



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 23 Meán Fómhair 2014

Tuesday, 23 September 2014

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As Deputy Ó Cuív is not present, Priority Question No. 2 cannot be taken at this point. I call Deputy Ferris to introduce Priority Question No. 3.

Agriculture Schemes Eligibility

3. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will ensure that those working commonage will not be disadvantaged if 50% of shareholders do not take up the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS. [35428/14]

Deputy Martin Ferris: The question is to ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will ensure that those working commonage will not be disadvantaged if 50% of shareholders do not take up the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, and those who work commonages and apply for the scheme will be successful.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I thank the Deputy for the question. This is an issue of concern to many hill farmers. The preservation and restoration of commonages, and the continuation of suitable and environmentally friendly farming practices on the hills, is a core element of GLAS and part of Ireland's overall plan for halting biodiversity loss. In recognition of the importance of commonages, hill farmers will get priority access to GLAS but it is accepted by all that the most effective management of those hills is achieved when those who are actively farming it work together. That is why the creation of a commonage management plan that encourages the shareholders themselves to take control of the grazing of their commonage is the model we have chosen for GLAS. In addition, in order to qualify for an agri-environment payment, the actions undertaken by farmers must be above

the baseline for the basic payment scheme, and it is the actions in the commonage management plan which demonstrate that. The only requirement for commonage farmers joining GLAS is for 50% of active farmers to sign up to a GLAS commonage plan or sufficient farmers to bring in at least 50% of the land into the commonage plan. There is no imposition of minimum or maximum stocking densities, and smaller commonages of less than 10 ha in size will not be subject to any minimum participation requirement. On commonages of that size, farmers can enter GLAS in their own right.

I do not believe that a minimum participation requirement based on this model is insurmountable and there are ways in which the application process can be structured that might assist. However, where real difficulties are being encountered, the farmers concerned can make a case to the commonage implementation committee for entry to the scheme. If it is clear that the farmer or farmers have made every effort to meet the requirement but have failed through no fault of their own, they will not be locked out of GLAS.

Deputy Martin Ferris: The Minister said that if a farmer puts his or her case to the commonage implementation committee, he or she may receive the relevant entitlements through that scheme. I understand that the level of take-up was less than 50% on the land, among active farmers and relating to commonage.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We have had many discussions with farmers concerned about this and certain issues have been raised. Farmers told me they cannot all work with the same planner because they have different planners and would like to be able to apply using their own planners. That is acceptable as long as they comply with a commonage GLAS plan implemented by a planner. If other planners are involved, that is fine as long as they ensure farmers farm in a manner consistent with the GLAS plan.

Ultimately, the aim of this is to ensure the commonage is farmed in a manner consistent with the GLAS plan. Farmers can buy in to this as they wish and use whatever advisers and planners they wish. However, it may be the case that one farmer wishes to sign up to GLAS but does not qualify because other farmers on the commonage do not wish to do so. That farmer can consult the commonage implementation committee and it will be proactive in trying to bring in sufficient numbers to ensure a credible solution to the problem. A commonage implies collective farming so the committee will insist that at least half the commonage is consistent with the commonage GLAS plan. Otherwise it would have no credibility.

In my view, the implementation group will provide practical responses to ensure people who wish to join GLAS can do so. Most of the farmers who had concerns are reasonably happy with the compromise.

Green Low-carbon Agri-environment Scheme

4. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will ensure that no commonage farmer will be excluded from access to GLAS by the 50% threshold; that all commonage land will qualify for the €120 per hectare payment; if he will ensure that GLAS is open for application at an early date to ensure that farmers are eligible for a full year's payment in 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35261/14]

Deputy Tom Fleming: There is much concern and disquiet relating to the commonage

aspect of the GLAS scheme. When commonage is owned by shareholders, each of whom has mapped and registered holdings, but boundaries are not fenced, it is known as unenclosed privately owned land. The proposed GLAS payment for nature sites and such land is €75 per hectare rather than €120, which applies to commonage land in public ownership. There is an anomaly and I ask the Minister to address the matter to ensure the maximum payment applies to everyone concerned.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I fixed the rate of payment at €120 per hectare and this is a major increase on what was payable under the previous programme - €75 per hectare. There is an overall ceiling of €5,000 per annum under GLAS so the rate proposed is payable to that point. When a commonage farmer has other priority environmental assets on his or her privately owned land, he or she may qualify for GLAS plus if the combination of this and his commonage actions pushes him or her over the €5,000 ceiling. The new scheme is currently before the European Commission for approval as part of the overall rural development programme. Once approval is granted, my Department will open the scheme as soon as possible.

If an anomaly exists between publicly owned land and privately owned commonage, I am not aware of it but I will examine the issue. I do not think this is an issue. I will check the issue given that the Deputy raised it. My understanding is we have made a decision on the GLAS programme for all commonage that the payment will be €120 per hectare. I will check and come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Tom Fleming: It is also essential that the Minister ensures all rules and regulations are tied up within a short time and that the scheme is expedited to give the planners an opportunity. It must also be sent to the EU Commission as speedily as possible to ensure farmers qualify for their payments at an early date in the new year. Sustaining viability in farming is dependent on the success of GLAS and being able to qualify for the full €7,000 with regard to the top-up payment. It needs to be simplified to give people the maximum opportunity to obtain the total benefit. Will the Minister ensure it is streamlined?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It went to the Commission in the first week in July and we expect a draft response on 3 October. If the Commission has any problems, there will be negotiations. This is with regard to the overall rural development programme and not just GLAS. GLAS is a big part of it but it is only one part because it also includes island communities, disadvantaged area payments, targeted agriculture modernisation scheme payments and young farmer supports.

Some people have been quite critical of entry to GLAS. When the scheme is fully up and running, it will spend €260 million a year. It is a huge environmental scheme and a massive initiative. We hope to have between 25,000 and 30,000 farmers in the scheme in its first year. We hope to be able to launch it in December, or earlier if we can. We have spoken to farming organisations and agricultural consultants and planners. They need at least five months to prepare all of the farmers' applications for the scheme because if we want to include between 25,000 and 30,000 farmers, it means 35,000 or 40,000 farmers could apply. This means that potentially one third of all farmers in Ireland could apply for GLAS. It will take a lot of management to ensure all of the applications get in on time given the fact that outside of Teagasc there are only 400 planners in the country. There is a big job to be done. We will then need to assess all of the applications. If we receive all of the applications by May or June, the assessment procedure will take until September and we hope to start payments under the new scheme by the end of next year. This is the timetable agreed by all the farm bodies because everybody

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wants to include as many farmers as we can. I could do it much quicker if I was only including 6,000 or 7,000 farmers, but people want to include as many farmers as we can, as do I. Many farmers are coming out of REPS and want a new scheme quickly. We will do it as fast as we can but it is a big job.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does Deputy Fleming have another question?

Deputy Tom Fleming: I wish to ask the Minister the position regarding the issues farmers are facing with regard to land eligibility penalties.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I meant that the Deputy is entitled to another supplementary question on this matter.

Deputy Tom Fleming: Given the dilemma facing farmers because of the Russian sanctions on food and a general reduction in their incomes, I take it that the Minister is sincere in his efforts to advance the scheme as quickly as possible. I ask him to keep a focus on it and ensure farmers receive their rightful moneys at an early stage.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will respond, to give Deputy Ó Cuív a chance to deal with Question No. 5. Of course we are responding to all types of challenges to agriculture this year. There has been much pressure on the beef industry, as Deputy Fleming knows. There may well be pressure on dairy prices over the next six or eight months. There is pressure on some arable farmers, although they have had great weather and very good harvests with regard to yield and quality. Price has not been good in that sector. Of course we have the Russian-imposed ban on certain agrifood products. Of course we want to get payments out as soon as we can. That is why we will get a very significant portion of the disadvantaged areas scheme payments out this week. That is also why we are making the case to get the single farm payment out by the middle of next month or at least a 50% advance payment. It is also why we want to get GLAS opened up as soon as we can. I am not in the business of hanging on to money and resources that I should get out to farmers, but we must have systems that can do that credibly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We return to Deputy Ó Cuív's first priority question, Question No. 2.

Beef Industry

2. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to deal with the present crisis in the beef trade; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35430/14]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I apologise. I could not get out of the National Ploughing Championships. It was hard enough to get in, but then I could not get out of it when I was in it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: No problem.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As the Minister has alluded to, there is a crisis in the beef industry. What is he doing to resolve it?

Deputy Simon Coveney: This has undoubtedly been a difficult year for the beef sector. Prices are down by about 10.5% on last year, which saw an all-time high. So, even though

historically the prices at the moment do not look that bad when compared with the prices two or three years ago, certainly the prices that many farmers paid for store cattle last year on the back of very high prices has meant that this year many beef farmers are losing money or making very tight margins.

We are trying to do a number of things. First, it is important to say that I cannot set prices, but I can try to improve the structure of how the beef industry operates to increase the negotiating capacity of farmers. We are trying to do that specifically by setting up producer organisations in the not too distant future. We are in the middle of a consultation process on that right now and I would welcome feedback from Opposition parties on that. At the moment beef farmers, unlike those in the dairy sector, effectively negotiate on their own with factories when they bring animals in. We would like to set up producer organisations which would be legal entities, professionally run, representing 5,000, 7,000 or 10,000 beef farmers. They would negotiate with factories, probably on a regional basis so that they would have real bargaining power in terms of providing top quality animals at the right age and the right specification to get the best price possible for farmers. Of course there would be an ongoing negotiation with factories that would improve the communication significantly and deal with much of the mistrust that has existed between farmers and factories over the past 12 months or so.

We have also had a beef forum, as farmers are calling it. Michael Dowling completed a report for the second meeting. That report is being implemented where possible at the moment. We have increased the marketing fund through Bord Bia for Irish beef right across Europe.

There is a specific cross-Border problem, about which I am sure Deputy Martin Ferris will ask me later.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I have spoken to my colleague in the North about the matter on numerous occasions at this stage and I will meet her again on Friday. I have also met representatives of supermarkets and written to retailers about it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We are also opening up new markets for Irish beef and are facilitating an increase in live cattle exports. We are working intensively on all the things I control in terms of policy and structural change whereby we can influence in the industry. I cannot, in a market-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. I call Deputy Ó Cuív and I will come back to the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I have a final comment. We are producing 15% more beef in volume terms this year and every market into which we are selling is either stagnant or reducing its consumption of beef. There are market forces here that have weakened prices.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I cannot change that with policy decisions.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As the Minister knows and has alluded to, there has been a major problem with the nomadic cattle. We have the farcical situation that cattle born, bred and

slaughtered on this island are not classed as Irish. I understand the Minister has had very fruitful discussions with his counterpart, the Minister, Ms O'Neill, MLA. I understand an agreement was reached to have the EU labelling on it as UK, but it would be called Irish beef. I ask the Minister for an update on his discussions with the supermarket chains on calling it Irish beef on the supermarket shelf. Did they ask for some assurances on traceability? Were the Departments able to give that assurance - which should be no problem because both have very good systems - in order that they can get the product on the shelves, not as nomadic cattle but as Irish beef? While I welcome the discussions, results are needed from them.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is important to bring clarity to this discussion because we have done everything we can to facilitate a new compromise label approach if someone wishes to pursue that course of action. However, that label must come from a processor in Northern Ireland and I cannot force that action. I have made it clear to the Minister, Ms Michelle O'Neill, that we have no problem with that to try to ensure there is a normalisation of the cross-Border trade. Approximately 50,000 animals normally go north from marts in Border counties and along the west of Ireland. Moreover, there has been quite a pick-up in that trade over the past two or three weeks, as anyone who attends marts will have seen, and a strong price is being paid for finishers and store cattle in marts. However, there is an issue in that when there is a lot of meat around, as is the case this year, retailers are much fussier about what they accept. They do not want label ambiguity, whereby consumers look at a labelled product that is produced in the Republic of Ireland and slaughtered in Northern Ireland, that is, the United Kingdom and therefore is not British or Irish but is something in between. I have written to the three UK retailers that buy and sell Irish beef. I have met representatives of Tesco, with whom we had a long meeting on this subject. Tesco is open to compromise in this regard to try to be helpful but there is a responsibility on a processor who is selling into that market to work out with retailers in the United Kingdom what such a compromise label actually would look like in the end.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you. I will come back to the Minister but I must call Deputy Ó Cuív.

Deputy Simon Coveney: While the Department will support and facilitate it, ultimately I cannot force a label in another jurisdiction and this must happen in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: My understanding is that one ultimate assurance sought from the Minister, Ms O'Neill, in respect of traceability has now been given. Would it be a good idea at this stage for both Ministers to meet the main multiples together and emphasise to them that there is full traceability and that the Irish label is completely satisfactory to both of them?

Second, the Minister mentioned producer organisations, which I welcome. However, this has not worked within the vegetable and horticultural industry, as the supermarkets still are too powerful. In line with the commitment in the Lisbon treaty that farmers are entitled to a fair price, will the Minister be taking up the issue with the incoming Commissioner, who he knows fairly well? Will he take up with him the issue about the need for the European Union to ensure the relationship between primary producers of all products across Europe and the multiples is more even than is the case at present and that just as there is legislation to protect the consumer, there should be equal legislation to enforce the commitment in the Treaty of Lisbon to ensure that the relationship of the primary producers with the supermarkets is on an even footing?

Deputy Simon Coveney: First, I agree with the Deputy on the last point. If one considers the trend over the past 15 to 20 years, one will see that primary producers on average had re-

ceived approximately 30% of the end price of a product sold in a retail outlet. That figure now is approximately 20% and for many products is less than that. Consequently, there has been a squeeze which has forced more competitive pricing because retailers have become much bigger and their systems are much larger and more efficient. Moreover, in many cases, they are very demanding of primary producers. This is the reason producer organisations are needed and the collective response from the European Union on this in the Common Agricultural Policy has been to support actively producer organisations. I accept that more must be done and that it must be done collectively as the European Union because were Ireland to try to do this on its own, it simply would make itself totally price-uncompetitive.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Agreed.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Given that we export almost 90% of everything we produce into these other markets, we cannot force prices up in Ireland, which would mean the countries into which we sell at present simply would stop buying from us. There are issues in this regard but producer organisations do work in many cases. There are examples within the fruit and vegetable sectors in Ireland in which producers have been put under a lot of pressure but if the Deputy considers the mushroom business in Ireland, Monaghan Mushrooms is the largest producer of mushrooms in the world. It is part of a very successful producer organisation structure, which has helped to build that infrastructure. In most other European countries, there are strong producer organisations representing primary producers and negotiating on their behalf very professionally. That is the type of structure we need in the beef industry.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will now proceed to Question No. 5 in the name of Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív.

Rural Development Plan

5. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding the proposed rural development plan submitted to Brussels; if the plan may be amended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35431/14]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I had the opportunity during the summer to read the rural development plan submitted by the Minister to Brussels. I understand the next step in the process is that the European Commission will send its observations back to the Minister. Has he received those observations at this stage and, if so, will he publish them or undertake to do so when they are received? The public and Opposition spokespersons should have knowledge and sight of those observations.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I have not yet received the EU's observations on the rural development plan. Our applications were required to be submitted by 22 July and we managed to get them in by 3 July or thereabouts. They are being considered by the Commission at present and we are due to receive from it a formal observation on the draft RDP on 3 October. Thereafter, depending on the Commission's concerns, comments and, potentially, proposed amendments, we will have to enter into a process of consultation with it.

It would be appropriate at that point to have a conversation with Opposition spokespersons, perhaps in committee. I certainly will have nothing to hide at that stage. It would be helpful

in identifying and dealing quickly with any issues that require clarification or any changes that should be made. After that we can go back to the Commission seeking formal approval to allow us to open up all the schemes we want to get up and running and which farmers are demanding, including the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS. Once we receive the Commission's response to the draft plan, the Deputy will find I am more than open to discussing it with him and other colleagues. The Oireachtas committee might be the best place to do it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Is the Minister still confident that this whole process can be completed by the end of the year - namely, receiving the observation back from the Commission and completing whatever negotiations are required?

In regard to the GLAS, is it the case that there will be no prepayments? In other words, if payments are made in 2015, will it only be possible to pay farmers for the part of 2015 for which they are in the scheme? If, for example, the scheme opens on 1 September, will the Minister be able to pay them 75% of what is due in September, October, November and December?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will have to clarify it, but that is my understanding of how it will work.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That was what I was informed by the Minister's officials, but I would like it on the record. There is some loose talk that there might be massive payments under the GLAS which would apply from the beginning of the year or even the day of application. The Minister is saying today that everybody will be admitted into the scheme, in one tranche, at the same time and the clock will start on that day. Am I correct, then, in saying that if payment is made in December, it will be 75% of the proportion of the year that one is actually in the scheme?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is important to note that we cannot legally pay a farmer for a time period in which he or she is not in the scheme. The answer to the Deputy's first question is "Yes"; I am confident we can get this done by the end of the year. In fact, I hope we can get it done before the end of November, so that we can open up the GLAS in December and farmers will have the four to five-month period which everybody agrees is necessary, because of the numbers involved in the scheme, to get their applications in. We will then need a couple of months to assess those applications. If we get them in by May or June of next year, it will be September before we can decide on the 25,000 to 30,000 farmers who will be accepted into the scheme. Once they are accepted, participants will receive payments from that point onward. If it is October, November and December of next year, then payment will be on the basis of those three months in 2015.

I assure the Deputy that we want to get payments out as quickly as we can, but there is a process that must be gone through. As I said earlier, if I accepted 6,000 or 7,000 farmers into GLAS, it could be done much more quickly and they would be in far earlier but that is not what farm bodies wanted. The demand from all stakeholders was that they wanted as many farmers in as possible in the first tranche of GLAS and we are trying to accommodate that but it will take a bit of time.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Realistically, it is not because the Minister does not have the money. Allowing for what the Minister said in terms of October, November and December, that works out at a total payout of €30 million to 30,000 farmers. It is approximately €1,000 apiece. Three quarters of a quarter works out a less than one fifth so we will round it up to

€1,000 to each farmer, totalling €30 million. That is the figure. I have heard demands for €200 million but I keep saying it is not possible for the Minister to pay that out because the rules do not allow it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: For what its worth, I appreciate the Deputy's help on this because we need to be realistic with farmers in terms of what is possible. I am trying to deliver GLAS as quickly as I can but there will be teething problems opening a scheme which accepts 25,000 to 30,000 in the first tranche. There will be problems and issues which will need clarification. Some farmers will get paid early, certainly before the end of next year, but other farmers will have to clarify issues, paperwork and so on which will spill over into January. In my estimation, most of the payments next year for the first tranche of GLAS will happen in the November, December, January and February period, which will span two financial years.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Even if everybody got paid by Christmas, it would still be €30 million.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Yes, it would be that kind of figure. I do not want to commit to hard and fast figures because that would be wrong but given the indications we are getting, I suspect it will not be a million miles away from that.

Agriculture Schemes Eligibility

6. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding issues that farmers face on the land eligibility penalties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35260/14]

Deputy Tom Fleming: The question relates to issues in regard to land eligibility. This is a very serious matter. It seems more than 33,000 land parcels are affected. Eligibility or ineligibility is a very grey area and I ask that the Minister makes every effort to minimise the impact on the Irish farmers affected.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy will be aware of the value of the EU-funded direct payment schemes to Ireland. Each year, farmers in Ireland benefit from funding of more than €1.5 billion under schemes such as the single farm payment scheme, the disadvantaged areas scheme, agri-environment schemes and so on. This comprises the entire net income of many thousands of Irish farmers.

The European Commission has an obligation to ensure that member states manage and use the EU funding granted to them in accordance with the very restrictive provisions governing the schemes and general financial provisions. All of the lands declared by farmers must be eligible if these lands benefit from payment under one of more of these schemes. Under the terms and conditions of the direct aid schemes, which includes the single payment scheme, farmers are obliged to declare only eligible land when making their applications and are to exclude ineligible features such as roads, buildings, farmyards, dense scrub, etc. These claims are then recorded on the Department's land parcel identification system, LPIS. Given the importance of the LPIS database in underpinning direct aid payments worth in excess of €1.5 billion annually, my Department is obliged under EU regulations to ensure its accuracy.

Following consultation with the EU Commission, as part of the normal accounting process,

my Department was requested to undertake a complete review of the LPIS database. This ongoing review is of major significance as the Commission is seeking to disallow €181 million of funding to Ireland relating to payments over the past five years. As I have explained to the House on a number of occasions, this is currently the subject of an Irish appeal to the EU conciliation body. This land eligibility review has resulted in the necessity to adjust parcels of a significant number of applicants, where it was established that some ineligible features had been included. In certain circumstances, these adjustments are giving rise to penalties. As I have said previously when I outlined the numbers involved, the vast majority of farmers in Ireland are not affected by this but some are affected in a minor way - we are trying to deal with those farmers - and a relatively small number of farmers have a big issue in this regard. We will deal with the latter farmers on a case-by-case basis in as practical a way as we can. I assure the Deputy I am not in the business of putting anybody out of business.

Deputy Tom Fleming: We are all aware there was no intent on the part of the vast majority of farmers who are affected by these regulations to break any sort of rule. Everything was done in good faith. The new satellite imagery system was introduced mainly to deal with marginal land. Much of this is questionable in terms of what the satellite has ascertained. Farmers consider they have grassland, even though it may be rough grazing. This is one of the aspects that have been ruled ineligible. It is a harsh way to deal with the matter. Some farmers will face massive claims for money drawn down.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The idea that we can just ignore this because farmers think they are being unfairly treated is simply not going to work. Other countries have been fined huge sums of money, amounting to more than €1 billion in a number of cases, because of this issue. We are trying to address the issue with as much accuracy as we can in order that farmers who have over-claimed, either by accident or otherwise, will primarily be the ones who give back money they should not have drawn down in the first place. This is a difficult process because we have to assess every land parcel in the country, of which there are hundreds of thousands, but we cannot ignore it. I recognise that some people will feel unfairly treated. That is why we have an appeals mechanism within the Department and a second appeals mechanism that is separate from the Department if people feel the Department might have it in for them. The latter mechanism is chaired by Mr. Pdraig Gibbons, who is a much respected individual in the agrifood sector in Ireland. People are using those appeal systems and they are successful in some cases. The percentage is actually pretty good. We are trying to help people as best we can but we cannot ignore the issue because we will have to pay €181 million if we do so. That money would have to come out of the agrifood budget. I am not willing to accept that when, in my view, the figure should be much lower. That is what we are seeking to negotiate.

Deputy Tom Fleming: I acknowledge that the Minister is making his best effort with the European Commission but I ask him to go back to the table, particularly in regard to retrospective payments. A large number of farmers will be forced out of business if they have to go back over five years, as is being threatened. This is not an acceptable situation. It is well known that surveys are being carried out in respect of single farm payments. Many beef suckler and sheep farmers depend on the 100% rate of single farm payment to stay in business. It is practically the sole income for many farmers. In view of the significant detrimental effect this will have if it is pursued in the manner we have been led to expect, the Minister needs to work his weight to advance the position of Irish farmers.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I assure the Deputy we are trying to accommodate farmers as best we can. I have spent many hours speaking to my officials, farming organisations and farmers to

figure out how we can do this in a way that satisfies the Commission in terms of returning public moneys that should never have been drawn down in the first place, while also managing any penalties that may be imposed in a way that is fair. We will investigate options for repayment schedules over a number of years in order that we do not target farmers excessively. We will continue to try to be as flexible as we can. Most people who understand this issue would accept that if we just ignore it or refuse to pay, we will simply be fined a large lump sum of money which would go way beyond the figure we were effectively overpaid on lands where money should not have been drawn down.

We are still around the table; we have never left the table with the Commission representatives. We are now going to a conciliation process and we are preparing a very significant case. We have already sent the conciliation group a very detailed submission and we will give a verbal case to back up that in the not too distant future. We are looking to try to minimise the overall exposure for Irish farming so we can manage it in a way that is as farmer-friendly as possible.

Other Questions

Beef Industry

7. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he, along with the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development in the North, met representatives of the British multiples to address issues related to Irish beef; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35159/14]

Deputy Martin Ferris: Much of this issue was addressed in the response to Deputy Ó Cuív's priority question. Will the Minister provide an update on his meetings with his counterpart in the North, the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, Ms Michelle O'Neill, as well as the representatives of supermarkets? What was the outcome?

Deputy Simon Coveney: Ireland's trade with Britain accounts for 53% of our beef export volumes, worth €1.1 billion per year, at approximately 250,000 tonnes in 2013. It is equivalent to approximately 750,000 cattle, so there is much trade between Ireland and Britain. The British retailers' long-standing policy is to market British and Irish beef separately so as to avoid any perceived confusion for consumers. This means beef must be sourced from animals originating in one country or the other; they are labelled as born, reared and slaughtered in the same EU state. Therefore, animals which originate in the Republic and are sent North for rearing or slaughter fall out of the retailers specifications, as they will have to be labelled as coming from two separate states. I suspect the Deputy would like - as I would - this island to be one country but it is not at the moment, so there is a requirement for a country of origin label that is accurate. That is the issue with which UK retailers have an issue.

The number of such animals is relatively small in overall terms at 50,000 per year and there has been an impact on some of the trade in live cattle into Northern Ireland, which traditionally has been an important outlet for the Irish beef sector. Nevertheless, I am pleased to note that mart sales in the last fortnight are reported as strong both in terms of price and volumes being traded. As a result of the difficulties earlier in the year, I have engaged with my counterpart

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in Northern Ireland, the Minister, Ms Michelle O'Neill, in order to try to alleviate some of the pressures being felt by farmers involved in the cross-Border trade. We agreed to make a joint approach to the three British retailers who stock Irish beef, accepting that these were commercial matters, but also seeking some flexibility, given that this beef is produced to the exacting standards required by British consumers. I have also met separately with representatives of Tesco recently and we had a useful and frank discussion on this and other issues regarding the beef market generally. I have also convened a meeting with the Minister, Ms O'Neill, and those involved with the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium, which will take place in Dublin in the coming weeks. This will provide a useful forum to further explore the retailer concerns and identify possible solutions. I will also meet the Minister at the next North-South Ministerial Council, when we will also have an opportunity to discuss the matter.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

While exploring these issues, I must also be mindful of the significant brand of Irish beef built up over many years and amounting to €2.1 billion of exports in the last year. Irish beef trades on its reputation and this must be guiding principle where changes to the labelling rules are under discussion nonetheless. I am of course fully aware of the temporary difficulties in the cross-Border trade this year and I am exploring practical solutions to alleviate this.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I thank the Minister for his reply. At what stage is the issue of an agreed label to meet the requirements of at least one player in the multiples sector? My understanding is that both the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Northern Ireland Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development had agreed a label, with one of the multiples seeking a letter of comfort regarding that. I understand it was sent.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that, although I wish it were. I cannot agree a label for a product in Northern Ireland. It is outside my jurisdiction. The Irish Food Safety Authority has no jurisdiction there. Following conversations with the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Michelle O'Neill, I have made clear to her in writing that I have no problem with this. Many people in Ireland have a big problem with this, mainly processors. I have no problem with this as a way of trying to create a normal trade, North and South, for beef on its way to the UK market.

I have met Tesco and have asked if it will show some flexibility because beef produced on the island of Ireland for consumers in Britain is perceived as Irish beef coming from the island of Ireland. We should market it as such but the country of origin labels will need to be accurate. We cannot ignore the fact that technically two jurisdictions would be involved. The overall branding could and should be Irish beef. Ultimately it is up to a processor selling beef from Northern Ireland into the UK to come up with that label. Politicians cannot put a label on product. Somebody who is selling it needs to do that. I have made clear that we certainly will not object if and when that happens. In fact, we have encouraged them to do that and to meet retailers who have shown a willingness to be flexible about its sale.

Deputy Martin Ferris: Has the Minister received any reply to his request for flexibility?

Deputy Simon Coveney: Absolutely.

Deputy Martin Ferris: Was it positive or negative?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It was positive. I had a two hour meeting with Tesco when we

discussed a series of issues, mainly around beef. This was one of the key requests. Until a few weeks ago, the trade for live beef animals was significantly down. Ironically, live cattle exports to Northern Ireland are significantly up this year. The kind of animals we are looking for in the beef trade has been down somewhat. We need Northern buyers in marts, providing competition to get the best prices for animals, and so on, and that has picked up significantly in recent weeks. To be fair to Tesco, it said it was willing to consider this. It is very strict about label accuracy, to make sure that it looks after its consumers, but it recognised that its customers would not have a problem with an Irish label on beef produced to more or less the same standards, North and South on the island of Ireland, as long as there was proper label clarity underneath that. It is up to processors in the North to deliver on that and negotiate with Tesco, which has shown a willingness to be flexible.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Animals aged over 30 months cannot be used for T-bone steak. This is a significant cut-off point for factories. Does the Minister think it is possible to increase that to 36 months? The specific risk material regulation had been at 24 months, but in years gone by it was 36 months until the problems arose.

There is a very good completed database for all beef animals in Ireland, which is controlled by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and provides all details of herd profile. Do the factories have access to that database? If so, it explains how easy it is for them to manipulate the market price. Sometimes that gives them too much information and they are able to take advantage of the farmers, knowing when the heifers were born and how many are coming to the 30 month point.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is if they get the information; they are not supposed to.

Deputy Mick Wallace: It gives the factories the opportunity to cut the price at that time.

Deputy Simon Coveney: None of that should happen because factories do not have access to the database. If they get access to it they are doing so in ways that they should not, whether from a vet in the factory, or whatever. Factories should not have access to a database that gives them information about the numbers of animals that farmers in their region have to sell, and so on. We have put systems in place to make sure they do not get access to that information. I have heard that accusation on a number of occasions over the past six months. We have checked it out in some detail. We are ensuring the broader database to which the Department must have access, relating to animal movements and numbers, etc., is not handed over. Factories are not entitled to this commercially sensitive information.

We sell into a number of premium markets that have age restrictions as part of their specifications. Other markets do not have such restrictions. Some markets have weight restrictions as well. British retailers, which comprise the highest paying market for beef in the world at the moment, want beef steaks that are smaller than those being sold by some Irish producers that are producing really good animals. When there is a lot of beef around the market, as there has been this year, the premium markets that are paying the most for that beef can choose to demand certain specifications. That has been one of the most significant problems over the past 12 months, particularly for producers of large continental animals of a certain age. They got very good money for animals of that age last year, but they are being penalised for animals of the same age this year. That is why there needs to be a much better line of communication between factories and primary producers. I hope the producer organisations will help to facilitate that.

Commonage Framework Plans

8. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his proposals to resolve the difficulties faced by farmers with commonage land due to his proposals in relation to eligibility for the basic payment, the payment for areas of natural constraint and the GLAS scheme for farmers with commonage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35172/14]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As the Minister knows, there has been substantial disquiet in all the counties that have significant numbers of farmers with commonage. I recognise that there has been some movement in that regard. I welcome the meetings on this issue that will take place around the country in the next week. Can the Minister outline the present state of play with regard to commonage farmers and collective agreements? Will all farmers be required to put stock up on the hill? Public meetings do not always get down to the nitty-gritty. Other than those meetings, what process is in place to resolve what needs to be resolved?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I hope the public meetings will involve workshop-type sessions, rather than a group of people lecturing from the stage. The idea underpinning the commonage areas implementation group is that a group of experienced people, who are farmer-friendly, speak a language everybody understands and have an appreciation of commonage farming, will sit down and work out with farmers what they need to do to qualify for basic payments. It is very straightforward. The only thing a farmer will be required to do to get a single farm payment is have a minimum stocking rate of one ewe per 1.5 hectares. Essentially, he or she will need to have one sheep for each area of between three and a half and four acres. Obviously, we discussed this very low stocking rate with the farming organisations before we settled on it. We have to be credible with the Commission. There needs to be some level of proof that there is farming activity going on in the hills. The obvious way to do that is to focus on stocking levels. The only thing a farmer has to do to qualify for a single farm payment is have a stocking rate of one ewe per 1.5 hectares by the end of next year. If one has not been doing much farming over recent years, or if one has a very low stocking rate, one should be fine as long as one builds up a basic stocking rate before the end of next year. If one is farming in an area where a lower stocking rate is required because of environmental restrictions, that is fine. One automatically qualifies as long as one has some level of stocking. There seems to have been a great deal of confusion about how farmers with commonage can qualify for a single farm payment. I want to clarify that it is very easy for them to qualify. They just need to have some level of activity in the commonage land. We are measuring that by providing for a very low stocking rate threshold.

GLAS is a bit different. Commonage farmers will get priority access and acceptance into GLAS. As I said in response to an earlier question, if GLAS is to be credible, farmers have to do something else, other than qualifying for a single farm payment, to get €5,000. Essentially, they have to agree to farm in accordance with a GLAS commonage plan. At least 50% of the active farmers in that commonage area or the farmers who own 50% of the area of the commonage have to be doing that. If, for whatever reason, farmers who want to apply to GLAS cannot get 50% of the active farmers in the commonage area to be part of it, they can work through the implementation group which will help them to do it. This is a practical response to the concerns that have been expressed in recent months.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: One of the big questions for anyone familiar with commonage

farming and hills would be what the “something extra” referred to by the Minister involves. What is the nature of the “something extra” that the 50% will have to agree to? As I understand it, the Department has said that farmers can join individually as long as there is a common plan for the commonage part of the farm. Is the Minister saying that the commonage plan will have to be agreed by 50% of the farmers or 50% of the area owners? Will 50% of those in ownership who have submitted an area aid form have to sign up to the commonage plan before anybody can get into the scheme?

Deputy Simon Coveney: On the first question, I suspect that a GLAS commonage plan would be required to include management of scrub, some limitations on burning, maintaining land in reasonable agricultural condition and so forth. These are the kinds of things that ensure that a commonage is protected in terms of its biodiversity and natural condition.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What about bird habitats?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will leave that to the planners. I do not want to exactly prescribe a GLAS commonage plan but these are the kinds of things that could be included.

In order for farmers to draw down their payment of up to €5,000 under the terms of GLAS - based on €120 per hectare - or more than €5,000 under the GLAS plus scheme, at least half of the active farmers on that commonage will have to buy into it. Otherwise the scheme would not have any credibility in the eyes of the European Commission in the context of collective farming. We are not asking for a collective agreement. We are not even saying that every farmer has to use the same planner. All we are saying is that there must be a plan in place. The implementation group will help to ensure that such a plan is put in place and farmers can then sign up to it either through their own planner or by working with the planner who has put the plan in place. They must then farm in a way that is consistent with the commonage plan. If there is a problem with numbers the implementation group can help by speaking to other farmers who, for whatever reason, may not want to be part of it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I submitted a written parliamentary question last week but I am still confused by the answer I received. I ask the Minister to clarify the issue on the floor of the House. In terms of the basic payment, the rural development plan stipulates that a farmer on marginal land must keep the equivalent of one ewe to 1.5 hectares, with exceptions for designated land. That is a very low stocking rate and in fact, most farmers would keep the equivalent of one ewe to 1 hectare. Will the farmers all be obliged to put some of their stock on the marginal land or the commonage? For reasons of viability, some older farmers do not bother using the hills and only use the lowland; other farmers benefit from that because they can then put more stock up on the hills. Between Jack Sprat and the wife, they get the job done.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I understand the question.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I would like the Minister to clarify the situation in such circumstances.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am well aware that commonage farming does not operate in such a way that everybody contributes the exact same level of stocking rate. That would be a nonsense. There are some very active farmers in commonage areas and some less active farmers. However, in order for farmers to qualify for a single farm payment, they will have to have some stock in the commonage area for which they are applying for the payment. That said, they do not have to have the same level of stock as, for example, their neighbour who may be

much more active.

3 o'clock

One of the reasons we have an implementation group is to explain that there are flexibilities here. There must be flexibilities because this is collective farming. Some farmers in the commonage will contribute less, some more but the average overall stocking rate numbers need to be appropriate to the commonage and the way in which it is farmed needs to be consistent if they are to draw down a GLAS payment with a GLAS commonage plan. There will be the flexibility between farmers. No one expects all farmers to have the exact same percentage.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Must one have some stock?

Deputy Simon Coveney: One must have some stock. Otherwise one is effectively getting a payment for not farming.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We must go on to the next question. This question is going on all day.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The point at issue is that some farmers farm the lowland but not the commonage. The Minister states that now those farmers must put sheep on the commonage.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Some stock.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: If they do, can the Minister imagine trying to find ten ewes on 200 acres or 500 acres? In reality, that is what he is imposing on farmers. I will show him the figures in the folders to prove it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Can I get this right? Is Deputy Ó Cuív suggesting that farmers who are not farming on land would draw down payments on that land?

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: No.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is what he seems to be suggesting. They are putting stock onto a piece of land somewhere else but they are drawing down payments on a commonage area in which they are not involved in farming.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is the practicalities.

Deputy Simon Coveney: If we were to take that approach, when it was audited by the Commission we would have another LIPIS-type issue on our hands whereby farmers would be drawing down payments on land in which they are not involved in farming. We must have a minimum level of agricultural activity in the commonage areas where farmers are drawing down payments and we should be able to manage that in a way that allows farmers to do that. If farmers decide to not do that and to focus on other land, they should not draw down payments on the land on which they are not farming.

Departmental Expenditure

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide a list of all the contracts between Coillte and other State agencies and the total

amount of funding from all State agencies transferred to Coillte since 1989; if he will provide any cost-benefit analysis or reviews related to this State funding of Coillte; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35165/14]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As the question spells out, it is about supports and funding to Coillte since it was set up in 1989. The context for this question is that I favour public support and investment for a semi-State company engaged in forestry. After the meeting which the Minister kindly set up with Coillte for me last week, what came across clearly was Coillte's fairly bald statement that it is precluded, primarily by the EU, from contributing to meeting our afforestation targets. Coillte cannot contribute to one of its core activities. I asked for what are we giving Coillte funding and support if it cannot do what should be its primary activity and whether it is, in fact, that funding is going to push Coillte towards more commercialised activities which have little to do with its core activity.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Tom Hayes): Coillte Teoranta was established as a private commercial company under the Forestry Act 1988 and day-to-day operational matters, such as contractual arrangements and sources of funding, are the responsibility of the company.

As a commercial company, Coillte is required to publish annual accounts, copies of which are laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas, in accordance with the Forestry Act 1988. Coillte's annual report 2013 was accordingly laid before the Houses on 30 June last. I wish to advise that note 28 to those financial statements outline the sales and purchases of goods, property and services to entities controlled by the Government.

While such contracts are operational matters for the company, a list was, however, also sought from the company. Coillte has advised that it was not possible in the time available to provide a list of all the contracts between Coillte and other State agencies as this would need to be clearly defined. The company further advised that the Coillte Group sold goods, property and services to RTE and the ESB in 2013 in the normal course of business but that a range of contracts would exist, some of which involve consideration being paid to Coillte for goods and services and some of which involve Coillte making payments.

As for the total amount of funding from all State agencies transferred to Coillte since 1989, Coillte advises it has received some €12.4 million, mostly in its provision of forest recreational facilities. Up to €1.4 million was from the Irish Sports Council in respect of the trail managers programme. Another €1.4 million was received and managed by Coillte on behalf of the Dublin Mountain Partnership while some €9.6 million has been received from Fáilte Ireland. This latter amount encompassed funding for its development of Lough Key forest park in conjunction with Roscommon County Council and capital funding towards forest recreation infrastructure.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

With reference to the undertaking of cost-benefit analyses relating to such funding, Coillte and the Heritage Council have conducted research to evaluate the public goods value of three important services, namely, biodiversity-nature, landscape and cultural heritage. These were found to have a cumulative value of over €500 million, with biodiversity-nature estimated to be €322 million, landscape to be €96 million and cultural heritage to be €92 million. Information on the valuation of such public goods, and case studies so illustrating, is available on the publications page of the Coillte website. The final report, from 2005, of a study on the economic

value of trails and forest recreation jointly commissioned by Coillte and the Irish Sports Council is also available on the website.

Coillte has also advised that it is happy to engage directly with the Deputy to discuss the issues raised.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I would appreciate if we could get the list of all contracts between Coillte and other State agencies going back to 1989 as soon as it becomes available.

The initial loan facility for Coillte, when it was established and as provided for in legislation, was €30 million. In 2009, this was increased to €400 million. Around that time there was a large deficit in Coillte's pension fund. The National Pensions Reserve Fund bought harvesting rights through the Irish Forestry Unit Trust for some of Coillte's forests. When I met the company last week, it explained to me it sells the harvesting rights of its forests to entities of various sorts to get cash which it then invests elsewhere. Are we giving indirect supports and subsidies, as well as direct supports, to Coillte but not knowing where this money is going? It is certainly not going into afforestation programmes because Coillte is not allowed do such programmes and cannot contribute to what should be its core objective. Where is the money going then?

Deputy Tom Hayes: Coillte is a large operation with SmartPly, Medite and other forestry product projects. The whole forestry industry is growing, including the private forestry sector. Coillte has been responsible over many years for the development of our forest business. The potential for exporting timber is now significant.

As the Deputy said, he visited Coillte last week and engaged with the company. It is happy to engage further to give him the specific details he may require. After all, it is a public company and it must outline to this House the moneys it spends. I assure the Deputy the company will engage with him in providing the detailed information he requires.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Coillte was helpful and informative. My questions are more directed at the Government's policy and, as it is the main shareholder, to where it is driving Coillte. If Coillte cannot contribute to afforestation and increasing our forest cover, then it seems to me that it is being driven in the direction of providing industrialised wind turbines, for example. In 2009, when the loan facility was extended from €30 million to €400 million, it was said in this House that some of that might be used to move into the area of providing nursing homes. Coillte is moving into controversial areas such as providing industrialised wind turbines which is arguably nothing to do with what it really should be doing. It is being pushed into a more commercialised, for-profit, privatised direction by government policy. We have no control over it even though we are owners of 100% of it. It is in a type of limbo where there is no transparency over its investment decisions, strategic direction or whether it is applying itself to its core activities, namely, growing trees and managing the forest estate.

Deputy Tom Hayes: I assure Deputy Boyd Barrett that Coillte must publish its accounts each year. We want the company to be profitable. When the Government took office it carried out a root and branch assessment of many public bodies and companies, including Coillte. It was the Government's view that the company should be more focused, on afforestation in particular. We want Coillte to be progressive, profitable and to get a dividend for the State. Coillte is now more focused than might have been the case in the past. It is important that its current line of actions be continued.

TB Eradication Scheme

10. **Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason he is pursuing a badger cull when guarantees have been given about rolling out a vaccination programme for badgers infected with TB; the reason his Department is tendering for the provision of 25,000 units of biological material, which are essentially body bags for badgers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35173/14]

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: My question relates to the reason a badger cull is being pursued and why the Department has tendered for 25,000 units of biological material, essentially body bags for badgers, when it has given a commitment to roll out a vaccination programme to control bovine TB.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank Deputy O’Sullivan for asking the question. I know it is an issue of concern to her and I wish to give her a detailed answer to it. The wildlife policy, which is a component of my Department’s TB eradication programme, has been developed in response to research which has demonstrated that the eradication of the disease is not a practicable proposition until the reservoir of infection in badgers is addressed. Capturing of badgers takes place in areas where serious outbreaks of TB have been identified in cattle herds and where Department veterinarians have found, following an epidemiological examination, that badgers are the likely source of infections. Approximately 6,000 badgers are culled annually by trained contractors under licence and the process is monitored and supervised by Department staff. In tandem with the badger removal programme, my Department continues to sponsor research and trials into developing a vaccination programme to control tuberculosis in badgers, thus improving the overall health status of that species, and to break the infection link to cattle. The research to date has demonstrated that oral vaccination of badgers in a captive environment with BCG vaccine generates high levels of protective immunity against bovine TB. Current research is aimed at confirming that such a protective effect holds true in the wild population.

My Department’s ultimate objective is to incorporate badger vaccination into the TB eradication programme when data are available to ensure that it can be incorporated in an optimally effective and sustainable manner. A number of field trials are ongoing with this objective in mind, but it is anticipated that it will be a number of years before a viable oral delivery method can be put in place and, therefore, targeted badger removals will continue in the medium term in the interests of ensuring that the progress achieved in recent years in combating TB in cattle is maintained.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: That is a most unfortunate answer because in the context of a badger cull we are talking about a most inhumane, cruel and barbaric way of dealing with bovine TB, when first, it has not been fully proven that the badger is totally responsible for the disease, and there are doubts over some of the experiments that initially proved that was the case. Second, a reduction in TB in cattle can also be linked to improved husbandry and other factors, not especially through the badger cull. Could the Minister explain the urgency to kill thousands of an ecologically important species, namely, the badger?

I refer to an IT glitch that occurred in the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs in England which meant it overstated the number of cattle herds infected by TB in Britain to such an extent that the decline in TB was shown to have been in the year preceding the badger cull. A badger cull is a particularly cruel way to deal with the problem. Illegal ways are in use to kill badgers. Such horrible practices, include putting slurry in badger setts, and throwing

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badger carcasses onto the road to give the impression they have been killed in road accidents. That is what is happening to a badger population that we do not know is 100% responsible for bovine TB.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not condone or in any way support the illegal killing of badgers in a way that is not licensed, controlled and monitored by my Department. I share Deputy O'Sullivan's views on the matter.

It is important to note that culling badgers is only a part of a TB programme that has been extraordinarily successful in Ireland. We have less TB in Ireland now than at any time since 1953 when records began. The UK cannot say the same. If anything, depending on the region, the jurisdiction has an increasing problem with TB in herds. The system we have in place at the moment is working. We are targeting areas where there are significant TB outbreaks where we have a reason to believe there is a link with wildlife infection by badgers. It is not an indiscriminate culling of badgers throughout the country. It is a targeted effort to try to catch and put down badgers we believe might have TB themselves and are spreading TB to cattle. Culling has been a part of a very effective TB programme that is reducing TB dramatically in Ireland and is saving the taxpayer a lot of money. As soon as we can introduce a vaccination programme to target TB in badgers that is credible and that can take the place of the targeted culling programme, we will do it. I will enthusiastically introduce such a programme if and when that is the case, but I will not do something to undermine the efforts we have put in place in recent decades.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: Recent reports have shown that injecting badgers significantly reduces the progress and severity of TB. Unlike culling, vaccination does not disrupt the badger's social group and it provides immunity indirectly to unvaccinated badger cubs. An experiment was conducted where one third of the badger population was injected and immunity immediately spread to the rest of the badger population. A more recent experiment in England showed that more rigorous testing and vaccination of cattle is also a way forward. There should be an urgency in terms of the vaccination programme rather than just having a cull, because it has been in place for so long. We must look seriously and urgently at a vaccination programme.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I reassure the Deputy that only last week I asked my Secretary General to examine the issue and to try to fast-track a vaccination programme for badgers if it could be done credibly. However, I will not undermine the efforts we have made over many years-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Rentokil.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----until we are sure we can do it in a way that keeps the positive momentum in the existing TB eradication programme, which has been extraordinarily successful. Ultimately, we want to eradicate TB from Ireland in badger populations and in cattle populations.

There is not a problem with badger numbers in Ireland. The cull will not compromise badger numbers. We have a healthy badger population throughout the country currently. I accept that the preference is to vaccinate rather than kill badgers if we can do that effectively.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: How would one do that?

Deputy Finian McGrath: Tell that to the badger.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That is ridiculous.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Ultimately-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Would the Minister like to catch a badger and try to inject it?

Deputy Simon Coveney: If Deputy Healy-Rae was listening earlier, which I doubt he was-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I was listening to the debate in my office.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----I explained the trials we are running at the moment, which are showing credible results in the area.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That concludes Question Time.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Minister knows what to do with the badger and it is the same with the deer.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Deputy Healy-Rae should not make a joke of the matter.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Joe Costello - the need to put in place new educational facilities for All Hallows College, Dublin, to ensure its continuation as an educational campus;

(2) Deputy Michael Healy-Rae - the staffing levels in Kerry General Hospital;

(3) Deputy Robert Troy - the need for the Health Service Executive to put in place an early access programme for patients with hepatitis C to new direct acting antiviral;

(4) Deputies Sean Fleming and Brian Stanley - the future provision of services at the accident and emergency department in Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise;

(5) Deputy Frank Feighan - the need to include Cloonakilla national school, Bealnamulla, County Roscommon, in the school building programme;

(6) Deputy Terence Flanagan - the need for Irish Water to ensure that water meters are fully accessible to those with disabilities;

(7) Deputy Patrick O'Donovan - the need to examine the Labour Court recommendation of 2008 in respect of pension payments for community employment supervisors and assistant supervisors;

(8) Deputy Brendan Griffin - the need to allow geographically isolated small schools to appeal the loss of mainstream teaching posts on grounds of geographic isolation and the lack of

an amalgamation option;

(9) Deputy Timmy Dooley - the need for the Minister to address issues regarding his direction to the Commission for Aviation Regulation on 15 September 2014;

(10) Deputy Seán Conlan - the need to retain all positions in the public service card section of the Department in Ballybay, County Monaghan;

(11) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the Minister's proposals regarding the introduction of State-subsidised rural broadband and the timeline for such proposals to be completed;

(12) Deputy Paul J. Connaughton - the need to review the appeals process on the allocation of teachers to small schools;

(13) Deputy Peadar Tóibín - the need to lobby the British Prime Minister to facilitate a referendum in the North of Ireland on full Irish independence;

(14) Deputy Catherine Murphy - the need to address concerns that the decline in income and resources at the National Library of Ireland is impacting on the quality and preservation of its collection;

(15) Deputy Michael McNamara - the need to address the beef price crisis; (16) Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan - the need for community rehabilitation services for stroke victims;

(17) Deputy Róisín Shortall - the need to address the unacceptable handling of the review of medical cards for those aged over 70;

(18) Deputy Seán Crowe - the need to address concerns due to cuts to funding for the school completion programme in officially designated disadvantaged areas;

(19) Deputy Derek Nolan - the need for a new emergency department unit at University Hospital Galway;

(20) Deputy Clare Daly - the need to discuss the air strikes inside Syria against IS;

(21) Deputy Mick Wallace - the need to discuss the air strikes inside Syria against IS;

(22) Deputy Colm Keaveney - the need to address the ongoing crisis in the provision of speech therapy services;

(23) Deputy Michael McGrath - the implications for Ireland of the OECD report on base erosion and profit shifting and the Minister's policy actions subsequent to this report;

(24) Deputy Billy Kelleher - the plans to address increases in inpatient, day case and outpatient waiting lists between January and July of this year;

(25) Deputy Jim Daly - the need to double the capacity at Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Crumlin, to facilitate the treatment of up to 120 patients with spinal deformity each year; (26) Deputy Seamus Kirk - the need to discuss the role of Ireland in the devolution of powers to Northern Ireland following the Scottish referendum result; and

(27) Deputy Anthony Lawlor - the need to address concerns regarding deduction at source payments of the local property tax by social welfare recipients.

The matters raised by Deputies Michael McGrath; Michael McNamara; Sean Fleming; and Brian Stanley and Frank Feighan have been selected for discussion.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I want to return to the issue of social housing, which has rightly been raised frequently in this House over the past number of years. There are currently around 100,000 social housing applicants on local authority lists across the country. Many of these people would never have envisaged having to add their names to such lists and their failure to find housing sees them sleeping in cars and staying in bed and breakfast and hotel accommodation. They sleep on friends' sofas, floors and mattresses and families have been splintered by the failure to provide social housing. A man held in high esteem in Ireland and internationally, Fr. Peter McVerry, summed up the situation last May when he said that in his 40 years of dealing with homelessness he had never seen things so bad. He described a tsunami of homelessness relating to the housing shortage and said the situation was beyond crisis.

Does the Government agree with the Labour Party suggestion on introducing rent control? A cap has been placed on social housing rents and this has caused real difficulties, particularly in the greater Dublin area. Why has the Government not used the strategic investment fund to deliver social housing?

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I thank the Deputy for his questions. When Deputy Jan O'Sullivan was Minister of State with responsibility for housing she made significant progress on this but everyone appreciates that problems emerge as an economy comes out of recession and they must be addressed. Ireland has quickly gone from having no housing market to having problems on the supply side. The supply side affects the availability of both private housing and social housing. There is a new Minister at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, and a new Minister of State, Deputy Paudie Coffey. They are working assiduously to develop plans to meet the need for social housing. Suggestions such as those made by the Deputy will be considered because we all know there is a problem.

The Deputy will recall that when his party was in Government policy changed from the direct provision of houses by construction by local authorities to the use of local authority housing budgets to purchase private houses in private housing estates. That is one way to address supply but there are other ways and they will all be considered in the context of the budget.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I have much regard for the Minister, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, and we were told some time ago that she would engage with the Department of Social Protection to deal with the crisis in rent allowance but this problem has not been addressed. My main concern relating to the delivery of social housing is that we cannot wait for the implementation of another plan - we need a direct construction programme. The Minister and his colleagues in Government have spoken of a solution that is off-balance sheet. The Minister of State with responsibility for housing has spoken of the voluntary sector providing housing. The Minister recently suggested the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, should provide housing. The Government is standing back from a burning crisis that is affecting the day-to-day lives of people, suggesting another entity, be it the voluntary sector or NAMA, should solve the problem. I suggest the Minister and the Government must solve the problem by directly building local authority housing. I suggest the National Pensions Reserve Fund be used as €1 billion

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would construct around 6,000 local authority houses, which would generate huge employment across the country. Funding from the National Pensions Reserve Fund could leverage other funding into the housing market. Will the Government take immediate action in these areas?

Deputy Michael Noonan: The disaster caused by Deputy Ó Fearghail's party in government was so cataclysmic that every sector of the economy was affected.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Answer the question.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Freagair an cheist.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please wait for the reply.

Deputy Michael Noonan: It totally fractured the capacity of the construction industry to provide either public or private houses.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Michael Noonan: The recovery is now under way. Before Deputy Jan O'Sullivan was promoted to the office of Minister for Education and Skills she prevailed on local authorities to repair houses that were locked up as many such houses were around the country. That was the first step and then she held talks with NAMA that still continue. NAMA notified the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government several months ago that it has over 4,000 houses available for the purposes of social housing and local authorities indicate that they will take up around 2,000 of these.

The direct provision of housing is an option but it requires finance. The suggestion made by the Deputy is being considered but at this time of year Ministers are involved in negotiating Estimates for their Departments. When departmental budgets are set announcements will be made on all problems, including that identified by the Deputy.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We are now in the throes of the usual pre-budget scenario - the flying of kites by various Ministers and shadow boxing between coalition partners. There is a sham fight between the Labour Party and Fine Gael while families watch and hope there will be an end to austerity.

Last week various Government Ministers trumpeted the improved Exchequer figures but the key point is that those figures give the opportunity to do the right thing. Citizens have faced repeated austerity budgets, cuts across the board to public services and tax increases. This has happened directly and through various stealth taxes. One cannot discuss recovery without giving families more money in their pockets, which can go back into the domestic economy. We cannot discuss a neutral budget while people are receiving application forms from Irish Water, Uisce Éireann, as we speak. People are wondering whether to give their personal public service, PPS, numbers and various details. How will people afford this extra charge?

The Minister for Finance knows better than most that he has a choice. He can continue to protect those at the top of Irish society or he can take the pressure off families that have been squeezed by these budgets. Will the Minister withdraw the plans for the implementation of water charges and give families a real break in this budget?

Deputy Michael Noonan: I am glad the Deputy acknowledges the improving financial situation and the dramatic growth in GDP figures, which are up by 5.8% in the first six months

of the year. I remind the Deputy that in the past three and a half years his party opposed every measure taken to get the country on an even keel.

Deputy Tom Hayes: They opposed every one of them.

Deputy Michael Noonan: The measures that were taken are the reasons the economy is now growing and Sinn Féin opposed every measure. I understand why the Deputy is subdued today. Sinn Féin hoped to build a political movement on the back of misery and failure in the economy but the country is not failing. The country is growing strongly again.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Look at the national debt.

Deputy Michael Noonan: I note that in this morning's newspaper Sinn Féin states that it has another red-line issue. First it was to abolish property tax and now it is to abolish water charges. These are red-line issues but nobody is rushing to join Sinn Féin in government.

Deputy Tom Hayes: Not even Deputy Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Where is the queue to join Fine Gael in government?

Deputy Sandra McLellan: Sell their souls.

Deputy Michael Noonan: Putting down a red-line issue is like an auld fellow walking up and down the boundaries of the ballroom of romance saying he will not dance with any of those women over there. Nobody wants to dance with him.

Deputy Tom Hayes: Sinn Féin is lonesome.

Deputy Michael Noonan: Nobody wants to dance with him. That is the position.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: We are not dancing with the troika. Perhaps the Minister does not realise about the €200 million and the national debt.

Deputy Michael Noonan: Red lines? Is Deputy Mac Lochlainn joking me? If I could comment on Sinn Féin's economic position, it wants to abolish water charges and property tax. Where will it get the €800 million to bring it to the starting point, if it was ever unfortunate enough to be in government? Who will Sinn Féin nail?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Cut your wages for a start.

Deputy Michael Noonan: Who are the rich?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Turn around.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister obviously does not know who the rich are because he has never taxed them.

Deputy Tom Hayes: In Sinn Féin's book a garda married to a teacher is rich.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister is quite capable of looking after himself.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He is indeed.

Deputy Michael Noonan: It is difficult enough to construct budgets, but when one begins

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by moving back €800 million before one starts, then income tax will get a desperate belt, as will universal social charge and personal incomes. These are the Sinn Féin-----

Deputy Peter Mathews: What about the €700 million pension levy?

Deputy Michael Noonan: Is Deputy Mathews against that also?

Deputy Peter Mathews: The biggest of them all. The Minister forgot about that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Minister to ignore the side comments.

Deputy Michael Noonan: I thought Deputy Mathews had more sense. It is not possible to construct a budget on the type of proposals Sinn Féin is making-----

Deputy Sandra McLellan: It is.

Deputy Michael Noonan: -----and it needs to start again. Go back to basics. Now that the economy is growing, Sinn Féin needs a new model because what it has stated up to now is absolute economic nonsense.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: He would be a far better Taoiseach.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow Deputy Mac Lochlainn to put a supplementary question.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: One would think the Minister was doing stand-up at the Edinburgh fringe festival. Anybody watching today is looking at him and his fellow comedians behind him making light of the reality and sheer distress of so many families who are getting these letters through their doors and making choices and decisions. It is hugely disingenuous of the Minister because he knows that every year we give him detailed costed proposals for the budget with clear alternatives and choices. Every year, understandably, Fine Gael protects the very wealthy in society because that is what it is about.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Rubbish.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: What is shocking to people watching today is why the Labour Party continues to facilitate this agenda. This year once again Sinn Féin will provide the Minister with a fully costed budget with alternatives and choices for him to make. There will be no hiding place or stand-up comedy. There will be the reality he must face up to, with the electorate who will have to pay the bills come next January. It is about choices. Will the Minister protect those at the very top as he always has done, as all his language reflects, or will he bring in a genuinely fair and equal budget which starts to take the pressure off families throughout the State? This is his choice and we await his decision.

Deputy Joe Higgins: The Minister might be the auld fellow in the ballroom of romance by the time this is all over.

Deputy Michael Noonan: The House appreciates I am making light of Sinn Féin's pretend economics. That is what I am making light of.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister is deflecting.

Deputy Michael Noonan: To summarise the fully costed three budget submissions Sinn

Féin has made to me over the past three and a half years, it decided that 85% of the correction in the finances of the country should be made by way of tax increases-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: What are water and property charges?

Deputy Michael Noonan: -----and the total proposal of its tax increases was more than €7 billion. If Sinn Féin thinks the country can take an extra burden of €7 billion in taxation, whether it is the well off, those on middle incomes or the poor who must pay it-----

Deputy Peter Mathews: What about corporates?

Deputy Michael Noonan: -----it is absolute nonsense. This is what I am illustrating today. I am making light of the so-called economic proposals Sinn Féin is bringing forward. I can understand why it took its stance against the policies we pursued, which were dubbed as austerity policies, but now that it has been proved they have been successful-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It has not been successful. Real people are suffering.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: Successful for whom? For the homeless?

Deputy Michael Noonan: -----and that the economy is growing dramatically, if Sinn Féin wants to be a serious force in the Parliament, it should at least get background people who understand economics and who can add.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: The Minister's Department. The Department of Finance.

Deputy Peter Mathews: What about corporate taxation?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Is Deputy Mathews sitting out this dance?

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Durkan to respect Deputy Collins, who is on her feet.

Deputy Joan Collins: The 2011 programme for Government promised an extension of BreastCheck to those aged between 65 and 69 years. As part of the Government's reform plans for the health service it was promised to roll it out at the beginning of 2014 but this has not happened. It was also part of Fine Gael's commitments before the election in 2011. The Irish Cancer Society has been asking the Government to extend BreastCheck to women aged between 65 and 69 years in the HSE's national service plan for 2015. If the Government keeps its promise and extends BreastCheck to women in this age group, 43,670 women will be invited to attend for free screening each year. We know that for every 500 women screened, one life will be saved, so this will result in 87 women's lives being saved annually. In the Minister's constituency it will mean four women's lives will be saved, given that there are 2,100 women in the age group in the constituency, and in the Taoiseach's constituency five women's lives will be saved.

The Minister for Health has stated it is intended to extend the upper age range for Breast-Check to include those aged between 65 and 69 years as soon as possible and with available resources. Will the Minister make clear to the Irish Cancer Society and the 43,670 women between the age of 65 and 69 years and their families what extra resources, if any, are needed for the extension and the cost of these extra resources? What plan does the Government have to put in place these resources in order that the life-saving service will be provided in the HSE's service plan for 2015? I am glad the Minister for Finance is here because he has an input.

Deputy Michael Noonan: I thank the Deputy for her submission. BreastCheck has been

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an effective method of identifying persons in a pre-cancer state who then have the potential of early intervention. It has been rolled out for various age cohorts in various geographic areas throughout the country. It is a progressive scheme. I have no doubt that as the scheme advances, the Minister for Health will take the Deputy's views into account. The resources of the health service must be used where they are most effective. There are many issues with regard to screening programmes, with which I am sure the Deputy is familiar. It must be treated very carefully before extensions are put in place. In general terms, what the Deputy has said is worth considering as soon as resources are available.

Deputy Joan Collins: A promise was made by the Minister's party before the 2011 election, and it was part of the programme for Government, that the age group would be included in BreastCheck free screenings. Why has this not been done and why can the Minister not tell the Irish Cancer Society, the women in this age group and their families that he will seriously commit to the promise in the upcoming budget and provide for it in the HSE's service plan for 2015? The Minister pulls the strings, he knows this is needed and the Government promised it so why is he not here stating the Government will seriously commit to introducing it in the 2015 service plan? HIQA has stated it is the most effective method and recommended extending BreastCheck to women in this age group. The EU advisory committee on cancer prevention recommends asymptomatic women aged between 50 and 69 years should be screened every two to three years. All medical expertise states regular screening is the most effective way to prevent women dying from breast cancer. Will the Minister state the Government will seriously consider introducing this in the 2015 service plan?

Deputy Michael Noonan: The mandate of the Government runs for another year and a half so there is no breach of any commitment in the programme for Government arising from this.

Deputy Joan Collins: It was supposed to be 2014.

Deputy Michael Noonan: I understand the points made by the Deputy. When I was Minister for Health I brought forward the first breast screening programmes and I understand how they are organised. I will speak to the Minister for Health and tell him the Deputy's views on this issue.

Deputy Joan Collins: What about the Government's views and the Department's views?

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Employment Data

1. **Deputy Joe Higgins** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide a breakdown by sector of jobs created in the economy this year; and if he will provide figures for the average wage levels for these jobs by sector. [29935/14]

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Higgins to introduce the question.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Normally we do not get this opportunity on Taoiseach's questions.

My question was to ask the Taoiseach and indeed the Government representatives for a

breakdown by sector of jobs created in the economy this year and figures for the average wage levels for these jobs to see if we can get at the truth that the Government has grotesquely exaggerated the number of jobs created, many at very low and insecure levels of pay.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I thank the Deputy for his question. Statistics on the labour force and employment by sector are based on the quarterly national household survey, QNHS, conducted by the Central Statistics Office. These figures are published on a quarterly basis and the latest figures available are for the second quarter of 2014. The results for that quarter show that employment has increased by 31,600 in the past year.

The QNHS includes a breakdown of total employment, and the trend in employment, quarterly and annual, for each sector of the economy. It does not break that trend into the gross flows of jobs gained and jobs lost. However, estimates of the numbers of jobs created and jobs destroyed are compiled by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, on the basis of administrative data. These tables on job creation and job destruction are published on the StatBank database available on the CSO's website. The purpose of the series is to explore the dynamics in business employment – the flow of jobs and persons between firms and within and between sectors, using a methodology adapted from research literature in this area.

The job churn series is based on a statistical analysis of administrative data from the Revenue Commissioners. The Revenue information is provided to the CSO under the Statistics Act 1993 and is used solely for statistical purposes. The estimates of job churn relate to all employing enterprises in key sectors of the business economy as classified by the standard European classification of economic activity. The most recent data which the CSO has compiled on this topic are for the year 2011.

I propose to circulate in the Official Report a table showing the estimates of job creation, job destruction, the resulting net jobs created and the corresponding estimated weekly pay of hirings for the years 2006 to 2011. Key features from this table are as follows. Between 2010 and 2011, an estimated 210,985 jobs were created, with a net 9,972 jobs created after jobs lost are taken into account. In the preceding three years, the net figure was negative, with a large volume of net job destruction. Between 2007 and 2008, the net job loss figure was 131,926; between 2008 and 2009 it was 364,726; and between 2009 and 2010 the net number of jobs lost was 104,589. The sectors which had the greatest job loss over that three year period were construction, and wholesale and retail trade, including repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles. In 2011, the estimated weekly pay for jobs lost was €502.92 and the weekly pay for jobs created was €562.25. The average weekly pay for all jobs in the business economy was €632.56.

These figures are based on administrative data sources. They supplement the existing CSO series based on the quarterly national household survey and earnings surveys, but they are not directly comparable to those surveys, as they are compiled from an administrative source. The value of this new series is that it provides more detail on the dynamics of the labour market. The CSO is continuing to work on this new series and plans to have figures for 2012 and 2013 available by the end of December 2014.

-	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Business economy excluding activities of holding companies (B to N, -642)						
Job creation (Number)	353,614	375,167	217,819	146,889	183,445	210,985
Job destruction (Number)	198,209	228,356	349,745	511,615	288,034	201,013
Net Job Creation	155,405	146,811	-131,926	-364,726	-104,589	9,972
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	493.19	501.63	504.28	499.08	474.56	502.92
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	459.07	503.22	516.32	547.21	560.76	562.25
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	611.03	637.08	657.32	643.03	633.01	632.56
Mining and quarrying (B)						
Job creation (Number)	..	..	862	582	217	412
Job destruction (Number)	..	..	1103	2020	1678	590
Net Job Creation	..	..	-241	-1438	-1461	-178
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	..	..	684.60	760.57	650.87	556.90
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	..	..	726.68	788.94	857.48	686.24
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	..	..	854.39	864.01	885.54	858.21
Manufacturing (C)						
Job creation (Number)	31,375	31,976	18,136	17,400	16,984	26,166
Job destruction (Number)	20,496	25,951	34,688	55,018	30,550	23,129
Net Job Creation	10,879	6,025	-16,552	-37,618	-13,566	3,037
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	588.84	588.04	650.21	691.52	590.04	739.38
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	548.11	634.78	642.49	675.18	803.45	825.45
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	676.56	704.18	737.51	747.87	745.41	755.68
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply (D)						
Job creation (Number)	..	..	276	714	390	276
Job destruction (Number)	..	..	86	134	805	1000
Net Job Creation	..	..	190	580	-415	-724
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	982.24	860.62	675.39	724.53
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	1186.47	1236.41	1122.72	996.78

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-	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	1329.37	1328.89	1321.21	1249.11
Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities (E)						
Job creation (Number)	1822	2188	1587	857	1035	1260
Job destruction (Number)	760	696	1566	1999	1394	869
Net Job Creation	1062	1492	21	-1142	-359	391
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	523	598.86	567.74	544.46	517	459.04
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	550.60	532.52	596.09	594.97	588.96	569.94
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	617.39	656.69	670.16	641.74	613.82	591.62
Construction (F)						
Job creation (Number)	70,104	59,352	29,864	13,846	16,534	16,961
Job destruction (Number)	36,173	52,520	84,820	94,408	50,607	30,577
Net Job Creation	33,931	6,832	-54,956	-80,562	-34,073	-13,616
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	571.74	598.75	604.48	555.39	502.28	504.94
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	564.62	579.05	606.30	626.04	605.81	575.47
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	666.58	694.09	712.09	680.49	638.76	614.30
Wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (G)						
Job creation (Number)	68,647	97,424	44,444	29,632	37,881	43,355
Job destruction (Number)	56,441	43,575	71,300	125,393	54,480	42,172
Net Job Creation	12,206	53,849	-26,856	-95,761	-16,599	1,183
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	380.54	404.17	403.68	399.85	386.64	383.32
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	373.16	388.68	403.24	430.51	446.05	428.29
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	491.47	512.38	526.33	515.18	506.68	502.07
Transportation and storage (H)						
Job creation (Number)	13,922	12,841	14,507	4,988	8,078	8,163
Job destruction (Number)	6,017	13,031	10,333	16,398	12,247	9,393
Net Job Creation	7,905	-190	4,174	-11,410	-4,169	-1,230
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	495.30	506.67	565.19	467.10	478.38	443.82

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-	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	499.67	594.61	539.77	546.84	599.28	593.27
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	667.93	685.95	705.69	703.54	685.38	673.91
Accommodation and food service activities (I)						
Job creation (Number)	51,711	53,704	35,372	25,015	30,385	36,298
Job destruction (Number)	31,634	36,246	50,830	73,859	39,898	29,561
Net Job Creation	20,077	17,458	-15,458	-48,844	-9,513	6,737
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	297.36	315.18	308.40	286.25	274.76	270.13
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	275.38	296.30	320.39	328.71	315.17	291.70
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	345.27	367.02	373.85	357	338.86	332.32
Information and communication (J)						
Job creation (Number)	26,464	17,071	15,864	12,033	15,367	13,723
Job destruction (Number)	7,427	12,431	14,601	22,680	16,050	12,943
Net Job Creation	19,037	4,640	1,263	-10,647	-683	780
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	746.38	723.42	732.38	738.01	810.91	760.69
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	703.10	718.95	795.63	845.91	847.42	860.87
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	853.31	893.91	926.23	918.37	923.73	952.12
Financial and insurance activities excluding activities of holding companies (K-642)						
Job creation (Number)	13,994	18,874	6,269	4,015	12,828	14,213
Job destruction (Number)	6,766	6,506	10,009	15,668	6,877	10,375
Net Job Creation	7,228	12,368	-3,740	-11,653	5,951	3,838
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	743.18	797.99	813.44	973.94	777.04	915.06
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	793.10	907.69	870.78	921.12	1043.19	987.65
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	898.27	943.03	982.73	947.83	942.90	963.29
Real estate activities (L)						
Job creation (Number)	5,136	5,181	3,348	2,693	3,096	4,964
Job destruction (Number)	2,454	3,513	4,048	6,963	4,542	2,797
Net Job Creation	2,682	1,668	-700	-4,270	-1,446	2,167

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-	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	528.99	535.61	583.15	552.83	464.99	394.40
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	462.87	522.30	541.24	541.18	494.98	489.22
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	622.33	637.20	641	607.78	586.60	556.07
Professional, scientific and technical activities (M)						
Job creation (Number)	26,386	28,561	18,101	10,927	15,305	20,240
Job destruction (Number)	9,703	14,729	19,028	33,804	25,534	16,073
Net Job Creation	16,683	13,832	-927	-22,877	-10,229	4,167
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	609.56	640.57	649.63	624.35	589.61	588.31
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	585.46	619.10	646.23	696.34	677.95	653.54
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	727.61	775.20	801.56	758.65	743.28	748.06
Administrative and support service activities (N)						
Job creation (Number)	42,659	46,804	29,189	24,187	25,345	24,954
Job destruction (Number)	19,086	18,375	47,333	63,271	43,372	21,534
Net Job Creation	23,573	28,429	-18,144	-39,084	-18,027	3,420
Hirings - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	423.78	431.24	422.21	412.01	415	412.70
Separations - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	383.44	414.41	426.15	454.94	436.17	425.37
All Jobs - Mean Weekly Reckonable Pay €	485.75	507.02	518.10	492.77	487.99	491.29

This information and further detailed breakdowns are available online and are updated annually. See <http://www.cso.ie/shorturl.aspx/216>

Deputy Joe Higgins: The Minister of State did not explain why at the beginning of this year every single day and every single week the Taoiseach and Ministers were out boasting about a job creation rate of 5,000 per month for 2013. What happened? The job creation rate in the first half of 2014 collapsed relative to that. What happened to the 5,000 a month the Government was boasting about? Is it not very clear that the points we made at the time, which was that half of the claimed job creation in 2013 was most likely - it still has not been confirmed - due to statistical realignment after the census and that the second half was in very low paid sectors such as hotel and catering, were correct? We welcome every single job, but we want decent wages and security for the workers, which is not the trend at present. In the first half of 2014, the total number of jobs in the economy fell by 8,000. That is the reality and it is accounted for by emigration and other factors.

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I ask the Minister of State to be straight and honest with the people. Currently counted within the labour force are 95,000 to 105,000 people who are on labour activation schemes simply as a method to take them off the dole figures, which as everybody knows has been widely exposed as trickery. It is employing taxpayers' funds to subsidise sometimes very big employers for semi-slave labour, with workers forced off the dole to work for nothing essentially. Is that not verified by the recent revelation that in the Department of Education and Skills incredibly the State is increasingly dependent on JobBridge and the likes to employ special needs assistants, teachers, cleaners and office staff as semi-slave labour at taxpayers' expense?

Does the Minister of State agree that the Government has been putting out quite sophisticated propaganda to cover up the reality that any recovery in the Irish economy, such as it is, is for the benefit of a small elite at the top and has not really got through in any sense to ordinary working people on the ground? While trumpeting this there is a complete ignoring of the fact that the suffering continues for the victims of austerity and bailout. Of course the Michael Hassenstabs of the world and their ilk will benefit massively from what is going on at the expense of ordinary people. Unfortunately, the capitalist media, which are cheerleaders for the Government, were cheerleaders for the speculation and the boom. They then became cheerleaders for austerity and are now giving uncritical headlines for bloated Government propaganda.

I ask the Minister of State to speak directly, for example, to 16 bricklayers and construction workers, members of Unite, who were forced on strike-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are straying a bit here.

Deputy Joe Higgins: -----in Lucan at Kishoge Community College - a Department of Education and Skills scheme - because their employer forced them on pain of lock-out to change from being-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Joe Higgins: -----employed workers to bogus subcontractors-----

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a separate question.

Deputy Joe Higgins: -----for €5 an hour. Is that the type of economy over which the Government now is prepared to stand because that is the reality of the so-called recovery for many working-class people?

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, could I just explain? This is purely a statistical question to the Minister of State who is responsible for the Central Statistics Office, CSO. It is not a matter of policy and we must stick to the confines of that. It is only reasonable that had the Deputy other questions, they would be tabled to the appropriate Ministers. However, this is a statistical question that is being replied to - regardless of whether it is to the Deputy's satisfaction - and that is the situation.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I just wanted to throw in questions.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, it is none of the Deputy's business to interfere there. I just wish to put on the record what it is. This is a statistical question and is being answered on that basis, not on a policy basis.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Yes, but a Cheann Comhairle-----

Deputy Paul Kehoe: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. During my time in this House, since 2002, Deputy Higgins's train of thought has never changed. Allow me to outline to the Ceann Comhairle that unemployment decreased by 46,200, that is, by 15.4%, on an annual basis between the second quarters of 2013 and 2014, bringing the total number of persons unemployed to 254,500. This is the eighth quarter in succession in which unemployment has declined on an annual basis. The overall unadjusted unemployment rate decreased from 13.9% to 11.8% over the year up to the second quarter of 2014. On a seasonally-adjusted basis, the unemployment rate decreased from 12% in the first quarter of 2014 to 11.5% in the second quarter of 2014, while the number of persons unemployed fell by 12,700 between the first and second quarters of 2014. The total number of persons classified as unemployed on a seasonally-adjusted basis was 247,700 in the second quarter of 2014, which compares with a peak of 326,000 in the first quarter of 2012. The seasonally-adjusted unemployment total of 247,700 in the second quarter of 2014 is the lowest since the first quarter of 2009, when the seasonally-adjusted number of persons unemployed was 229,000.

The number of persons aged between 15 and 24, that is, youths, who are classified as unemployed in the second quarter of 2014 was 52,000. This represents a decrease of 12,200 or 18.8% when compared with the second quarter of 2013. Youth unemployment was 76,000 two years previously, in the second quarter of 2012. The number of persons aged between 16 and 24 and not in employment, education or training was 73,400 in the second quarter of 2014, which represents a decrease of 4,300 since the second quarter of 2013, when the number of persons aged between 16 and 24 and not in employment, education or training was 77,000.

I should remind Deputy Higgins that last week's jobs included 115 in Dairygold, 500 in Argos, 300 in food start-ups, 75 in TK Maxx, 50 in Dealz, 45 in CaterWaste, 40 in A & L Goodbody, 40 in Stanton Fisher, 20 in Kedington Direct and ten in Subway. These figures speak for themselves.

Deputy Joe Higgins: As the Ceann Comhairle is aware, the saying goes that there are lies, damned lies and statistics. This is why Members cannot confine a reply of the Government that is full of statistics just to that; they must interpret them.

An Ceann Comhairle: No sorry, this is a different matter. This is complying with Standing Orders of the Dáil and is not to do with statistics and damned statistics. It is to do with the rules of the House and if the Deputy puts down a question asking for certain figures, it is the appropriate Minister who deals with it. However, if the Deputy strays into an area of policy, it is a different Minister. As that is the point I am making, please proceed.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Yes, I know but in fairness, the Standing Order of the Dáil should not prevent Members from getting at the real nub of an issue and the truth of the situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, well the Deputy then should put the question to the appropriate Minister.

Deputy Joe Higgins: In any case, I refer to the horrific statistics the Minister of State has now given for the unemployed. Anything greater than a quarter of a million is horrific, as would be a number a lot less than that. However, were one to add to that the 158,600 people net who have emigrated since 2008, the 100,000 people on so-called labour activation schemes, as well as other categories that are not included in the live register, does the Minister of State not agree that we still have a massive crisis of people who are forcibly unemployed, who are suffering as

a result of the austerity policies and that a change of policy to massive investment is needed for the job creation that is essential in this society?

Deputy Paul Kehoe: While I do not agree with some of the Deputy's positions, I question whether he actually is questioning some of the figures I have too hand from the Central Statistics Office, which is independent. When the Government came into office in 2011, the unemployment figure was 15.1%, at present it is 11.2% and next year, it is projected to fall to 9.9%. These are the projections the Government has to hand and so it must be doing something right. Be it labour activation schemes or whatever, they are turning into real, full-time jobs. Moreover, there is proof of this, if one speaks to some of those who have taken on people in the labour activation schemes.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will have a quick supplementary from Deputy Tóibín. Will you stick to the statistical question?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I will. First, I welcome any improvement that has happened in the figures. However, one should be able to be critical of the issues that still are not right within the economy. In recent years, a large amount of pent-up investment has come to the fore and has found itself in the creation of some of these jobs. In addition, the export figures that were weak in 2013 have strengthened this year, which also has led to the increase in gross domestic product, GDP. However one key issue with regard to the jobs crisis in the State is that internationally, Ireland is an outlier with regard to the number of people who have lost their jobs since 2008 and in respect of the current unemployment crisis. However, the Government's response has been extremely meek in trying to resolve the issue.

One should look at the figures since the present Administration came to power in 2011. Before the last election, Labour Party posters appeared stating that 70,000 new jobs had been created.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question please.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: However, since the Government has come to power, 40,000 new jobs have been created and only 5,000 new jobs have been created in the first six months of this year. The Minister of State spoke about the reduction in the percentage of people unemployed. Given that six times more people have emigrated since it came into office than actually found a new job in this State-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, would you put your question please?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In what way can the Government rebalance these figures to ensure these statistics are not heavily weighed and that the engine of change with regard to the employment figures is not skewed towards emigration?

Deputy Paul Kehoe: The information on migration is published in the annual population and migration estimates release. In 2014, the release showed that the net outward migration in the year to April 2014 is estimated to have fallen to 21,400, which is a decrease of 11,700 from the previous year's figures of 33,100. Emigration from Ireland in the 12 months to April 2014 is estimated to have fallen to 81,900 from 89,900 in the year to April 2013, while the number of immigrants is estimated to have increased from 55,900 to 60,000 over the same period. Estimates of emigration and immigration by principal economic status were provided for the first time in August 2014. The results show that of the 75,900 persons aged 15 and more who

emigrated in that year, 28,900 were at work, 5,300 were unemployed and 29,000 were students. Among immigrants, 22,600 were at work, 6,800 were unemployed and 16,200 were students.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: May I ask a further question?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, I call Deputy Ó Feargháil.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. Notwithstanding my agreement with some of the points made by Deputy Higgins, on the whole area of labour activation, this is not the first Government to use it as a way of dealing with an unemployment crisis and Members should not underestimate its importance because in terms of society, labour activation is playing an important role.

4 o'clock

However, it can be only a short-term response, and it can only seek to address the short-term social problems that confront us. Competitiveness in the economy was a challenge that existed for this Government, and it has acted successfully in reducing VAT on the hospitality sector. I welcome the employment that is supported by that measure, with many of those jobs being good and worthwhile. However, there is a developing view in Irish society that the Fine Gael Party element of the Government has as its mission, in tackling the issue of competitiveness, to continue to drive down wages to the point that many of the jobs being created are in yellow pack, low-paid employment. That is not what any of us on this side of the House wants.

I note with concern that 46% of those persons who emigrated in recent times were in employment before they left. What does it say about the current employment and taxation regime if such a large cohort of young people with jobs are leaving the country? When we look to Spain, Italy and Greece, we see frightening levels of youth unemployment of 50% or more. The reality, however, is that our youth unemployment level has been disproportionately distorted by the emigration situation. If we did not have the tradition of emigration we have in this country, I do not know if the problem would not be far greater. Will the Minister of State address these concerns?

Deputy Paul Kehoe: I am surprised to hear the Deputy speak about yellow pack workers and single out the Fine Gael Party's policy given that his party, when it was in government, reduced the national minimum wage, a measure for which the Deputy voted. No person has ever come to me with a concern regarding my party's position on this issue. Indeed, the figures stand up for themselves in terms of the measures we are taking.

The Deputy referred to the large numbers of persons leaving this country who are in employment. We are an island nation and many of our young people want to travel and see the world. Members of my own family have left jobs to go abroad for that purpose. I agree that the figures might look alarming, but the reality is that the people who leave jobs in Ireland for Australia, Canada, the United States and elsewhere are doing so of their own free will. In the case of persons who were forced to leave because of unemployment, it seems that large numbers of them are now coming back. I have spoken to many parents in recent months whose children are returning because they see a brighter future for our economy and country, with opportunities now available which were not there in 2008 and 2009, when we saw the highest rate of departure from this country. I do not have any explanation for why people would choose to leave Ireland when they have a job here, other than to say that their reasons would be varied.

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We have a long way to go regarding the hospitality sector, but the figures are positive. It is a work in progress and we are moving in the right direction. Overall, the unemployment level is falling, which everybody in the House welcomes. That improvement is largely down to the sacrifices Irish people have made in recent years. Our objective is to ensure this is a better country to live in, with full employment by 2020 and every young person having an opportunity of employment. Earlier today I opened a new facility in Trinity College where several lecturers and other staff members observed that there is no comparison between the opportunities now available to graduates compared with the situation five or six years ago.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: These statistical questions are important because there is nothing which infuriates people more than being told things are getting better for them when they self-evidently are not. The question relates both to the broader issue of jobs and unemployment and to different sectors and levels of pay. It is a problem from a statistical point of view if we cannot get a proper breakdown of these data. Some of the figures the Minister of State is giving us go back to 2011. We cannot, based on what he is telling us, judge whether the Government propaganda about the great success and improvement in employment is true, and we will not be able to do so for a considerable time. We can, however, conclude, based on what he has said, that if we did not have 20,000 people leaving the country this year and last, there would have been a zero decrease in unemployment.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy put his supplementary question?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It would be helpful if the Government at least owned up to that fact. It is a disastrous situation, notwithstanding that the creation of any new job is, of course, welcome.

The question also referred to pay rates and sectors, but the Minister of State has not been able to give us any proper statistics in this regard. Those data are important because people in this country are of the view, based on their own experience, that there is widespread displacement of what were previously well-paid jobs-----

An Ceann Comhairle: This is Question Time, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am asking a question.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is making a statement. I ask him to put his supplementary question.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am not making a statement.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, you are.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Does the Minister of State accept there is widespread and justified concern that displacement is going on? One example of this is what is happening at the Rhatigan site, where brick layers, after not being paid for five weeks, were given €100 per week for work for which they previously would have received €600 or €700.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a separate matter. If the Deputy does not put his supplementary question, I will cut him off.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is this the type of job creation we are talking about?

Deputy Paul Kehoe: I would advise Deputy Boyd Barrett to get out a bit more and explore.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I was out on the picket line at the site to which I referred.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Exactly. The Deputy will only go to places where there are pickets, negativity and bad news stories. He should get out a little more in his constituency to hear from members of the business community what is happening. There is positivity out there.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have spoken to them and they are not happy campers.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: I always find that if one stays around negative people, one will become negative oneself. That is exactly what has happened to the Deputy. He has spent far too long up in that back row. If he came over and talked to us on this side of the House, he might become a little more positive about what is really happening.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: That is a tantalising invitation.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Come dance with me.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: The Minister of State is flirting.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: A few years ago Deputy Boyd Barrett was giving out about block layers and so on being paid €600 or €700 per week. I do not agree with his sentiments today and I hope he will take my advice to try and be a little more positive.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Order of Business

Deputy Michael Noonan: It is proposed to take No. 15, motion re. referral to Select Subcommittee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of Double Taxation Relief Orders 2014; No. 4, Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014 - Order for Second Stage and Second Stage; and No. a32, statements on the participation by Irish Defence Forces personnel in the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force mission on the Golan Heights.

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that No. 15 shall be decided without debate; and the proceedings in relation to No. a32 shall be taken at 6.50 p.m. tonight and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 7.30 p.m. and the following arrangements shall apply: the statement of a Minister or Minister of State and of the main spokespersons for Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, who shall be called upon in that order, shall not exceed ten minutes in each case, and such members may share their time; Private Members' business shall be No. 159, motion re. housing.

Tomorrow's business after Oral Questions shall be: No. 4, Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014 - Second Stage (resumed); and No. 5, Sport Ireland Bill 2014 - Order for Second Stage and Second Stage.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are two proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 15 agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with No. a32 agreed to? Agreed.

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Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I appreciate the importance of the Golan Heights issue but it might have been useful to us if we had a little more time. None the less, I appreciate the urgency of the situation.

I refer to the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014 because, to say the least, there is a considerable amount of confusion about the impact of this Bill. It includes changes to the charges to be applied to people with intellectual or physical disabilities who avail of assisted accommodation provided by the HSE. The Disability Federation of Ireland and other groups are very concerned about the impact of a number of the amendments to be made by the Bill. I understand a committee was set up to look at this area of charging people with disabilities and that it comprised people from the Department of Health and the HSE but nobody from the disability sector was engaged in that process which, I suggest, was extremely reprehensible.

The Disability Federation of Ireland is concerned that the charges will adversely impact on people accessing respite services for a period of time, together with the inevitable consequences that this new set of charges will have for people in residential accommodation.

Our national disability strategy and the Disability Act-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid you are straying a bit on the Order of Business.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I will stop at this, but it is a vital issue. The disability strategy and the Disability Act committed us all to a framework whereby equal participation in society would be facilitated and encouraged. If one is going to take large amounts of money from disabled people in residential care-----

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a Second Stage speech.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: -----they will not be able to participate. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for his forbearance but given there was no consultation on this, will the Government withdraw the Bill and have the consultation it should have had before the Bill appeared on our Order Paper?

An Ceann Comhairle: Hold on, according to the order, the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014 is ordered for Second Stage and Second Stage. I think all these points can be made on Second Stage. Does the Minister wish to reply?

Deputy Michael Noonan: As I understand it, Second Stage is being resumed, so the Deputy will have every opportunity to make his points in the course of Second Stage, if he has not already made them.

An Ceann Comhairle: I think he has made his point anyway.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: On promised legislation, last week *TheJournal.ie* website covered the family courts in an excellent series of reports. The suffering of families which must endure this family courts process was quite harrowing. In fairness, Ministers have, on a number of occasions, promised that the Government will bring in legislation to address this. The first Bill to which I draw the Minister's attention is the mediation Bill which would ask families, when they initially break up, to engage in mediation to, hopefully, find a resolution which avoids them having to go through the whole process of the courts and all that comes with that, including the huge costs to families that entails. The second Bill to which I refer is the family court Bill. Having read through those harrowing reports and excellent journalism

last week, when will the Government bring in these Bills to address this issue once and for all?

Deputy Michael Noonan: We have no date yet for publication of the family court Bill. The mediation Bill will be published early next year.

Deputy Michael McGrath: On a number of occasions before the recess, we discussed the situation relating to the sale of loan books to unregulated third parties Bill and the Minister committed to bringing it forward earlier than 2015. It is listed for this session but does the Minister know specifically when it will be published? I know his Department had a public consultation exercise, which has concluded, but the sooner we see the Bill, the better.

Deputy Michael Noonan: It is still on schedule to be published this session.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I would like to ask about the referendum on children's rights and the misappropriation of funding. Will there be a debate in this House on what happened to the money voted by the House for that referendum? Approximately, €1.1 million of it was-----

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a separate-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is an issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: It sounds like a parliamentary question.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am going to be forced to report it to the Garda Síochána if I do not get some answers here. I have raised it here countless time.

An Ceann Comhairle: You are entitled to an answer but put down a parliamentary question.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I have done so but did not get answers.

Deputy Michael Noonan: Normally, items of expenditure are debated when the debate occurs on the Estimates. When the Estimates debate is scheduled for individual Departments, it is either discussed here or at the finance committee.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Is the Minister able to indicate to the House the current position on the national paediatric hospital development board (amendment) Bill? To what extent has it been approved by Cabinet and is it expected to be brought before the House in this session? Has the education (admission to school) Bill been approved by Cabinet? When is it likely to come before the House and will it be in this session?

Deputy Michael Noonan: The second Bill to which the Deputy referred is well advanced and it is expected to be published in this session. There is no date yet for publication of the national paediatric hospital development board (amendment) Bill.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Given the amount of time it will take the universities to put together their electoral registers, can the Minister outline the progress on the Seanad electoral (university Members) (amendment) Bill? It is of key importance that it is taken early in the new year on the basis that an election will be called sometime next year or the year after. Will the landlord and tenant Bill include proposals to amalgamate any of the agencies in the property services area in order to streamline such services?

An Ceann Comhairle: We can debate the content of the Bill when it comes before the

House.

Deputy Michael Noonan: The proposals in the Seanad electoral (university Members) (amendment) Bill have been discussed in the Seanad already. Effectively, the discussion was on the proposed heads of the Bill but work is advanced on it. Tentatively, it will be published next year.

Deputy Alan Farrell: What about the landlord and tenant Bill?

Deputy Michael Noonan: There is no date for publication.

Double Taxation Relief Orders: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I move:

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Orders in draft:

- (i) Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income) (Kingdom of Belgium) Order 2014,
- (ii) Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income and Capital Gains) (Kingdom of Thailand) Order 2014,
- (iii) Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income and on Capital) (Grand Duchy of Luxembourg) Order 2014,
- (iv) Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income) (Botswana) Order 2014, and
- (v) Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income) (Kingdom of Denmark) Order 2014,

copies of which have been laid before Dáil Éireann on 22nd September, 2014, be referred to the Select sub-Committee on Finance, in accordance with Standing Order 82A(3) (b) and (6)(a), which, not later than 30th September, 2014, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 87, and Standing Order 86(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Topical Issue Debate

Corporation Tax Regime

Deputy Michael McGrath: I am glad the Minister for Finance is in the Chamber to deal with the issue of the OECD base erosion and profit shifting deliverables report 2014. I feel it is important to raise the issue in the Dáil at an early date. I am sure the Minister will agree that it is critical to provide certainty on Ireland's corporation tax regime. All of the main political parties in this House subscribe to the 12.5% corporation tax rate. However, as important as the rate itself is the corporation tax system, which is administered by Revenue and underpinned by legislation. There has been considerable speculation as to what the report means for Ireland

in terms of changes the Minister might seek to make in the budget. I seek reassurance from him in regard to his intentions because we should be under no illusions - I am sure he is not - that Ireland is operating in a highly competitive environment when it comes to foreign direct investment. Ireland's corporation tax rate and system have been fundamental to our success in attracting inward investment over many years.

It has been clear for some time that our corporation tax system is in the spotlight and, in many respects, under attack. There was commentary, much of it inaccurate, at US Senate hearings and in the UK House of Commons, and a European Commission probe is ongoing into the treatment of one company by Revenue. It is important that Ireland moves in parallel with other countries. The OECD listed a number of countries as having harmful tax practices, but Ireland was not one of them. However, a head of steam appears to be building to the effect that Ireland will make a unilateral move on certain aspects of our system. The double Irish has been highlighted as a case in point. The questions I have to pose - I do not have all the answers - are what is the cost of doing nothing on the issue and what is the cost of acting on it. Would it be sufficient to signal a roadmap of changes that the Minister intends to make over the coming period in respect of our corporation tax offering?

It appears to me from my discussions with multinational companies, their representative bodies and their professional advisers that Ireland's corporation tax offering has become less attractive compared to the UK's offering in recent times. The UK authorities have upped their game considerably. I am getting that feedback from the companies concerned, and I am sure the Minister and his officials are getting similar feedback on the UK's move on the patent box, the reduction in its corporation tax rate and the manner in which it treats overseas profits from a corporation tax point of view. Ireland needs to play hard but fair, and Ireland needs to play to win when it comes to foreign direct investment. I am loth to see a situation in which we make unilateral moves before other countries change their systems. Compared to many other countries, Ireland's system is open, transparent and underpinned by legislation. The Minister knows full well the importance of the investment and employment that multinationals bring to this country. I want to see that supported and protected and if he is going to make any changes, they have to be in the context of an overall package of improving our corporation tax offering, such as in regard to the treatment of intellectual property and research and development. These issues are fundamental to companies seeking to invest in Ireland.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I thank the Deputy for tabling this important issue for debate because the base erosion and profit shifting, BEPS, process and international tax generally have received significant media attention recently. Due to a need for a multilateral solution to this international problem, the G20 asked the OECD to report with recommendations on how to tackle aggressive and harmful tax planning. The resultant OECD project is known as the OECD base erosion and profit shifting project. When a company undertakes base erosion, it is attempting to reduce its taxable income and thereby reduce the amount of tax it has to pay. The practice of profit shifting is to move profits from one jurisdiction to another.

In July 2013, the OECD launched an action plan on BEPS, identifying 15 specific actions needed in order to equip governments with the domestic and international instruments to address these challenges. The BEPS project is not seeking to harmonise tax rates across its members as the action plan because, as it states, "tax policy is not only the expression of national sovereignty but it is at the core of this sovereignty, and each country is free to devise its tax system in the way it considers most appropriate". Further, the project is not opposed to tax

competition in member states but instead opposes harmful tax competition adopted by jurisdictions. It is fundamentally important to distinguish between these two types of tax competition. For instance, a low rate of tax is a policy lever that can be used by countries, especially smaller, peripheral countries, that seek to attract foreign direct investment for growth.

Many of the BEPS actions are technically complex but at its heart BEPS is a simple concept with two key pillars, namely, to align more strictly substance and taxing rights, in other words, companies should be taxed where they have their substantive operations; and to address harmful tax regimes. This is in line with Ireland's overall strategy for attracting foreign direct investment. Ireland has not been and will never will be a brass plate location. We only have and want substantive foreign direct investment - the kind that brings real jobs. That is why I believe that the OECD BEPS project offers more opportunities for Ireland than risks. We have welcomed the first set of BEPS reports, which were released last week, because they are the first milestone in this two year process. The reports examine a number of different areas and the draft recommendations are very positive. As I noted last week, Ireland agrees in particular with the conclusion of the report on the digital economy that the sector should not be ring-fenced from the economy as a whole. There has also been good progress in the areas of coherence, substance and transparency, and while further work is required in some of these areas, the reports are a further step towards multilateral co-operation on countering base erosion and profit shifting by multinationals.

At 12.5%, Ireland has the lowest general corporate tax rate in the OECD. Corporate tax rates are a matter of national sovereignty. This Government is committed to maintaining the rate. Ireland's offering of a competitive corporate tax rate, the availability of skills and our reputation for being business friendly give us a huge advantage that other countries will struggle to match. As international tax loopholes progressively get closed down, our low general corporation tax rate will become even more attractive. Indeed, as we continue to improve our offering for knowledge-based investment, research and development, and intellectual property, I believe that over the coming years we can grow our share of FDI related investment. In recognition of the importance of the BEPS project, my Department held a public consultation on it earlier this year to start a national conversation on how Ireland should best position itself in a post-BEPS environment. We received a lot of very interesting responses which will feed into my deliberations for budget 2015. I plan to publish the results of this consultation in the near future.

Deputy Michael McGrath: All of us accept that change is coming to the international corporation tax environment. The question for Ireland is whether we anticipate those changes by seeking first mover advantage, if there is an advantage to moving first, or wait to see how other countries respond and move in step with them. I am concerned that, if Ireland moves unilaterally on the double Irish issue, the focus will move to other issues pertaining to our corporation tax regime in the absence of other countries making changes to their systems. We may lose a competitive edge and it would be the second significant change in 12 months to our corporation tax regime. The Minister dealt with the issue of stateless companies in last year's budget.

The issue of certainty is fundamental to corporation tax and inward investment decisions. My instinct is that Ireland should move on an agreed basis with other countries and be cautious about making any changes to our corporation tax regime. We should be under no illusions that behind all this international drive towards an improved corporation tax environment, other countries are looking at Ireland with envy because of the more than 150,000 direct jobs in multinationals here and the investment associated with that. They want our jobs and investment. It is an economic reality we must accept.

In the context of the consultation exercise and the report it is intended to publish, is the Minister considering changes in this area for the 2015 budget? I know the Minister cannot tell me what are the changes but is this very much a live issue in the budget deliberations?

Deputy Michael Noonan: As the Deputy has said, Ireland has been doing very well with foreign direct investment. Statistics indicate that we get slightly over 3% of all foreign direct investment that goes into the European Union, which is approximately twice the proportion of European GDP represented by the Irish economy. We are in a good position. We will have to defend resolutely our right to set our own tax rates, and nobody in any of the fora which have discussed these issues has suggested we would be compelled to move away from the 12.5% rate. That rate is the centre point, together with the availability of skilled young people to work in industry. We are largely an English-speaking country and, together with our proximity to the European Union, that is part of a package.

The Deputy is right to state that this is being discussed in the US Congress and the House of Commons. Ireland has suffered some reputational damage because of the focus on the “double Irish” system. The OECD has issued the first of a series of reports, with the chief executive of its tax division singling out Ireland again for special mention. There is no doubt we are under international focus but in preparing for the budget I will take into account everything the Deputy has said. He has put out the balances of advantage fairly in the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: As we have taken matters earlier than anticipated, Deputy McNamara is not yet present. I have asked that an SOS be made to him, so we might give him a few minutes if Deputies do not mind.

Sitting suspended at 4.35 p.m. and resumed at 4.45 p.m.

Accident and Emergency Departments Closures

Deputy Sean Fleming: I want to raise the very important issue of the future of the accident and emergency unit at Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise. The Minister of State will be aware that the national director of acute hospital services published a report in which he said that the 24-hour a day, seven days a week accident and emergency unit in Portlaoise was “not clinically sustainable”. His report went on to say that the department should be replaced by a medical assessment unit and local injury clinic operating during daytime hours only. He added that other services, such as day care surgery, endoscopy and a local injury unit should be developed to make up for the loss of emergency and surgery facilities, as happened after other hospitals closed their units.

The Minister for Health, responding to public pressure, said there were absolutely no plans to close the unit. I accept that but the question of downgrading the unit is in the offing. The report did not mention closing it. It referred to scaling it down and replacing it. The Department of Health’s submission to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, as part of the Government’s comprehensive spending review, suggested closing 24-hour services at five hospital emergency departments, including Portlaoise, if its budget were cut. The Department of Health has caused this scare. Maybe it is trying to frighten off the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform by saying if it cuts the budget it will close the accident and emergency unit.

That the Department is suggesting this possibility undermines the unit in Portlaoise hospital. There are 43,000 visits to the accident and emergency unit in Portlaoise every year. It is one of the busiest units in Ireland outside the capital city, according to the HSE report of activity to the end of July, published this month.

Deputy Brian Stanley: There is great concern about the Portlaoise hospital. As the previous speaker said of its workload, it is one of the busiest accident and emergency, maternity and paediatric units outside Dublin but it has one of the lowest budgets. Its budget is €10 million lower than that of Naas General Hospital. I am not asking the Minister of State to rob the hospital in Naas. I do not want her to rob Peter to pay Paul. Despite having a bigger workload it has a much lower budget than Naas General Hospital. This year it had a budget of only €44 million which is approximately €8 million less than it had a few years ago when its budget was in excess of €51 million. The budget just about covers the payroll. Despite the best efforts of management and staff the hospital seems to be always in a precarious situation. I recognise that the State has gone through a financially difficult period but the difficult situation at Portlaoise has been compounded by the constant stream of leaked reports that we do not have sight of. We read about them on the front pages of the newspapers.

A clinical report carried out by Dr. Ian Carter earlier this year was not published. It should have been and I ask that it be published. It recommended the closure of the 24-hour accident and emergency unit and surgical services. Then we had the confidential Department submission, which suggested that if the Government went ahead with the planned budget cuts, 20 of the 150 beds at the hospital would be lost and the emergency department's opening hours would be confined to the hours between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. The Minister, Deputy Varadkar, has said he has no plans to close the emergency department. That may be so, but will its opening hours be reduced so that it provides a nine-to-five service only? Accidents are not confined to the hours between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. The staff and the community are being subjected to a relentless campaign of uncertainty. Further uncertainty is being created. Can the Minister of State give me an assurance that the accident and emergency unit and the surgical services at Portlaoise are secure and safe?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): On behalf of the Minister for Health, I thank Deputies Fleming and Stanley for raising this issue. I think they will understand that the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, is unable to be here, unfortunately. As the Minister has previously said, there are no plans to close the emergency department at the Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise. Following the Chief Medical Officer's report last January on maternity services in the hospital and a visit to the hospital by the HSE national surgical clinical programme, the HSE undertook a performance diagnostic to ascertain the current performance status of the hospital in all aspects of service provision. The report identified a number of issues and made key recommendations with regard to control, leadership and clinical services at the hospital. The report suggested that some services in the hospital need to be reconfigured to ensure patients are treated in the most appropriate setting by specialist staff who can meet their needs. The over-riding concern is to address any patient safety and quality concerns that arise.

The HSE is working through an action plan with the staff in the hospital to stabilise and improve services at the Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise. Changes are required to enhance existing resources and structures at the hospital and to address clinical service deficiencies. A joint governance group has been established to ensure appropriate accountability and oversight of required actions and to incorporate the hospital into the existing governance structures within

the Dublin and midlands hospital group, which includes St. James's Hospital and the Coombe, working in collaboration with the children's hospital group. A project team, which has been formed to support the work of the governance group, is in the hospital on a regular basis to support staff on the ground. Immediate actions to stabilise service provision include the appointment of an advanced nurse practitioner and the recruitment of a temporary consultant emergency physician to address the immediate senior decision-making issues within the emergency department. The filling of an additional physician post and replacement posts in endocrinology and care of the elderly is also being advanced.

The joint governance group will also examine the future service configuration at the Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise, including emergency department services. It will explore opportunities to develop services like endoscopy and day surgery. Any potential future reconfiguration of services will be undertaken in a planned and orderly manner. It will take account of existing patient flows, demands in other hospitals and the need to develop particular services at Portlaoise in the context of overall service configuration in the Dublin and midlands hospital group. Recent media reports on the wider issue - the retention of funding for 24-hour emergency departments and the current number of beds across the system - were based on information in the Department's submission to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform under the Government's comprehensive review of expenditure exercise. This review exercise is carried out every three to four years. The last such review was completed in 2011. As the Department's submission under the current exercise is under consideration, it would not be appropriate to comment further at this point, other than to say it is currently not planned to implement measures contained in that submission.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The submission the Department of Health sent to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform suggested that five accident and emergency departments, including the one in Portlaoise, should be downgraded. The Minister of State is saying it is not intended to implement that submission. The only logical thing the Department can do is publicly withdraw the submission that is the source of the problem in Portlaoise. The Department of Health caused the problem when it issued its submission. I was interested to note that the Minister of State's response did not refer to the appointment of a team of medical specialists by the former HSE national director of acute hospitals, Ian Carter, who commissioned the review we mentioned. The Minister of State did not deal with that. She mentioned all the good things that are happening but she ignored the report that questions the sustainability of the unit. She did not say the Department of Health should withdraw the submission it sent to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, given that it appears to have no intention of proceeding with it in any event. The problem is that the systematic cut in the budget over the past three years has undermined public confidence and the confidence of staff in the hospital in Portlaoise.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Minister of State said that as the comprehensive review of expenditure is under consideration at present, "it would not be appropriate to comment further at this point, other than to say it is currently not planned to implement measures contained in that submission". We are concerned about the possibility that 20 beds will be withdrawn from Portlaoise hospital and the emergency department at the hospital will be closed or have its opening hours reduced. That is the issue. We are trying to emphasise that the figures show that the Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise is a busy major regional hospital in a strategic location. The Minister of State's statement does not give any comfort to me, to the staff of the hospital or to the community in County Laois. We have not been reassured that services at the hospital are safe for the future. Although she said "there are no plans" to close the emergency department,

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she did not give us a funding commitment. I want the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, to give us a commitment that the clinical review will be published and that core maternity, paediatric and surgical services will be maintained. Surgical services are necessary if maternity, paediatric and emergency departments are to be maintained. I want a commitment that Portlaoise hospital will have an adequate budget in 2015 to maintain those core services.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I do not think anything I might say would satisfy either Deputy. I am not certain that could be done in any circumstances, even if we had more than enough money to do everything we want to do. I do not know anyone who can say absolutely that something will not change in the future. If the Deputies know anyone who makes such statements, I suggest they should not believe him or her.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I am looking for a commitment for next year, 2015.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: It is understood that the Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise is a very busy hospital. Part of the review took account of patient flow. Equally, the appointment of an advanced nurse practitioner and the recruitment of a temporary consultant physician in the accident and emergency department will help to address immediate senior decision-making issues in that department. An additional physician post and replacement posts in endocrinology and care of the elderly are also being advanced. I would not say that such actions are typical of a body that intends to close a hospital. Such measures have been taken by an organisation that is keen to ensure procedures and quality standards are maintained where that can safely be done. This is about shoring up a hospital that needs such support. Nothing I say will give the Deputies any reassurance. That is the job of the Opposition. I have set out the position as it stands. On behalf of the Minister for Health, I assure the House the intention is that patient safety will be paramount at all times when additional decisions are being made regarding the Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise. Considerable decisions have already been made.

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014: Order for Second Stage

Bill entitled an Act to amend the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 to provide for the application of that Act to the health or social care professions of optometrist and dispensing optician, to divide the health or social care profession of radiographer into the two health or social care professions of radiographer and radiation therapist, to permit a registration board to be the registration board of two or more designated professions, to introduce uniformity between that Act and certain provisions of other Acts which regulate health or social care professions that are not regulated by that Act, to repeal the Opticians Act 1956, to amend sections 67A, 67C and 67D of the Health Act 1970 as amended by section 19 of the Health (Amendment) Act 2013, and to provide for related matters.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): I move: “That Second Stage be taken now.”

Question put and agreed to.

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): I move: “That

the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am pleased to have an opportunity to address the House on Second Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014. This is quite a technical Bill, with a total of 44 sections. It has three main objectives, the first of which is to provide for the subsuming of the Opticians Board into the Health and Social Care Professionals Council. The Bill also makes certain amendments to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 in the interests of efficiency and to ensure consistency with the legislation governing other health regulators.

The Bill also amends the Health Act 1970 to ensure that statutory contributions are payable by recipients of residential support services who, while maintained, are not directly accommodated by or on behalf of the Health Service Executive.

5 o'clock

The first objective and the original main purpose of the Bill, which is to subsume the Opticians Board into the Health and Social Care Professionals Council, is in furtherance of the ongoing programme of State agency rationalisation. The intention is to transfer the regulation of the professions of optometrist and dispensing optician from the Opticians Act 1956 to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005. I would like to pay tribute, at this stage, to the Opticians Board's outgoing president, members, its registrar and their predecessors who have been regulating the optical professions for almost 60 years. The amalgamation of the Opticians Board with a more broad-based, multi-profession regulator will move the regulation of these professions into a modern regulatory regime where the primary and overriding focus will continue to be on the protection of the public. I know that the professional bodies representing optometrists and ophthalmologists have concerns regarding the transition to a new regulatory regime under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 and, in particular, with the proposed composition of the new optical registration board and I would like to provide some assurances on these points. I note, however, that a statement was issued today welcoming the new regime, for which I am thankful.

The Opticians Act 1956 provides for an eleven-member board comprising five optometrists, one dispensing optician, four medical practitioners and one other person who may also be a medical practitioner. In contrast, the thirteen-member registration boards established under the 2005 Act have a lay majority of one, in line with modern legislation governing other health professionals such as doctors and nurses. The interim optical registration board, whose members will be appointed to the new statutory board when this Bill is enacted, includes four optometrists and two dispensing opticians. It also includes two medical practitioners, one of which is a consultant ophthalmologist, who were appointed to represent the public interest on this occasion. The Act allows a degree of flexibility to cater for the particular skill needs of the board at particular times. Accordingly, the public interest representation of future boards may differ from the current board. Also, on the same basis, the ratio of optometrists to dispensing opticians may be varied in the future, subject to the appointment of at least one member of each profession. The lay-majority model is working well for the other six registration boards and I would urge the professional bodies to work constructively with the new board.

Similarly, the approach to regulating professionals is somewhat different under the amended 2005 Act. It is less prescriptive but, I would argue, more effective than the 1956 Act which currently regulates opticians. The focus is on the protection of the public by confining the use of professional titles solely to registrants who are obliged to comply with their profession's

code of professional conduct and ethics. If, as in the 1956 Act, the Bill provided for the inclusion, in primary legislation, of a specific prohibition on the treatment of eye diseases by opticians and an explicit requirement to inform patients of suspected eye diseases or conditions, it would result in optometrists and dispensing opticians being treated differently to the other professions registered under the 2005 Act. These are matters that are more appropriate to the code of professional conduct and ethics that will be adopted by the optical registration board. The code will require registrants to act within the limits of their knowledge, skills, competence and experience in the interest of public protection. Any breach of the code is defined in the Act as professional misconduct which would be liable to investigation and sanctions under the 2005 Act's fitness to practice provisions.

I would now like to provide the House with some background to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, which will apply to optometrists and dispensing opticians on the enactment of this Bill and with an update on its implementation to date. The Act currently provides for the statutory regulation of 12 other designated health and social care professions, namely the professions of clinical biochemist, dietitian, medical scientist, occupational therapist, orthoptist, physiotherapist, podiatrist, psychologist, radiographer, social care worker, social worker and speech and language therapist. Regulation under the Act is primarily by way of the statutory protection of professional titles by confining their use solely to persons granted registration. The structure of the system of statutory registration comprises registration boards, a committee structure to deal with disciplinary matters and a Health and Social Care Professionals Council with overall responsibility for the regulatory system. These bodies are collectively known as CORU and are responsible for protecting the public by regulating health and social care professionals in Ireland. CORU is also charged with the promotion of high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among the registrants.

The Act provides for "grand-parenting" which is a transitional period of two years during which existing practitioners must register on the basis of specified qualifications. After this period, only registrants of a registration board, who will be subject to the Act's regulatory regime, will be entitled to use the relevant designated title. As optometrists and dispensing opticians are already regulated under the 1956 Act, no transitional period will apply to them and their transfer to the 2005 Act will be seamless.

To date, the registers of two professions, namely social workers and radiographers, have been established. The Social Workers Registration Board's two-year transitional period ended in May of last year. This means that all persons using the title of social worker are now obliged to be registered and are subject to the provisions of the Act. The transitional period for the profession of radiographer will end in October of next year. Meanwhile, the registers for the professions of speech and language therapist, dietitian and occupational therapist will be established by their registration boards before the end of this year. The remaining professions are following close behind and I expect that the registers of all 12 professions will be open by the end of 2016.

From a public protection viewpoint, a crucial milestone in the regulation of the Act's designated health and social care professions will be the introduction of a robust fitness to practice regime. This will involve the commencement of Part 6 of the Act to allow complaints about the conduct or competence of registrants to be investigated. Disciplinary sanctions, where complaints are substantiated, up to and including cancellation of registration, may be imposed. The regime will be similar to that applicable to medical practitioners, nurses and midwives. CORU is currently putting in place the necessary legal and administrative arrangements to allow the

new fitness practice regime to be implemented and I hope to be in a position to make the necessary commencement order before the end of this year.

I would also like to update the House on proposals to regulate the professions of counsellor and psychotherapist which are not currently designated under the Act. This issue has been the subject of many Topical Issues debates in the House in the recent past. The Minister for Health may designate health or social care professions not currently designated if he or she considers that it is in the public interest to do so and if the specified criteria have been met. The previous Minister for Health, Deputy James Reilly, wrote to the Health and Social Care Professionals Council in May of this year advising it of his intention, in the public interest, to designate by regulation the profession or professions of counsellor and psychotherapist under section 4(2) of the Act. The Act provides that the Minister for Health is obliged to consult with the council in the first instance concerning a proposed designation and to give interested persons, organisation and bodies an opportunity to make representations to the Minister. The council has been asked to advise on a number of issues concerning the proposed designation and to take into consideration the recently published report of Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, on the academic standards necessary for the accreditation of courses in counselling and psychotherapy. This is an essential element as it will inform, for the purpose of registration, the assessment by the registration board, when established, of the qualifications of those currently in practice. This is the first stage in the consultation process under the Act and I expect to receive the council's report in the coming weeks. I will proceed to the next stage, which will involve a much wider consultation, when I have fully considered the council's report.

While a number of issues remain to be clarified including decisions on whether one or two professions are to be regulated, on the title or titles of the profession or professions, and on the minimum qualifications to be required of applicants for registration, the proposals to regulate counsellors and psychotherapists are being progressed as a priority. It is hoped the necessary designation regulations can be made early next year. Expressions of interest will then be sought from suitably qualified persons available for appointment to the new registration board that will be established to regulate counsellors and psychotherapists.

I am aware of other professions seeking designation under the Act. Creative arts therapists and audiologists, for example, have been making a case for regulation for some time. The immediate priority, however, is to establish the regulatory process for the 12 professions already designated and to come to final decisions, following the detailed consultation process, on the regulation of counsellors and psychotherapists. When all the registers have been established, towards the end of 2016, the Department will ask CORU to prepare a risk assessment, in terms of public protection, of the principal health and social care professions seeking designation, and to make recommendations concerning options for their possible future regulation.

The second objective of the Bill is to make certain amendments to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 in the interest of the efficient running of the regulatory system and to ensure consistency with the legislation governing other health regulators. In summary, under this objective, the Bill will divide, for the purposes of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, the designated profession of radiographer into the two designated professions of radiographer and radiation therapist, permit a registration board to regulate two or more designated professions, and introduce uniformity between the Act and certain provisions of other Acts which regulate medical practitioners, nurses and midwives. The division of the designated profession of radiographer into two designated professions of radiographer and radiation therapist, for the purposes of the 2005 Act, is in response to the evolution of the profession into

two professions for all practical purposes. Over time, the training, qualifications and scopes of practice of diagnostic radiographers who take images and radiation therapists who apply radiation treatment have continued to diverge. This division for regulatory purposes has been recommended by the Radiographers Registration Board and the Health and Social Care Professionals Council.

The existing 13-member Radiographers Registration Board will regulate the professions of radiographer and radiation therapist and the Optical Registration Board will regulate the professions of optometrist and dispensing optician. This is a new departure as up to now each profession had its own registration board. The Bill also provides that newly designated professions may, in the future, be regulated by an existing registration board. These measures will limit the number of new registration boards to be established as new professions are designated. Registration boards with two or more professions would still have 13 members, the existing balance between the number of lay and professional members would be maintained, and each of the board's professions would have at least one professional member on the board. In time, in order that CORU can operate as efficiently as possible on a cost effective and self-funding basis, it is planned to rationalise the 12 existing registration boards listed in the Act, one for each profession, plus any other boards that may be established for newly designated professions, into a reduced number of inter-disciplinary registration boards. This will require separate primary legislation to be introduced when the registration boards and their registers for the existing designated professions are up and running successfully.

The introduction of uniformity between the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 and certain provisions of other Acts which regulate medical practitioners, nurses and midwives is driven by the desirability to ensure consistency in the various registration regimes. The Bill will amend the Act in a number of respects to bring its provisions into line with those of the Medical Practitioners Act 2007 and the Nursing and Midwives Act 2011.

The final objective of this Bill is to address an unintended lacuna in section 19 of the Health (Amendment) Act 2013, which came to light during the implementation planning phase. That Act modernised the contributions regimes in a wide range of residential settings so as to better reflect current models of residential care service provision in the disability, mental health and care of older people sectors. Under the National Disability Strategy and A Vision for Change, there is an ongoing drive towards community-based living in the disability and mental health sectors. In line with this, the increasing trend, particularly in the disability sector, is for accommodation needs to be met by the agencies of the State, such as local authorities, responsible for addressing the accommodation needs of citizens generally. However, the 2013 Act unintentionally omitted situations where service users are maintained, although not accommodated, in specified settings by or on behalf of the HSE. The primary purpose of Part 3 is therefore to ensure that affordable contributions towards ongoing daily living costs will apply to those maintained in such settings, subject to appropriate safeguards. For example, the level of contribution will be reduced to reflect the extent to which service users meet their accommodation and-or maintenance costs themselves.

I now propose to outline the main provisions of the Bill. The Bill is divided into 3 Parts. Part 1 has three sections which provide for the repeal of the Opticians Act 1956 and for the standard provisions relating to Short Title, commencement and expenses.

Part 2 contains 37 sections relating to the amendment of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005. It applies the Act to the professions of optometrist and dispensing optician.

The primary sections in this regard are sections 6, 12, 17, 20, 22, 34 and 36. It also amends the Act, in sections 6, 12 and 21 of the Bill, to divide, for the purposes of that Act, the designated profession of radiographer into the two designated professions of radiographer and radiation therapist. Sections 6, 12, 13 and 16 will permit a registration board to regulate two or more designated professions.

Amendments to provide for the introduction of uniformity between the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 and the Medical Practitioners Act 2007 and the Nursing and Midwives Act 2011, and consequential and other technical amendments, comprise the remaining section of the Bill. The amendments required to align the 2005 Act with the 2007 and 2011 Acts may be broken down into the four main areas of governance, fitness to practice, registration and offences. The principal governance amendments relate to the election of a deputy chairperson of the Health and Social Care Professionals Council, the role of the council's chief executive officer, quorums and the holding of certain meetings of the council and registration boards by video link or the circulation of papers. The Bill amends CORU's fitness to practice regime to allow for: the cancellation of the registration of a registrant convicted of an indictable offence if it is in the public interest to do so, the appointment of persons to assist in investigating complaints against a registrant, the application for immediate suspension of the registration of a registrant on an *ex parte* basis, and the publication of the transcript of the proceedings of a committee of inquiry. In regard to registration, the Bill provides for the charging of fees for approving education and training programmes and for attaching conditions to the registration of a registrant with a relevant medical disability. Finally, the Bill modernises the Act's provisions relating to the prosecution of offences and provides the Health and Social Care Professionals Council with new investigation powers similar to those of the Medical Council and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland.

Part 3 has four sections which, under subsection 1(3) of the Bill, will come into operation in tandem with section 19 of the Health (Amendment) Act 2013. The Bill provides, in section 42, for amending section 61A of the Health Act 1970 to define or redefine key terms. The thrust of the amended definitions provision is to ensure that the statutory contributions regime will cover ongoing essential daily living costs such as food and utility bills where these are met by or on behalf of the HSE, irrespective of whether the service user is accommodated by or on behalf of the HSE. The Bill also provides for a number of amendments to section 67C of the 1970 Act, including provision for reducing contribution amounts automatically for those maintained but not accommodated by or on behalf of the HSE, Health Service Executive; varying contribution amounts based on service users' income levels and-or levels of dependence or independence; and making appropriate transitional arrangements for the new contributions framework if deemed necessary.

This Bill will modernise the regulation of the optical professions, will ensure all those maintained by the HSE and its agents in specified settings contribute within their means towards their daily living expenses while retaining a reasonable amount of income for personal use, and will enable the Health and Social Care Professionals Council to continue to fulfil, in a more effective way, its objective to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among registrants of the designated professions.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I welcome the broad thrust of the first two sections of the Health

(Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014. The Government, however, has taken the interpretation of “miscellaneous” to a whole new level in section 3 which covers charges for people who depend on provision of accommodation by the HSE or agents on its behalf. Fianna Fáil has no difficulty in supporting the first two sections but section 3 leaves much to be desired because of the lack of consultation and discussion with the various stakeholders involved.

The Department of Health stated this is not a revenue-raising measure. The Department, however, also told me last year that it would not have a budget deficit of €500 million. I must advocate on behalf of people who have the view that section 3 will put charges on a statutory footing that could be increased at a later stage. The broader issue of this should have been discussed with the Disability Federation of Ireland and other stakeholders who have concerns about these measures. While the measure contained in section 3 tightens up a lacuna in section 19 of the Health (Amendment) Act 2013, it should have been put out for discussion among the stakeholders involved. Not doing so is regrettable. When we talk about giving people with disabilities a voice in society, the very least we should do is listen to them when such a measure that directly impacts on them is brought before the House. Section 3 does impact on people with disabilities.

The Minister stated the Bill’s main objective is “to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among registrants of the designated professions”. We welcome this streamlining and the advances being made in the regulation of professional medical bodies, as well as them being open to the need for the public to have full confidence in such regulation. There is also the need to ensure continual training and education in these professions, as well as sanction in the event of codes of conduct being breached.

For a long time, some of our professions may seem to have had a vaulted position in society and been considered above the law. Critically, as people take more ownership of their health needs, the *quid pro quo* is that the medical professions must be obligated to respond in ensuring adequate safeguards are in place to ensure the appropriate conduct of their members. This also applies to education and continual learning because of the advances taking place in medicine in general.

As we are dealing with miscellaneous provisions in this Bill, I want to raise another broader issue, one to which we have referred on several occasions as did the former Minister for Health, of medical professionals who have been declared bankrupt such as pharmacists, for example. A commitment had been given that this issue would be addressed. I cannot understand why a pharmacist, if deemed bankrupt, cannot practise. I can understand the pharmacist being debarred from the business aspect but not from practising. Discussions were meant to have taken place to address this particular issue in the short term. Will the Minister inform me how the Department is dealing with this matter? The professionals involved are highly qualified and are meant to be used more in the provision of community-based medical care. This is an area that needs to be examined and the former Minister for Health said he was of like mind with others who raised this issue.

This Bill highlights the complexity of our health services and the number of health care professionals delivering care in our communities. This leads to challenges, particularly for administration managers and policymakers. As we see health care evolve and become more complex in many ways, equally we need to ensure there are simple and transparent ways for people to bring about complaints and not to be afraid to do so. Organisations overseeing the medical

professions must also not be afraid to be seen to acting on complaints. Most people who have a concern or complaint about a medical professional will want it ventilated and investigated. For many years, many health professions swept complaints under the carpet which has led us down some unfortunate pathways in some incidents. I hope the norm will be the investigation of people's complaints. This will enhance the integrity of health professionals as they will stand up to scrutiny and adjudication by their peers. This will ensure the public has full confidence in all health care professions.

Returning to section 3, the Bill provides that statutory contributions are payable by recipients of residential support services who, while maintained, are not directly accommodated by or on behalf of the HSE. Being maintained by the HSE means the cost of food, utility bills and other household essentials are met by the executive or its agents. However, the Department has no estimates available of the numbers likely to be affected by this measure. I find that a little strange. The Minister claims no extra costs or no extra charges will be incurred but it will still affect people involved as this provision will be placed on a statutory footing when this legislation passes. It would be nice to know how many people could be affected. The people most likely to be impacted are older people and those with physical, mental or intellectual disabilities or care needs who are living in accommodation provided by housing authorities or local authorities and who receive residential support services from the HSE or its agents. That is a critically important point because moving services into the community will become more prevalent in future. I have genuine concerns that increased charges will arise. In some nursing homes people did not receive the full range of treatments they required such as physiotherapy and other supports. The Department of Health, the HSE, HIQA and others must monitor the situation to ensure people receive their entitlements and the necessary supports to address their health needs. In some cases there is no clear oversight or lines of obligation for the provision of ancillary care services.

I recently spoke to a person in a nursing home who informed me that consultant geriatricians seldom visit nursing homes. We still have a long way to go to develop proper community services where the care professionals go into the community and meet their patients in their home as opposed to the reverse always being the case, which requires people to traipse in and out of hospitals continually. I accept such an approach requires resources but it would also free up resources if people did not have to visit hospitals continually. We should change the traffic flow and get health care professionals into communities. That should be easily done in the context of nursing home care as patients are in a defined place. I heard recently that it is very difficult to get a GP to visit a nursing home out of hours. I accept that is a challenge but we must put a strong emphasis on addressing the situation as such cases turn into emergencies requiring an ambulance and a visit to an accident and emergency department. That is not good for the individual or for the system as it ties up scarce resources in an already challenging environment. That is an area about which I have concerns.

People could be discouraged from opting for care in the community rather than in a residential setting. The financial contribution required could discourage some people from moving from a residential setting to a community setting. The Disability Federation of Ireland is concerned that the situation could adversely impact on those accessing respite care services for a period, which would place an extra strain on carers. It is estimated that family carers provide vital, unpaid support to people with disabilities in their homes every day, thus saving the Exchequer considerable sums of money. Periods of rest and time to oneself can be rare occurrences for family carers but it is essential for many family carers to maintain their health and well-

being, therefore enabling them to continue to provide care to a loved one at home. The amounts that could be charged could push people with disabilities further into deprivation or back into institutions, as they would no longer be able to afford to live or socialise in the community. The view was expressed to me by disability advocacy groups. It would have been preferable to have allowed time in advance of the Bill coming to the Dáil for discussion between stakeholders and the relevant sections in the Department, the HSE and others on their concerns about the impact of the proposed changes. Their concerns could well have been alleviated or in some way addressed in the legislation.

The national disability strategy and the Disability Act established a new framework for disability services with the aim of supporting equal participation in society for people with disabilities. If they are paying higher charges, however, they will not be able to afford to participate. What I say is not a reflection on the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, or the office she holds, but we all know what will happen once a charge is introduced. There is an inevitable creep in the system which continually creeps in only one direction. Charges are seldom reduced. It is a concern for many that once a charge is statutorily introduced, the contributions sought could increase incrementally over a period. Most people with disabilities face considerable challenges in terms of personal development, job opportunities and financially. In the context of the Bill, we would oppose anything that would place further burdens on them. The miscellaneous provisions outlined are varied and disparate and it would be remiss of me to allow the Bill to be introduced without highlighting the issues of concern.

On the broader issue of health and the challenges facing it, the Minister of State is aware of the recent figures on waiting lists for outpatient appointments. Those who are on waiting lists for urgent procedures are being told they will be seen within 22 to 24 months for knee replacements and hip replacements. The challenges are considerable. Budgets are set at the start of the year. The Chamber is known for its latitude in many ways and the Acting Chairman, Deputy Catherine Byrne, is particularly known for her generosity in that regard. We must be honest about the health service. We cannot pretend we can give everything to everyone in the State and that it will not cost them anything. It is probably time for political parties and people in general together to come up with an honest approach to the health service. The proposed model for universal health insurance was not workable. Even those who drafted it must have known deep down that it was merely designed to get the Government over a particular hurdle. We have gone past that stage and we now face a situation where the health service is unsure of the funding model that underpins it. The notion that we can have a health service that will limp along, unsure of which direction to take, which funding model will underpin it or the principles that govern it in terms of who can access it, who will pay for it and who can get it are key components of an honest and timely debate on the direction of the health service. We cannot have a situation whereby this time next year we will have another budget deficit of €500 million and pressure on care professionals, especially at the coalface of the health service.

Nurses protested about patient safety outside a hospital in Galway recently and there was another protest in Limerick. Nurses elsewhere have expressed considerable concern at the impact of the cuts on patient safety. Nurses are health professionals whose obligation is to provide care in a safe, meaningful and efficient manner. We must listen to them when they say they are unable to do that. All the governance and structures in place stand for nothing if the Government does not support them in terms of resourcing them to ensure they can comply with their own high standards, the high standards expected of them by others, and the high standards the public deserve. The key issue is to ensure front-line services, in the context of some of the

people proposed to be governed under the Bill, can operate in a safe environment. The Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, referred to oversight by HIQA and others. From time to time HIQA must observe the pressure on front-line staff in emergency departments. Nurses in Galway are being given assistance to cope with work related stress. That is how difficult health care professionals find the situation on the front line. In the context of best practice, continuing professional development and oversight, we must ensure professionals operate within clear defined guidelines and maintain very high standards. It is critical that we support them when we ask them to do this. When we ask them to do so in legislation they are under an obligation so they should be helped with resources and supports. That is a debate for another day but it seems to me that everyone in this Chamber pretends he or she has the solutions to the challenges that face us in the area of health. We do not have all the solutions but we need a collective observation on the health system we seek, how it will be funded and the services it will provide. Who pays for health care and who receives it? Will everyone be entitled to universality or will contributions vary depending on a person's resources and needs? Will we encourage private health insurance? Is private health insurance integral to the public system or is it separate?

Nobody has all the solutions but producing a document prior to an election is merely pretence - and that applies to all parties. Five-point plans, seven-point plans and key lines throw health services into upheaval yet we expect a service to be delivered. This is not good enough as 100,000 people work in the health sector and 4.3 million people depend on it in various ways. We cannot simply lead the health service into a cul-de-sac and reverse out when we find it is blocked because that is not a sustainable way to deliver health care in this country. Even the best will of the professionals governed by this legislation, other legislation and various overseeing bodies does not allow them to operate properly in this environment.

GPs and nurses are under pressure to deliver in the community primary care setting, as are front-line staff in the emergency services. These are all key areas and we must respond quickly and collectively to the cries for support and help. Many nurses already need help to deal with work pressure and GPs are leaving the country in droves. I am not exaggerating - this is the reality of what is happening outside Leinster House. I know the Minister of State is not immune to this observation as she sees this every day. This matter must be addressed quickly.

The budget will be published on 15 October and it will outline some form of funding until the end of this year. I hope it will give us a chance of making it to the end of 2015 with a reasonable financial package that is realistic, achievable and sustainable, as opposed to the pretence that was offered last year and in previous years. I could go back further but such arguments are for another day.

We can speak of statutory registration, regulation, oversight and insisting on the appropriate behaviour of health care professionals but this must be done in the presumption that such professionals will be supported in their duties with proper and fair resources.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: This is the first health-related Bill of the new session and I welcome the Minister of State but I wonder when the Minister for Health will make his opening contribution. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. The explanatory memorandum indicates the Bill's main purpose is to subsume Bord na Radharcmhastóirí, the Opticians Board, into the Health and Social Care Professionals Council, CORU, divide the designated profession of radiographer into two designated professions of radiographer and radiation therapist and ensure that statutory contributions are payable by recipients of residential support services who are maintained, though not directly accommodated, by or on behalf of the Health

Service Executive.

I have been contacted by the Association of Optometrists Ireland - I am sure this applies to everyone here - and it is in broad support of the section dealing with eye care. That this Bill will facilitate increased care at primary level is to be welcomed. The fact that all parties to this proposed change have been consulted is also to be welcomed. I note also that the Department of Health patient safety committee has acknowledged that there is no risk to patient safety if Bord na Radharcmhastóirí is subsumed into the Health and Social Care Professionals Council.

I have also received correspondence from the Federation of (Ophthalmic and Dispensing) Opticians Ireland, which represents eye care providers and registered opticians in business in Ireland. While they are supportive of an update to the Act of 1956 they are concerned about sections 81A and 81B of the draft Bill. These sections state that spectacles may only be dispensed or sold by a registered medical practitioner or a registrant of the designated profession of optometrist or dispensing optician. The members of the federation inform me that currently, while optometrists conduct eye examinations and prescriptions are dispensed by dispensing opticians, they are often assisted by other trained members of staff with tasks such as the selection of frames and the processing of payments. I have been through the process a number of times in my life. They say that the result of these sections is that current practice would be prohibited. The members of the federation see current practice as both safe and an efficient use of skilled time. They are also concerned that if these sections remain in the Bill they could lead to restrictions on access to eye care, including sight tests, an increase in costs for members and the taxpayer and an increase in prices for the patient. I raise these matters on Second Stage because I believe they need to be addressed by the Minister and the Department. I hope my points receive responses when the Minister of State responds to this debate.

To require an optometrist or a dispensing optician to conduct the entire sale, they say, would be a poor use of the time of a clinically skilled professional. They also say that this very specific requirement is not something that is specified in the cases of other clinical professions regulated by CORU. I therefore seek clarification as to whether the Bill allows registered optometrists or dispensing opticians to delegate certain non-clinical functions of the dispense, for example the selection of frames, and the sale of spectacles to suitably qualified staff working under their supervision. Some people buy non-prescription spectacles off the shelf so there is a need to clarify the impact and intent of the sections mentioned.

This is the first Bill to be brought forward in the new Minister's term. I had intended stating "by the new Minister" but this apparently is not the case. Much has changed, it appears, in Government policy since his arrival. Gone are some of the core objectives of the former Minister and in their place we have but guarantees of a continuing - with respect - unfair two-tier health system. I note that to date six registration boards have been established for social workers, radiographers, dietitians, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists. It is a great pity that these are among the very same services the Government has targeted for cutbacks. Sadly, it is the most vulnerable in society who are most affected by the cuts introduced in the years of austerity under the former Fianna Fáil Government, and continued and deepened by the Fine Gael and Labour Party coalition. The very young and those who have lived longer lives, those with disabilities and those in under-resourced and deprived areas already at a disadvantage see supports continually chipped away.

I further note that no mention is made of the remaining professions of the 12 that had previously been designated under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, specifically the

roles of clinical biochemist, medical scientist, orthoptist, podiatrist, and psychologist. I ask the Minister of State for an update on the development of a framework for the regulation of these professions. If she put it on the record in her opening contribution, I apologise. The debate started way ahead of the signalled time on my schedule-----

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: It took me by surprise also.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: -----and I missed what she had to say. I have the text of her contribution and I will take the time to study it afterwards. If any of the points I have made were not covered in it, I ask that they be addressed in the closing contribution on Second Stage.

The second part of the Bill divides the designated profession of radiographer into two separate professions of radiographer and radiation therapist. There is an important difference and I welcome this development as something that will be to the benefit of patients and also to what will be the two stand-alone recognised professions of radiographer and radiation therapist. These roles have different focuses and I believe that such a division will aid in ensuring the roles keep up with developments internationally along with aiding transparency, and will further improve patient care.

That the Bill will allow the cancellation of registration of a registrant convicted of an indictable offence if it is in the public interest is to be welcomed. Indeed, it is unfortunate that this has not been a part of legislation to date. I also welcome the provision for the appointment of persons to aid investigations and immediate suspension on an *ex parte* basis. The publication of the transcript of the proceedings of a committee of inquiry, a new departure, will add to transparency and will help to increase the public's trust in CORU and in the provision of multidisciplinary health care. It is to be hoped this will avoid the lack of transparency and *omerta* that was seen in representative bodies in the past and will not lead us into future health care scandals in which the public is kept in the dark following an injury to one or more of our number. The horrors of the Michael Neary scandal or the symphysiotomy scandal come to my mind, and they must press us to demand a better standard of care and more speedy access to redress in the health sphere.

The Health and Social Care Professionals Council will be given new investigative powers similar to those of the Medical Council and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland. While the vast majority of those represented by Health and Social Care Professionals Council are, without question, diligent, hard-working and caring individuals, the public must, nevertheless, be protected from rogue practitioners and those whose standard of care is not up to scratch, or even in some cases dangerous to the general population.

Reducing contribution amounts that cover essential daily living costs for those maintained by, or on behalf of, but not accommodated by the HSE, is concerning to me and to many Deputies in the House. I would be worried that this might be an effort to reduce supports in general. The Bill tells us that amounts of contribution would be varied, based on income levels of service users or levels of dependence or independence or both, as the case might be. This passage most certainly needs clarification as it is open to interpretation. It could lead to a Minister - I will not say "the Minister" - deciding that some or many of those receiving support would no longer qualify for it, either in part or in full.

In summary, I support the principal thrust of the Bill, certainly with regard to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act. Much of its substance focuses on the necessary regulation

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of health care practitioners but, unfortunately, as I have said and intended for the Minister of State's senior colleague if he were here, many of these are among the practices that have been so severely hit by recent years of Government-driven cutbacks. I would have urged him, as I urge the Minister of State, to ensure these are matters of serious and immediate address.

To encapsulate the key points which I believe need clarification, I seek clarification whether the Bill allows registered optometrists or dispensing opticians to delegate certain non-clinical functions of the dispense to suitably qualified staff, as is the case at present. I reflect on the provision for a reduction in contribution supports to cover essential daily living costs for people with physical or intellectual disabilities. If it is, as I fear, it needs to be removed. If it is not as it suggests at first reading, I ask for detailed clarification on how it is to be interpreted and how it will work out in real terms. These points merit the Minister of State's attention and clarification and I look forward to hearing what she has to say.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this new legislation. I welcome the fact the Minister of State is in the Chamber to listen to the views of various Members. We all have one thing in common, despite some political differences, which is that we all want a quality health service with standards and professionalism. We should all unite in the debate on funding for the health services. I strongly welcome any important debate on our health system, in particular on reforming our health service. The Bill is about standards and professionalism. These words jump out at one when one reads the legislation. We must make them real and meaningful and relate them to people's lives. We have a long way to go with regard to standards, professionalism and resources.

6 o'clock

The number of people on trolleys in accident and emergency departments increased by 158 in August. This is appalling and not good enough. It is unacceptable. How can we talk about standards and professionalism when this type of activity takes place on the front line in our accident and emergency departments? That is a key part of this debate as well. The Minister of State should not come into the House and say everything is fine, the economy is booming and growth is back in business when there has been an increase of 158 of patients lying on trolleys in hospitals in August. It is time to get real and bring in the resources and reforms we all support.

We need to stuff the tax-cuts brigade until we help the sick, the elderly and the disabled. That is a debate that will go on in coming weeks regarding the budget. In any economy in any civilised society that was ravaged by recession and rampant greed where resources are slim, one must give it to the neediest. That must be a key aspect if one is in here today addressing health issues. That is a tough decision for the Government. It can throw out tax cuts to the wealthy and yet it cannot find the extra resources and finances to look after the sick, the elderly, the disabled and our senior citizens on trolleys in hospitals such as Beaumont. That must be challenged and these are the kinds of tough decisions that need to be made. These are important key elements of this legislation.

The main purpose of the Bill is to subsume the Opticians Board into the Health and Social Care Council. It makes certain amendments to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 in the interests of efficiency and to ensure consistency with the legislation governing health regulators. It also amends the Health Act 1970 to ensure that statutory contributions are payable by recipients of residential support services, who, while maintained, are not directly

accommodated by or on behalf of the HSE. That is what is going on in this legislation. There are positive elements to it and I would also be very constructive regarding the Bill.

The Health and Social Care Council, which I will refer to as the council, is an independent regulator established to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct, education, training and competence among registrants of 12 designated health and social care professions. That is what the council is all about. The objective of the council is a key aspect regarding the build-up and debate on the health service. The objective of the council is to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct, education, training and competence among the registrants of the designated professions.

To date, six registration boards have been established for the professions of social worker, radiographer, dietician, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist and physiotherapist. It is planned to have all these 12 boards and the registers established by 2015. I welcome that six have already been established which is a positive development. I hope we achieve that target by 2015.

When one looks at the details of it, one finds we are talking about professions such as social worker. We now have a crisis with dysfunctional children and children at risk and yet we also have a problem with social workers. We need people to be involved in these front-line services. We all know there are waiting lists but we have to prioritise kids' situations. In particular abused children and children at risk need to be at the top of the political agenda.

The Minister of State should not come in here and tell us the economy is achieving 5% growth if the Government is not going to look after those vulnerable children. If one does not intervene when they are between four and ten years of age, they will all end up in Mountjoy Prison, robbing taxi drivers in Cork or beating people up in the streets because their dysfunction and abuse was neglected when they were between the ages of four and ten. Most sensible people, whether one is a social worker, an education psychologist or a backbench politician, will say that is the reality. Therefore the social workers have to be given priority.

An issue that has come up in recent days is the scandal of the shortage of positions and children on waiting lists for speech and language therapists. This is something we have to deal with. Children should be given these services as a right. If it means more tax, so be it, but one has to pay for the services.

I would like to broaden the debate because I mentioned social workers and speech and language therapists, and there are also occupational therapists. There is also the broader issue, which is the main part of the Minister of State's brief, and that is the issue of disabilities. We need to ensure we have high professional standards for all children and adults with a physical or intellectual disability. We have examples of good practice in the State as I know from first hand from my experience of my family situation. There are some excellent service providers in the State doing an excellent job, but we also need to plug the gaps and give those, who do not have them, an adequate service.

For example, many people do not realise that the census in 2011 recorded 595,355 people as having a disability, equivalent to 13% of the population. At least one in ten adults of working age of 15 to 64 has a disability. Disability increases sharply with age. Just 5.4% of children under 15 have a disability compared with 38% of those over 65 years. This is linked into the debate about the standard and professionalism of this debate on the whole council issue.

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Some 68% of people who use disability services are not satisfied with the level of control they have over their own lives. I accept this is about to change and that debate is going on and hopefully it will change. Some 40% are also dissatisfied with the quality of services being provided. The 60% I mentioned earlier are satisfied and, in fairness, they are getting a good service which I commend. However, if we are talking about reform, change and resources, we need to focus on the 40% who are not satisfied.

Some 13,655 applications for disability allowance were turned down last year, which represents a refusal rate of 55%. The Minister of State might say they are trying it on. The reality is that 58% of the appeals were later accepted. My point is that these people should not be punished or penalised for their disability. Almost 4,000 people with disabilities were in need of social housing in 2013.

This goes back to the issue with speech and language service. More than 32,000 children remained on waiting lists for speech and language assessments and interventions at the end of 2013. In 2013, some 15,830 people were waiting for assessment by an occupational therapist, with 2,500 waiting for more than a year, including 1,900 children. I am giving the facts and the reality. We know we cannot do it overnight, but we should prioritise certain issues.

We also have to face the reality that many people with disabilities have also been caught, particularly over the four or five years of austerity and they experience higher rates of poverty, for example. That is a figure that has been ignored - people with disabilities in poverty. Families where the head of the household is not at work due to illness or disability have the lowest average annual disposable income in the region of €21,492 - an 11% drop since 2010. Individuals who are not at work due to illness or disability endure some of the highest levels of consistent poverty at 17.6%. This overshadows the national figure of 7.7%.

Some 48.5% of people not at work due to illness or disability are at risk of deprivation, in contrast to the national average of 26.9%. This means that they struggle with the cost of adequate clothing and heating and cannot afford to eat a meal with fish or meat every second day. That is the reality. I am bringing this into the debate because we are talking about standards, professionalism and the work this council will do to upskill and ensure that standards are met.

Just 24.5% of people with disabilities have completed third level education compared with 38.7% of the general population. Some 16.3% of people with disabilities aged between 15 and 49 have completed no higher than their primary education, compared with 5.1% for the general population of the same age.

Included within that figure are people with intellectual disabilities but there also are people with a physical disability who are extremely bright and intelligent. I again refer to my experience as a councillor on Dublin City Council. In 1999, our target was to try to get the figure of staff with disabilities up to 5% and I remember we exceeded that target in one year. It showed that a lot of talented people in IT and in administration who had a physical disability came into work in Dublin City Council and made a massive contribution to the city of Dublin and the development and running of Dublin City Councils services.

My point is that Members must be radical, creative and compassionate and must show leadership. Only 20.7% of people with disabilities aged 15 and over are in employment, while the equivalent figure rises to 50% for the general population of the same age. The unemployment rate for people with disabilities stands at 30.8%, which is significantly greater than the current

figure of 11% for the general public. There also of course have been the hits in budget 2014, including a 15% cut to the weekly invalidity pension, a reduction of €5 million in expenditure on the supplementary payments, cuts of €44 per week to jobseeker's allowance, the abolition of the telephone allowance and seeking of €2.1 million in savings through exceptional needs payments. These issues affected people with disabilities and I raise them because they are important and because one must go back to standards and to the work that is set out.

I will return to the detailed provisions of the legislation, which makes reference to amendments to the Health Act 1970 in respect of statutory contributions. The Bill aims to ensure that statutory contributions are payable by recipients of residential support services who are maintained, though not directly accommodated, by or on behalf of, the Health Service Executive, HSE. Being maintained by the HSE means the cost of food, utility bills and other household essentials is met by the HSE or its agents. While there are no estimates available of the numbers affected, this group is likely to comprise older people and people with physical, mental or intellectual disabilities or care needs who are living in accommodation provided by housing authorities or local authorities or who receive residential support services from the HSE and its agents. Residential support services vary greatly, based on client need, and may include care assistance, supervision, house-parenting, psychological and nursing services. I urge the Minister to give priority to these services in the build-up to the budget.

I note the figures for the waiting lists for residential places, day places and respite care are not very big and consequently, they could be targeted and dealt with effectively. A radical Minister for Health could solve this issue pertaining to residential and day care because I read recently that in some places, the numbers were 300 to 340 and while there was a big figure in the region of 1,100, these still are issues we can attempt to solve. I urge the Minister, as well as every party in the Dáil, to prioritise these people. Examples of good practice are available, as are examples of high standards. Moreover, as the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, is aware, there also are examples whereby some of these service providers during the bad times really maintained services against the odds and managed their money sensibly. I have seen some outstanding services and people availing of some of them did not mind paying a contribution for respite in order to pay for the poorer families in respite. Some chief executives of such services took a highly inclusive approach with the parents. I happen to be a parent of a daughter who is in the Prosper Fingal services, which has a young team of staff who, although they are nailed to the wall, are doing a fantastic job against the odds. My point to the Minister of State is that examples of good practice are available. They should be given a leg up and, where possible, there should be a focus on these issues and the delivery of the services. This is an important point.

The Department of Health has stated that the new system is not intended as a revenue-raising measure, which I welcome. It is understood that most of those affected already are contributing towards their maintenance and accommodation costs. Under the Health Act 1970, the daily contribution will not exceed 80% of the maximum daily rate of the State pension (non-contributory). The Bill provides for waivers in certain circumstances, including to avoid undue financial hardship on the person concerned or his or her dependents. These are the positive aspects of this legislation and are the issues about which Members must agree on a common-sense idea and must decide to adopt it. I will support this and make no apologies for so doing. However, as part of my support, I urge the Government and the Minister to focus on the priority issues. They should not come into this Chamber every second day like the comedian who came into the Chamber earlier, namely, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, who was telling

jokes about the economy. The bottom line is if the economy is growing, that is fine but one must focus on providing services. Moreover, the State must prioritise its money and it is easy to jump up and down stating one wishes to give tax cuts to those people and further tax cuts to those who are well off. Any humane, sensitive and compassionate Government must first acknowledge it is aware that people want this and that everybody needs a break. It should accept the point about middle income and low-paid workers who, God knows, have suffered enough in recent years. However, there are certain times in life when one must make tough decisions and they must be to support the weaker sections of society. This must be the entire theme in respect of this legislation today.

I refer to the details in the legislation providing for the dissolution of the Opticians Board. The section looks at the dissolution of the aforementioned board, the transfer of staff, transfer of property and liabilities to the council, preservation of contracts, pending legal proceedings and preparation of accounts. I am a little concerned by the section pertaining to the transfer of staff and a red light has gone on in this regard but perhaps the Minister of State can deal with it later. It provides that every person who, immediately before the relevant day, was a member of the staff of the Opticians Board is, on the relevant day, transferred to, and becomes a member of, the council's staff. I welcome this provision. Moreover, a person transferred under this section is entitled, while in the council's service, to be employed on conditions of employment no less favourable than those to which that person was entitled immediately before the relevant day. The previous service of a person transferred under this section with the Opticians Board is to be counted as service for the purposes of, but subject to any exceptions or exclusions in, certain Acts, including the Redundancy Payments Acts, the Protection of Employees Acts and the Unfair Dismissals Acts.

As for the number of people affected by these issues, I believe there are no estimates available of the number of people likely to be affected by the changes proposed in the Bill. The Department has stated: "Unfortunately, the HSE does not collate information at present in a manner which facilitates quantification or reliable estimation of the numbers likely to be affected by the amendments in Part 3 of the Bill". This is also an issue Members must watch because this pertains to standards, effectiveness, accountability and reform. Members should remember they all were elected in 2011, when all promised reform following the shenanigans, everything that had gone on and the way in which things happened. On the doorsteps, all Members promised reform. My point to the Minister of State today is that part of reform is about being realistic. Anyone working in the health service will say that one cannot effect reform without money. As for those Members who come into this Chamber and state that expenditure in the health service is out of control, they do not realise but must understand that the health service is a service; it is not a private company or business and things change overnight. For example, last night's "Prime Time" programme highlighted the question of those families affected by hepatitis C. Those concerned need a drug to keep them alive and I believe the figures quoted were for more than €300 million. However, the bottom line is Members must pull back and must ask what, as a country and as a society, are the priorities. The point I make is that when one has limited resources, one must give them to the priority cases. Although this will not be popular with some people, I must state that I was shocked by a recent poll in *The Sunday Business Post*. I was having a go at the tax-cut brigade and my position was that were a few extra bob available, they should be put into services. I thought I would get hammered but in the aforementioned *The Sunday Business Post* poll, when asked, 61% of people stated that were an additional few million euro available, the money should be put into services and the resources should be provided. The Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, also should focus on this

point that support exists in this regard. Everyone accepts she is trying to do this internally and people are aware that in their hearts, those who work in the health services are trying to provide a quality health service.

People are also aware that there must be reform, efficiencies and accountability and that they cannot spend their lives slagging off the medical profession, including doctors and consultants. I acknowledge so doing might sound good in the newspapers. However, I have a major concern in light of the €100,000 or so of taxpayers' money that is given over to training each young doctor in UCC, NUIG, UCD and so on, when, as soon as their training is complete, so many end up going off to Australia or the United States to work. It might not be popular to mention Cuba in this Chamber - colleagues seem to have gone mad lately in their support of the US - but what happens there is instructive. When I visited the country some years ago I met a group of medical students who told me how, after finishing their training, they were obliged to give two years' service to poor communities in the villages and mountains, providing GP, mid-wifery and a range of other services. On another occasion, in a pub in Havana, I met another gang of medical students who were working, during their summer holidays, with the poorest families and communities.

This is a country that has been hammered by the embargo imposed by the bully boys in the US. I do not know what the Americans are up to, but I wish to God they would leave the Cuban people alone. However, that is another debate. The point of this example is to show what is happening in a very poor country that is being tortured by a US embargo. I attended a disability centre during my visit there and saw the disability provision that operates from cradle to grave. Every child with an intellectual disability is guaranteed a service from day of birth to day of death. We have far more resources than some of the countries already providing the type of modern, accessible and progressive health service our citizens deserve.

I welcome the Bill and the measures it contains. When it comes to health service provision, we should take a cross-party approach. The universal support for the NHS in Scotland was very evident during the campaign leading up to the independence referendum. I am very sorry for the voters for whom the result was a disappointment, but I was pleasantly surprised to see that all parties were committed to protecting the NHS. Some even spoke about how to make a better NHS. I would like to see a united approach in this country which acknowledges that there are certain things in life which we as a society and country must protect, namely, a good-quality health service and a good-quality education service. One can build a country and a society from those foundations. If we look after our sick, elderly and disabled, we will have a better country and a better quality of life for the people who live here. The Minister for Finance and his departmental whizz kids might not agree, but early intervention will, in the long term, see substantial savings in the provision of health services. I referred earlier to children being raised in very dysfunctional and violent families. We must intervene early in such circumstances and prevent their ending up in Mountjoy Prison some years down the road.

I hope the Minister of State takes on board the points we have made today. I urge her to keep fighting in the coming weeks for people with physical and intellectual disabilities. These people deserve services as a right, not as a charitable act. The parents of children with disabilities pay taxes and are entitled to a service. Nobody complains about the cost of sending little Johnny to the local national school, but there is plenty of whinging when parents of children with disabilities are looking for speech therapy and other services. We must break down that mindset. I welcome the legislation, but urge the Minister to give consideration to these issues.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this important Bill, whose aim is to enhance the health protection of the public. I was not around for the debate on the Opticians Act 1956, which this Bill will replace, or the Health Act 1970, which it amends. I was here, however, for both the passing of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 and the publication of the health strategy in 2001 which was the impetus for that legislation. I recall the importance attached to the passing of that Act in terms of its affording important information and protection to patients and giving them certainty that the health professionals caring for them had participated in recognised training and qualification courses and had reached and maintained a certain standard and fitness to practise, as overseen and enforced by a statutorily specified body. That such statutory safeguards are necessary is beyond question and I very much welcome the amendments and additions proposed in the Bill we are discussing today, which will enhance the safeguards in the original legislation.

Sick people have always been easy prey for charlatans. In fact, that has never been more the case than today, when we, more than any previous generation, are obsessed with health, fitness and diet and the pursuit of a longer and better quality of life. This is not a bad thing, but it does leave people open to the influence of quackery, mountebanks and very dubious medicine in a whole range of areas, from the magic diet that will give one the perfect figure to offers of foolproof cancer cures. Moreover, the Internet, which is now available to everybody, greatly facilitates this. It is understandable that people who are desperately ill or unhappy want to believe there is a cure for their ills. It is not something for which we can comprehensively legislate, because no legislation can protect people entirely or prevent them from accessing such doubtful services.

I am not suggesting that because a service is not regulated it is necessarily bad, but there are some services which are so important they must be regulated. I was appalled recently, in the aftermath of the Y case, to see fly postering all over Dublin advertising a website for the purchase of abortion pills. Abortifacients are not of themselves dangerous, but they can be both dangerous and ineffective if taken without proper supervision and information, if not taken at the right time, or if taken by persons who have no access to after care, if such is necessary. This particular issue is not entirely relevant to the Bill before us this evening, but it is an example of the types of practices to which people who are desperate will resort and which are facilitated by the Internet.

My colleague, Deputy Dan Neville, has frequently raised concerns regarding the lack of regulation of counsellors and psychotherapists offering various services, particularly to people who are at risk of suicide. I have regularly had flyers through my door offering services to both adults and children. The persons advertising these services may well be properly qualified, but it is difficult to know for sure. Before anybody is allowed to go mucking around with the minds of people who are unwell and vulnerable, there should be a way of ascertaining whether they are suitably qualified to do so. People seeking these services should know how to access providers who are competent and whose qualifications are recognised. As I said, it may be that most of these people are qualified, but the point is that we do not know. I understand there are moves afoot which would allow this group to reach agreement on the standards and qualifications necessary to allow members to assign themselves part of a designated group of professionals, so members of the public will know where to go to access these services. The Minister of State might elaborate on that.

On the other hand, there is always a danger when setting standards to regulate any profession or allow access to a profession that such regulation becomes so prescriptive as to create a

restrictive practice or anti-competitive situation. In fact, that has been the case in the health sector in the past, with some professionals acting as gatekeeper to their services or the services of others in the profession. The Minister of State might recall the fight put up by opticians some years ago when pressure was applied to them to end their monopoly on the sale of reading glasses. I assume that monopoly was protected in law at the time, but we can be thankful that the same no longer applies and people can now buy what is essentially a pair of magnifying glasses at a reduced price from a range of outlets. I am very glad to be able to buy them cheaply. The work opticians do is vital and specific but it is no reason they should be the gatekeeper to buying what is just a magnifying glass. I mention this because there is an onus on the council and on registration boards to be wary of these kinds of practices, even down to the setting of registration fees, lest they also become a barrier to entry. After all, the idea is not to protect the professions but to protect the public. The public interest should be paramount in all the deliberations and determinations of the council and the registration boards.

While the thrust of these provisions and the parent Act is to protect the public, there are two enormous benefits to the professionals themselves whose titles are being protected. They will not, for instance, find their careers being undermined by individuals who have not gone through the same training, who do not have the same qualifications and who have not obtained the same standards as they have. Once their profession is registered, people cannot just come in and set up without registering and having the recognised qualification. This is recognised by the various professionals because they have always been anxious to have statutory backing for their specialty and, indeed, we have had representations for further specialties.

If I remember correctly, this designation of professions facilitates compliance with an EU directive which allows mutual recognition of qualifications of those who are designated. This gives a huge benefit to the professions because it gives them ease of mobility and they can practice across the 28 EU countries. It is a benefit to the HSE in that when there is a shortage in a particular profession, it can go abroad and know that the standard of those it recruits in the EU is of a similar standard.

The 2005 legislation anticipated that further professions would join the registration system, beyond the initial 12 designated. The legislation was flexible enough to facilitate that and what is happening now, that is, the inclusion of opticians, with a single board registering the two branches of the profession. The same split is being accommodated for radiographers, which is right, because clearly they are two very different specialties. I am surprised it was not recognised initially because it is something that requires very different qualifications and it is right they should be registered separately and be subject to different standards.

There are other aspects of the legislation which give new powers to the registration boards - for instance, to suspend members of the profession when they are under investigation, if it is in the public interest to do so, and to cancel registration if they have been indicted of particular offences, again if it is in the public interest to do so. That is essential. One must be able to enforce standards. There is no point having standards if one cannot enforce them, so they are welcome additions to the powers of the registration boards.

There is a new power to add conditions to certain professionals if, for instance, they are suffering from a mental or physical disability of some sort. That is reasonable. It should not be black and white where one is struck off if one has a disability. People can do a job to a certain standard. I am glad that flexibility is included.

If I have a criticism it is the inordinately long time it has taken to implement the 2005 Act. I am not laying this at the Minister's door because it goes back over several Governments. This Bill is the second legislative change to the Act. For all intents and purposes, the Act has not yet been implemented. It took a while to get the boards in place but at this stage, we should be looking at a situation where all the boards should be at least registering the professions. As long as this goes on, the potential of the Act to protect the public is unrealised and there can be no mechanism in place to deal with fitness to practice complaints. The key to this kind of legislation is that the standards set are enforced. If that is not possible, there is no point setting standards at all. It is time for this legislation to be implemented and to be up and running. I hope this additional legislation will act as a spur to action, so that at least we can get all of the professionals registered and operating.

I refer to the section on statutory contributions because this is a miscellaneous provisions Bill. Like Deputy Finian McGrath, who spoke before me, I have a child - a son - in residential care. I can also say people have suffered over the years of cutbacks. There are different providers but I can only speak for the provider for my son which is Cheeverstown House. It has done an enormous amount of cutting back and has created enormous efficiencies. It is now at a stage where there is very little room for manoeuvre and services are definitely suffering. Like Deputy Finian McGrath, I hope its hardship can be eased as times get better and that it is prioritised.

The reason I mention it at all is that I fully support the whole notion of contributions. There was a bit of an outcry when statutory contributions were first introduced. The contribution made is only a fraction of the cost of the service. I would be delighted to make the contribution required, as I think most people would be, given the huge contribution taxpayers make towards the services. This measure in the Bill is a belt and braces provision to ensure persons who are supported or maintained by the HSE or its agents are liable for charges for that support although they are not actually accommodated by the HSE. The purpose is to give legal backing, even though I presume, in most cases, they are already paying.

I understand the need to include the whole new range of accommodation types because there has been a proliferation of different types of services in recent years. As well as the kind of sheltered accommodation provided by local authorities, there are many new living arrangements for people with disabilities. I am sure the Minister will agree that as the recession bit, the provision of new residential care places virtually came to a standstill and families with people with disabilities had to become ever more involved and had to find more innovative ways to find housing solutions, including buying homes, sharing homes and lending homes. Sometimes a number of families have come together to provide a home. They are more than happy to pay for the services with a certain percentage remaining with the clients as pocket money. Indeed, that arrangement is not dissimilar to the direct provision system for asylum seekers which has received much comment recently, but it is the system which pertains for many people in residential care. We should welcome the fact the HSE is flexible enough to look at these new models of housing for people with disabilities. The recession has forced us all to be a bit more imaginative in the way we provide services, whatever they may be.

I agree with previous speakers that it is a little bit worrying to read that the HSE does not know how many people this legislation will apply to or how much it is currently collecting from them. If the system is to work fairly, it has to be flexible and recognise the different circumstances in which people might get supports from the HSE. The HSE and local authorities have to be able to respond flexibly. I recently dealt with a case involving a married couple who rented from their local authority. The husband had to enter a mental health facility for several

months. He paid the charge in the mental health facility, which meant his wife did not have that income, but she was charged by the local authority based on the benefits accruing to a married couple. Local authorities and the health service need to co-operate so that people are not disadvantaged. That is an aside, however, and I welcome the legislation overall. I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on it and I look forward to seeing it being implemented at the earliest opportunity so that it can provide the safeguards it envisages.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Technical Group for allowing me time to speak on this important Bill. I welcome that the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, is in the Chamber for this debate. Given that she is a very practical person, I am sure she wants to hear about practical things that are happening on the ground with regard to our health service. St. Columbanus Community Hospital in Killarney is an excellent facility with which the Minister of State is familiar and which is run by an excellent management team and by nurses and staff who are stretched to the limit. Yesterday evening, I received a message from the hospital that a resident, who was not very elderly, wanted to see me. When I visited the ward on which he was staying, he was not expecting me because he did not have a mobile telephone through which I could contact him to make an appointment. He was sitting on a chair beside his bed with a towel covering his face. When I said “hello” to him he perked up and pulled the towel off his head. He explained that he had covered his head with the towel because he has cataracts and has been waiting two years to have them removed. The Minister of State will be aware this is usually a successful operation and that the distorted vision caused by cataracts can be very upsetting. This man is only in his early 60s but he is condemned to sit on that chair with a towel over his head because the only way he can get comfort is by seeing blackness in front of his eyes. If he removes the towel he is upset by the lights and strobes he sees because of the cataracts.

These operations have been moved to the South Infirmery in Cork, which is inundated to the point where it cannot manage. Earlier today I listened to the Minister for Finance as he clapped the Government on the back. I know the Minister of State would not act likewise because she is aware of the issues arising in her Department. She knows too many stories like that of the nice man I met yesterday to clap herself on the back. When these issues are addressed, I will be the first person to clap her on the back but I will not do so while we cannot look after people in that position or we condemn those who worked hard and paid their taxes to that type of existence. I cannot get the experience out of my head because it was an upsetting encounter.

As a constituency Deputy, I am sure the Minister of State is dealing with similar issues on a daily basis. We need an honest and open debate about the stress and pressure facing front-line nurses and staff in our community and general hospitals, whether in accident and emergency departments or on the wards, because nurses are at breaking point. That is not an exaggeration. Over the summer I had reason to visit Kerry General Hospital and Killarney Community Hospital, as well as other community hospitals, on a daily basis. I have also been down to Cahirciveen. Everywhere I go, nurses and other staff tell me they are breaking point. They are working harder than they ever worked before because they are not given adequate resources to deal with the workload. It is a dangerous situation saved only by their resilience and the fact they go beyond the call of duty every day. People who knew I was visiting the aforementioned individual in St. Columbanus home told me that what was happening was a disgrace. Something has to be done. I know the Government has to be prudent with money and budgets but there is a difference between being prudent and not providing a service. When it comes to simple matters, such as waiting lists for cataract or hip operations, it is disgraceful that people continue to suffer. They do not have sufficient resources by themselves and rely on the health

service to ensure they do not have to wait in discomfort, misery or agony. That is unfortunately the situation.

The management of our community and general hospitals are excellent. They provide an excellent service with what they have but they do not have enough. Kerry General Hospital has not received any structural investment other than the additional work done on the accident and emergency department, which was welcome. The wards of those hospitals need a huge investment to upgrade them. I ask the Minister to fight for the necessary resources. There is Cabinet responsibility for providing proper health care to people who desperately need our help.

Tomorrow the general practitioners of Ireland will take an unusual action by protesting outside the Dáil. They do not want to be here because they would prefer to do their work as general practitioners who provide an excellent service. Unfortunately, when young doctors entering the workforce see the contracts and obstacles this Government is putting in their way, they are bailing out and leaving the country. Doctors who are growing elderly are saying to themselves they have had enough and are retiring rather than signing up to what is put before them. We will lose a wealth of experience and will be left with another crisis in terms of a scarcity of good general practitioners willing to work in communities the length and breadth of the country. It is unprecedented that the doctors are coming here tomorrow.

Debate adjourned.

Defence Forces Mission on the Golan Heights: Statements

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Since 1974, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF, has successfully supervised the implementation of the disarmament agreement maintaining an area of separation between Israeli and Syrian forces on the Golan Heights. An infantry group of 130 personnel deployed to the UNDOF mission with the approval of Dáil Éireann in September 2013. It acts as a force reserve company, providing a quick reaction force which is on stand-by to assist with ongoing operations within the mission area. Ireland has also deployed a counter-improvised explosive device, IED, team.

The Defence Forces contingent was deployed in response to the then-escalating armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic to protect peacekeepers and military observers in monitoring the area of separation. The Irish contingent deployed in full armour with extensive weapons, appropriate to the prevailing security position. Prior to the initial deployment of troops to UNDOF, a full threat assessment and mission reconnaissance was carried out by the Defence Forces. The chief of staff advised the then Minister that the proposed Defence Forces contingent operating within the numbers and the weapons constraints imposed by the UN had the capability to operate effectively as a force reserve to UNDOF and discharge the mandate. The further escalation of the conflict in Syria in recent months has affected the UNDOF area of operations very significantly. Syrian armed forces have deployed and carried out military activities and security operations in the UNDOF area of operations. Numerous clashes have taken place between Syrian security forces and armed members of the opposition in the area of separation. More recently, there have been direct attacks on UN personnel deployed in the area and peacekeepers have been detained by armed elements.

Since 27 August, in response to hostilities, the Irish contingent has dealt with several incidents at the request of the UNDOF force commander. On 29 August and in a follow-up opera-

tion, the force reserve company assisted in the safe extraction of 58 members of the Philippine battalion. On 30 August, Irish soldiers extracted 35 Filipino troops from a position surrounded by rebels. In the course of these incidents, Irish troops came under fire and returned fire. The 45 Fijian peacekeepers detained by armed elements in late August were released unharmed on 11 September.

Given the evolving security position, the mission has continued to reconfigure its operations with a view to minimising unacceptable risks to peacekeepers while continuing to implement the mission's mandate. However, in the past fortnight, there has been a fundamental realignment of the UNDOF mission, reflecting the deteriorating position on the ground. The UNDOF headquarters, including the Irish contingent, has now been relocated to Camp Ziouani on the Israeli side of the area of separation. What has happened in the area of separation is entirely unacceptable, and I particularly condemn the unwarranted attacks on and the detention of UN peacekeeping personnel. This is a monitoring mission designed to report on breaches of an agreement between Israel and Syria, and its structure is designed to this end. All parties should respect the mission mandate, and there can never be any justification for the attacks on or detention of UN peacekeepers. Ireland remains committed to the mission but in light of recent events, I have indicated that a fundamental review of the capacity of the mission to fulfil its mandate is necessary. I personally discussed this review with the Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations a number of weeks ago in Milan.

The UN Security Council was briefed on the mission in detail 17 September by the UN Secretary General. On 19 September, the President of the UN Security Council issued a strong statement reaffirming the Council's unconditional support for the UNDOF mission and emphasising the importance of maintaining UNDOF as a vital contributor to peace and security in the broader Middle East. The Security Council noted in the statement the necessity of efforts to flexibly adjust UNDOF's posture to minimise risk to UN personnel as UNDOF continues to implement its mandate, while emphasising that the ultimate goal is for the peacekeepers to return to their positions in the UNDOF area of operation as soon as is safe and practicable. The Security Council also noted that it was important to maintain UNDOF's force strength to the level necessary to carry out its important mandate and to retain the quick reaction and counter-IED capabilities provided by Ireland, and which the Council noted as indispensable in the face of the challenging security environment.

I welcome the strong endorsement of the mission from the Security Council and the call to maintain force strength and key enablers during this period of reconstruction. In that regard, the UN Secretary General will report again to the UN Security Council around mid-October on steps to maintain UNDOF's capacity to discharge its mandate. I intend to discuss the matter further with UN authorities when I travel to New York later this week for an international summit on peacekeeping.

As I stated at the outset, UNDOF has played a key role in maintaining peace and security in the area of separation between Israel and Syria since 1974. It continues to have a role in that regard and Ireland contributes a significant element of the support and protection required by the force. Further restructuring is required and this is in process, and given current plans and the strong and unconditional endorsement of the mission by the UN Security Council, including the capabilities provided by Ireland, I am satisfied we can continue to contribute to the mission. On that basis I have advised the Government today that the Defence Forces will continue to participate in the mission and the rotation, as planned, will proceed. The 44th Infantry Group will be replaced by the 46th Infantry Group, with the new deployment commencing next month.

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I expect this to happen in mid-October, which is two weeks behind schedule, as that was agreed a number of days ago. This delay arises because it was deemed that structural changes in the mission should be in place before the arrival of a new deployment, with the people on the mission best placed to bed it down.

I commend the recent efforts of the 44th Infantry Group in its role as UNDOF's quick reaction force and the personnel in discharging their duties effectively, with courage and professionalism, together with all the peacekeepers participating in UNDOF. The Government and I place a high importance on the valuable work done by the Defence Forces in the challenging operational conditions faced in the region and in other missions around the world. I wish the new deployment of 130 troops well in the challenges they will face in the months to come.

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome the opportunity to address the House on this matter and I appreciate the Government arranging these statements. As my colleague, Deputy Ó Feargháil, did last week, I acknowledge the work done by the Minister, Deputy Coveney, on this matter. Many families are deeply concerned about loved ones who are providing distinguished service on behalf of the country in this particularly difficult theatre of the Golan Heights. The families of troops who may participate in the next rotation are equally concerned and I take this opportunity to thank the families of all the troops serving overseas. They make enormous sacrifices so our soldiers can carry out important services on behalf of the country, and their contribution should be recognised today as well. We share the concern but we also take pride in our servicemen and servicewomen overseas.

7 o'clock

Today, I particularly remember and salute Army personnel from Westmeath who are part of the 130 troops in the 46th Infantry Group. As the Minister indicated, it will be deployed some time in October to the area in question. These will replace the 44th infantry group which was deployed last March. As one of the Deputies representing Athlone, the home of Custume Barracks, I thank the Minister and the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, Lieutenant General Conor O'Boyle, for visiting last week to acknowledge and mark the deployment of the 46th infantry. I thank the Minister for his invitation. Unfortunately, I could not be present. It made a change from his predecessor who when he came to Custume Barracks never invited certain Deputies. I welcome the fact the Minister acknowledged all Deputies from the constituency last week. His presence and that of the Chief of Staff testified to the high esteem in which the service men and women, and their families, are held by all national and local public representatives and at the highest level of Government. They are fantastic ambassadors and it was right and proper that the Minister was there to acknowledge them last week.

I join others, inside and outside the House, in applauding the soldiering professionalism of our Defence Forces who are deployed on the Golan Heights. Our troops are individually and collectively correctly trained and their personal equipment and armaments are of the first order. The level of protection afforded to them with their electronic counter measure, ECM, enabled MOWAG APCs, armoured reconnaissance vehicles and heavy weaponry is reassuring from a force protection standpoint.

Our soldiers are doing Ireland proud in this most challenging theatre in a fast-changing security environment. They are a pivotal part of Ireland's foreign policy in pursuit of international peace and security. I share the concern of others in identifying the outdated nature of the present Security Council mandate for UNDOF. It was first agreed in 1974 and its regular ex-

tension since then had been adequate until the outbreak of internal hostilities in Syria two years ago. The present mandate is not workable in the current crisis and does not take cognisance of the new security reality in the UNDOF area of operations, or more correctly stated, the area of separation, AOS, identified in the UNDOF mandate. The Al Nusra Front rebels are prominent in, and adjacent to, the AOS. Indeed, the flame of the internal struggle against the Assad Government was first lit in the town of Derra immediately adjacent to the UNDOF AOS.

I urge the Minister to demand that the UN provide immediately all necessary means required by our troops, and all those in UNDOF, to ensure their safety while carrying out the essential elements of the mandate. I especially call on the Minister to request the UN to deploy immediately sufficient UN helicopters to the AOS to provide the necessary lift and recovery capability consistent with the new operational requirement of the evolving operational tempo. Of greatest importance is the provision by the UN of the required tactical and operational intelligence essential to the UN forces to operate safely in the AOS. This is a critical force protection necessity. Managing risk is essential for our troops. The certainty of timely and accurate intelligence is the cornerstone of this.

In a recent public statement the Minister suggested that the UN forces of UNDOF withdraw to the Israeli border. This was an unfortunate lapse in correct terminology in an area where accurate commentary is essential. The Golan Heights is termed Israeli occupied Syria in international law. The recognised border of Israel in international law is some distance south of the AOS and withdrawing to the correct Israeli border would ensure that the mandate of UNDOF could not operate.

The planned replacement of the present Irish contingent in UNDOF should proceed, subject to the assets identified by me being put in place. Soldiering in any scenario is a tough business. We are duty bound as politicians to ensure the safety and security of our soldiers when so deployed is not compromised. When the Defence Forces initially deployed to the Golan Heights the current UN Security Council Resolution was the same as the resolution in force at present. The security situation both in Syria and in the UN AOS on the Golan Heights differed little at that time from the fragile security situation today.

Ireland committed to a Chapter VI mission to a demilitarised zone, which is no longer relevant. The United Nations must make significant changes to address this issue. Has the Minister demanded that additional UN helicopters be positioned close to the area of separation to increase the lift and recovery capability of the UN force? Has consideration been given to strengthening the armed elements of other contingents in the region? I understand the Irish contingent is providing security for the 1,200 strong force. Should we not ensure that other contingents are armed to the same degree?

Ireland's mission to the Golan Heights will continue. I wish all those who have been deployed a safe and successful mission. They are embarking on another phase of Ireland's long and proud record of service with the UN and they can be sure of our full support in doing so.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I welcome the fact that time has been set aside to discuss this issue in the Dáil. We and the rest of the Opposition have called for this.

All Deputies have been unnerved by recent developments in the Golan Heights. We all share real concern for the health and safety of Irish troops stationed there on the UNDOF mission. Irish Defence Forces personnel who have served on UN peacekeeping missions have

been a credit to the country through their professional conduct and exceptional work. Sinn Féin is committed to positive Irish neutrality and an independent foreign policy. We believe Ireland should actively work to promote conflict resolution, peaceful democratic settlements and pathways and mechanisms to facilitate self-determination of peoples throughout the world.

Our country's background in conflict resolution means Ireland can draw on many lessons which could be applied to other conflict situations. The State's history of serving in UN blue helmet peacekeeping missions is a matter of pride and enhances our standing as a neutral state. However, sending troops to the UNDOF mission is not a simple or straightforward decision. As we know, UNDOF was set up in 1974 to patrol and monitor the strip between Syria and Israel but it has been increasingly caught up in Syria's civil war, with rebel groups attacking UN bases and kidnapping peacekeepers.

Ireland was asked to provide troops to the mission after Austria announced it was pulling its troops from the mission over security concerns and because the EU failed to renew its arms embargo on Syria. When we debated this issue on 18 July 2013, my colleague, Deputy Seán Crowe, made clear that Sinn Féin felt that the current mandate for UNDOF was not fit for purpose and that EU decisions, coupled with the continued erosion of Irish neutrality by consecutive Governments, robbed Irish troops of their neutrality on this mission. Sinn Féin voted against sending Irish troops on the UNDOF mission after that debate and we stand over that decision. Although Sinn Féin was against this deployment, we recognise that the Government got Dáil approval to deploy these troops, and we have used all opportunities to ensure their safety. That is of paramount concern to everybody in this House.

I know that almost all UN troops in the region are now deployed in the Israeli occupied Golan Heights area, including Irish troops, and that the UN Security Council released a statement last Friday strongly backing and unconditionally supporting the UNDOF mission. The statement also calls on the Secretary General of the UN to provide the Security Council with an update on the "steps necessary to maintain UNDOF's ability to carry out its mandate" within 30 days. Why did the Minister not wait for the publication of that draft report before making the recommendation to Cabinet which has been endorsed? Why did he not get more clarity on the changes that will be put in place and the reassurances that we require before making this decision? We have breaking news reports today that the US, with the support of some Arab countries, has carried out air strikes against ISIS targets in Syria. This further muddles the complexity of the Syrian war. Many neighbouring countries are supporting rebel and radical Islamist groups in a variety of direct and indirect ways, while symbolically helping the US to bomb ISIS targets supposedly without the approval of the Syrian Government. It has been reported that Islamic State fighters will now flee towards Kurdish areas. Kurdish defence forces have bravely fought off Islamic jihadists since 2012. Kurdish areas have become a haven for refugees fleeing persecution, but they may now be overrun. According to reports, over 60,000 Kurds have fled from ISIS in northern Syria - over the Turkish border - in the last few days. Sinn Féin fully supports the Government's humanitarian support to the vulnerable and impoverished Syrian population and refugees. It would support Government initiatives to increase the humanitarian aid and support supplied by the State. We believe aid should be sent to Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria. This should be negotiated directly with Kurdish officials. All sides in the Syrian conflict need to begin a negotiated cessation of violence and enter into inclusive peace talks immediately. ISIS is known for its extremist and sectarian beliefs which have been brutally enforced in areas they have conquered, causing massive human rights abuses and executions. Sinn Féin condemns this militant group in the strongest possible way. I will summarise our

concerns. The UN Security Council was divided from the beginning of the Syrian conflict. Its inaction allowed the conflict to continue without any resolution process being put in place. This had absolutely devastating consequences. The international community failed in this regard.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The UNDOF mission is not about the Syrian conflict.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Unfortunately, it has a knock-on effect. The arms embargo that was removed by the EU before we went out there undermined our neutrality in that equation. A similar point can be made regarding the emergence of ISIS. It is clear that interested parties in Europe and the US were supporting rebels in Syria who were heavily financed by the Gulf states, which are allies of Europe and the West, apparently. Now we have the evolution of ISIS, which has been heavily financed by the Gulf states. The world needs to confront and defeat this despicable and reprehensible organisation. This is a scenario of mixed messages. It is a complex situation. The Filipino Government recently expressed its concerns about the UN instructions given to soldiers on the ground. This is a mess. Our concerns remain. We await the UN report about how it intends to reorient this mission. The Minister said last week - I am paraphrasing - that he does not want our Defence Forces to go into harm's way. We are all realists in this House. When we send our peacekeepers, of whom we are immensely proud, into peacekeeping operations while wearing the blue helmets of the UN, we know they might be in harm's way. Every one of them accepts that role fully, bravely and courageously. Many of them have died in the service of our country while peacekeeping across the world. We must not unnecessarily - for no good reason - put our troops in harm's way. That is the concern we continue to have. I hope we can get the clarification and reassurance we require in the time ahead.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I would like to share time with Deputy Wallace.

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: While I have no doubt about the bravery and good intentions of the Irish troops participating in the UNDOF mission, I think the time has come to pull them out. I do not think we should continue to participate in this mission, which is largely irrelevant in the current context. We should not be endangering the lives of Irish troops in the middle of an extremely dangerous mess that has been created as a consequence of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. I refer to its cynical manipulations in Iraq, and now in Syria. I could say the same about Russia. Their manipulations in this area have created an absolute hornet's nest, the worst expression of which is obviously ISIS. These dangerous people are now overrunning parts of Iraq and Syria. This mess has resulted directly from the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. The US sponsored a sectarian government that used sectarian politics - divisions between Shia and Sunni Muslims - to fuel the growth of ISIS. This needs to be taken alongside the Western support of brutal autocratic regimes like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have been sponsoring certain armed elements to manipulate cynically the crisis in Syria. I should also refer to the extraordinary double standards when it comes to the treatment of Israel, which has been allowed to get away literally with the murder of Palestinian people in Gaza. All of the chickens of the West's hypocritical policy in the region are coming home to roost in the most dangerous and terrifying way with the rise of ISIS. Our troops should not be put in the middle of that dangerous cocktail.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Our troops are not in the middle of that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We have already had one group-----

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Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy should be careful with what he is saying. Our troops are not going into that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The safest thing-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: There are families listening to this debate. The Deputy should be careful in what he is saying.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister should be careful.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am being very careful.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He should pull them out. There is no good reason for them to be there in this dangerous situation.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There is. There are very good reasons.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The situation is getting completely out of control. It is spilling over into Kurdistan and Turkey. God knows where it will go from here. Therefore, I see no purpose in our troops being there. I think we should pull them out.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Our troops are not there.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Our troops are in the UNDOF buffer area.

Deputy Simon Coveney: They are in the Golan Heights.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There is no presence of ISIL or ISIS in the Golan Heights.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Some of the rebel groups are operating in that area. Some of the conflict is taking place there. It is spreading across Syria and into Turkey. If the Minister knows where it will end, I think he is making a serious mistake. The US is escalating the conflict by starting to bomb. This will fuel a situation that is already dangerous and disastrous. The most useful thing we could do in these circumstances is pull our troops out for their own safety and finally begin to stand up to and challenge the inconsistency, hypocrisy, manipulation and double standards of what the big powers are doing in the region, which has fuelled the growth of ISIS and the other insurgent Islamic groups. We should stop supporting regimes like those in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. We should stop co-operating with an Egyptian regime that is digging the grave of the Arab Spring in Egypt. These are the sorts of things we could usefully do instead of endangering the lives of our troops. If there is no problem, why has the Minister said the mission should be reviewed? Why has he said we need to rethink its whole purpose? It is obviously in the context of what is happening in Syria that the Minister is making such remarks. If this was not an issue, the headquarters of the mission would not have redeployed and the Minister would not have said in his speech that the whole basis of the mission is being reconsidered. He said that it needs to be reviewed. That is being done because the Minister can see what a dangerous mess there is. I am saying we should go one step further by pulling the troops out and finally beginning to challenge the disastrous policies of the Western powers in the region.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I appreciate that the Government likes the idea of keeping the peacekeeping force in position on the Golan Heights. I am aware that the troops want to go.

I have serious reservations about the idea of having them there. I think the Minister knows it is not as safe as it was. The situation has deteriorated. It is no longer just a conflict between Syria and Israel. The original UNDOF troops were put into position to deal with the Israeli Syrian conflict and given the fact that the mission was put in place 40 years ago, it really has not worked. In fact, for all practical purposes, it has failed because the conflict between Syria and Israel has never been sorted and that was part of the remit of the force initially.

It would also appear that the UNDOF troops on the Golan Heights are currently in the process of being withdrawn west of the Israeli defence lines. The UNDOF mission established in 1974 was intended as a disengagement force - hence the name. Its primary purpose was and is to form a buffer zone between Syrian forces in the east and Israeli forces in the west but now the bulk of the UN troops are being withdrawn to the west of the Israeli forces. Therefore, the UNDOF mission is no longer forming a buffer zone or operating as a disengagement force. In reality, it is serving no valid purpose. Recent media reports and statements from the Minister would seem to indicate that Syrian militia forces are in the process of occupying parts of the buffer zone previously occupied by the UN forces. Since these militias are opposed not only to the Syrian State forces, but also to the Israeli forces, it is possible that there will be some conflict in the region. The Islamic State is not the only group causing problems in the region. The so-called moderate forces who are very active in Syria and who are operating very close to this area are being armed by the US at the moment which, to my mind, is absolute madness. It is one of the craziest international situations we have ever seen. Russia is pouring arms into the region, as is Saudi Arabia. Now the US is pouring arms into the region and is bombing parts of Iraq and Syria, contrary to international law. The situation is getting worse by the day and the people who are suffering the most are the citizens on the ground. Military intervention in these places does not work. It is crazy. It is just throwing oil on the fire to pour more arms into the region. The US has the strength and the authority to deal with this in a different way but it has not chosen to do so, which is very disappointing.

Given that the Irish troops are now being pulled to the west, it is as if they are forming a buffer for the benefit of the Israelis and I do not see how the Minister can assert that there is a genuine argument for the Irish troops remaining in place. As I said to the Minister last week during question time, I really believe that there are better things that our soldiers could be doing. I mentioned the peacekeeping mission in the Congo, where a lot of the troops are not nearly as well trained as the Irish. Our personnel could do very useful work there. A lot of the forces in that UN mission are from Third World countries where, unfortunately, the level of training is not as high as in Ireland. The Irish troops would be of huge benefit there. I also wonder if Europe is seriously interested in a peaceful solution to the conflict in Ukraine or whether it is happy to go along with NATO's expansionist policy. Has everyone forgotten that NATO did a deal with Gorbachev when the Soviet Union split up that it would not encroach on the former Soviet Union? That is exactly what it is doing now and that is where the problems in Ukraine stem from. That said, we are where we are with Ukraine and we need a peacekeeping force in place there if we want a peaceful solution.

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I wish to take this opportunity to clarify a few issues because I do not want this debate to broaden out into a general debate on the Middle East and policies in that region. We have an involvement in two very significant peacekeeping missions in this part of the world. One is the UNIFIL peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon which Ireland has had major involvement in for many decades. Pretty close, geographically, to that we have had 130 troops in a peacekeeping mission on the Golan Heights

for the past 12 months. The decision that I have to make, given the changing conditions on the ground, which is always a possibility in any of these volatile areas, is whether we work with the other partners involved in the mission, along with the UN, to restructure the mission and to effectively “de-risk” what our soldiers are being exposed to and maintain what has been one of the most successful peacekeeping missions operated by the UN. Deputy Wallace said that the mission has been a failure but UNDOF has operated since the 1970s observing an armistice between two very powerful nations who were at war until then and it has been hugely successful.

Deputy Mick Wallace: It did not solve the conflict.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It was not meant to provide a political solution. The mandate is a Chapter Six peace observation role where the UN operates within a 75 km long strip, with Mount Hermon at the northern end, down along the Golan Heights. The UN had a string of posts manned by peacekeepers who were observing the adherence to an armistice and peace plan between two countries and it was hugely successful.

The situation on the ground, as everybody has acknowledged, has dramatically changed over the past number of months and, in particular, in the past number of weeks and the mission has responded to that by relocating and redeploying troops to safer locations out of what was previously a demilitarised area but which has now become part of the civil war in Syria. The troops are now located west of an alpha line which the Israelis control where there were a series of UN posts already because the mission was about observing the Israeli side as well as the Syrian side. Undoubtedly, the ability of the mission to fulfil its mandate, for the moment, is compromised. Notwithstanding that, the judgment I had to make, having spoken to various ambassadors of countries which are interested and have a stake in ensuring stability in the Middle East, was whether we are better off having a UN presence in that region - in a relatively safe zone, which the troops are in now - in order to try to encourage and deliver stability because the last thing the Middle East needs now is a war between Syria and Israel, or whether we pull out and allow the mission to collapse. I asked the UN for three things, the first of which was the restructuring of the mission. I also asked that the UN adopt an open mind towards a re-evaluation of the equipment available to the troops to make sure they can protect themselves and that the UN Security Council would make a very strong and clear statement to that effect. The UN agreed to all of that and as a result, I believe that Ireland should be committed to this mission because it is much safer now than it has been in recent weeks because of the change and redeployment that has already happened. The redeployment is not still under discussion but has already happened. Our troops are well trained and are capable of dealing with potential difficulties but they are now unlikely to encounter such for the foreseeable future because I do not envisage a significant UN presence on the Syrian side of that alpha line any time soon. The only UN troops on the Syrian side of the alpha line are Nepalese troops on Mount Hermon. Their posts are at high altitude and will soon be covered in snow. Furthermore, there is no appetite for a civil war in that part of the Golan Heights.

Commentators are talking about ISIL and Islamic State and US bombing in Syria. It has been made clear to me that the rebel forces and militia in the Golan Heights are not ISIL or Islamic State, but what is called the al-Nusra Front, which is an offshoot of al-Qaeda. They have different objectives and we are unlikely to see any bombing happening in that place.

Deputy Mick Wallace: They are probably good guys.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We have seen a structural and dramatic change to the mission,

but this remains a peace observation mission. We will review the weaponry that is available to our troops and to others who are working with us. If Ireland was to pull out of this, it would result in this mission having a destabilised future which, in turn, would contribute negatively to instability in the region.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The fact they had to move undermines the mission.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Such instability is not something we should allow.

Housing Provision: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— the State is in the midst of the most severe housing crisis in its history, due mostly to a drastic shortage of social housing;

— 89,872 households, representing well in excess of 100,000 men, women and children are currently on local authority housing waiting lists, a rise of 30% in just five years;

— approximately 74,000 households are in receipt of rent supplement at a cost of €344 million in subsidy for private landlords, more than a third of whom are in Dublin;

— 2013 saw a decrease of 36% in the construction of new housing;

— the latest reports from both the Private Residential Tenancies Board, PRTB, and Daft show private residential rents in Dublin have risen by 26% since the Fine Gael-Labour Party coalition took office in 2011 and that this trend is continuing;

— homelessness services are reporting unprecedented need with rough sleep numbers in Dublin trebling last year, resulting in 139 people sleeping on the city's streets during harsh winter conditions with many more forced to live in emergency or temporary accommodation;

— more than €1 billion has been cut from the housing budget since 2008;

— City council inspections have found that the vast majority of rental properties in inner city Dublin do not meet minimum standards for human habitation;

— the Government has failed to deliver less than a quarter of promised National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, housing after three years in office;

— the Government is also currently failing in its stated policy objective to end long-term homelessness by 2016; and

— the rental accommodation scheme has failed to deliver adequate numbers of homes and to protect those it has housed from eviction;

recognises:

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— the great work done by many voluntary and co-operative organisations across the State to provide housing where the State has failed or refused to do so;

— the vital role played by homeless agencies and charities in providing for people experiencing homelessness and lobbying for policies to end homelessness;

— that the Government has failed to prioritise the housing of citizens in need and are repeating the failed policies of its Government predecessors; and

— in solving the social housing crisis and ending long-term homelessness it is essential that the quality of homes provided are built to the highest standards - being warm, spacious and secure;

concludes that:

— the solution to the housing crisis needs to become a political priority for this Government which is underpinned by credible Government initiatives to build and deliver more social housing;

— alternative funding models must be used to allow local authorities to build new homes as and where needed;

— NAMA must be given a deadline for delivery of promised housing and this process should be overseen by the Joint Committee on Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht;

— soaring rent rates need to be tackled; and

— the Government has a responsibility and duty to prioritise housing in the remainder of this Dáil term; and

calls on the Government to:

— introduce legislative change to allow for the initial use of €1 billion from the Strategic Investment Fund to deliver at least 6,600 additional social housing units over the next two years;

— ensure that all new housing provided, whether for emergency accommodation or for long-term housing, meets the standards as laid down in regulations and efficiently provides warmth, space and other essential utilities required of a modern home;

— further prioritise local authority construction as a method of providing homes for those who need them;

— take urgent action regarding spiralling rents by implementing a system of rent control that guarantees a fair rate of return for landlords that is linked to both the consumer price index and the quality of the property;

— enable local authorities to establish independent housing trusts allowing them to source financing independent of the national debt in order to build and maintain new social housing;

— ensure that recipients of Housing Assistance Payment will not be removed from

housing waiting lists;

— amend equality legislation to disallow the practice of landlords discriminating against recipients of rent supplement and immediately reform the operation of the scheme to ensure recipients seeking rental properties are not unnecessarily disadvantaged;

— broaden access to the mortgage-to-rent scheme;

— commit to ring-fencing funding for housing and homelessness services for the lifetime of this Government;

— introduce a deposit retention scheme under the supervision of the PRTB; and

— set a date for a referendum on the Constitutional Convention's recommendation that Bunreacht na hÉireann should include a right to housing cognisable by the courts.

Tá áthas orm go bhfuilim ag labhairt ar ghnó Comhaltáí Príobháideacha. This motion is designed to highlight the dire crisis in housing. For more than three years, Sinn Féin has been using every opportunity to raise this crisis with the Ministers of this Government who share responsibility for housing. We have struggled to bring home to them the true scale of this crisis. Some 89,000 households are on waiting lists, representing well in excess of 100,000 men, women and children. There are at least 5,000 homeless in this State, with 10,000 seeking the services of Focus Ireland in 2013. Between 30 and 40 families become homeless every month in Dublin. On Wednesday night last, 158 persons were found sleeping rough on the streets of the capital. Shame on us. Some 74,000 households are on rent supplement and 23,000 on the rental accommodation scheme. By no stretch of the imagination could these be considered to be adequately housed, with rising rents and repossessions of buy-to-lets. Today, the leading homeless charity, Simon Community, states that the Government's goal of ending homelessness by 2016 is dead in the water due to its own policies. It is fantasy. These are the results of the policies of austerity. Since 2008, more than €1 billion euro has been cut from the capital budget for housing. The Minister's predecessors were responsible for some of it and this Government continued the practice.

This is what anyone would call an emergency. The obvious solution to this crisis is to build housing. That is not to say this will be easy. It is an expensive solution that will require dedication. This Government must decide that the social good and the public interest come first. We must put in place the solutions to this crisis. The Government must accept that the financial cost in the short term is worth the benefit to society. A more equal and fair society will reap its own rewards and generate genuine and sustainable prosperity in the future. For every person and family that short-sightedness fails, we are poorer morally, as a community and as an economy. It is far more costly to condemn a child to deprivation or a family to homelessness than to give them a home. This is at the heart of what we propose, that a home is a right we cannot afford to deny to the people.

These measures are not an attempt to attack the Government. Tackling this crisis is far more important than political point scoring, but we are in this position because of failed policies which must be abandoned. The truth is this Government's policy has put more people into homelessness than it has lifted out. Through cuts to rent supplement, single parent's allowance, child benefit and young person's dole, through austerity as ruthlessly pursued by this Government, those who struggled previously are now drowning and those who made ends meet are now fighting to keep their heads above water.

Despite it seeming late to start to tackle this crisis, it is certainly not too late. I accept that the Government has in recent times been more willing to accept that the crisis is just that, but a lot more is required than words. We need real investment and a real commitment. We need houses and we need them as soon as possible.

My party's proposals include an additional 6,600 homes for social housing, which the State could build through local authorities. This could be done by a simple legislative change to release €1 billion from the Strategic Investment Fund for social investment. Housing people in quality homes seems a good strategy worthy of investment. The construction of these 6,600 homes would create thousands of jobs. It would generate increased VAT and income tax revenue. It would increase local authority rent revenues and stabilise private rents by decreasing demand. Most important, it would allow 6,600 households to live as people in dignity. If those 6,600 households were taken out of rent supplement to be housed, it would represent a saving of about €148 million over the next five years. When one considers all of the extra costs involved in not housing people properly for years on end, this is a conservative figure. That said, this investment is not the solution but part of a solution. It is a step in the right direction. Sinn Féin is under no illusions about the scale of this crisis or how easy it will be to solve, but we must take the first step and we feel this investment is it.

We also propose a suite of measures which seek to help tenants in the private rental market. Some 20% of accommodation in this State is rental accommodation. Despite growing numbers, tenant's rights have not received enough focus by Government and regulation is needed. Rental tenants are routinely misinformed of their rights. Often tenancy agreements do not respect the rights of tenants, and low standards, high rents and insecure conditions are the norm. If there is a crisis in social housing, equally there is a crisis in the rental market and it is tenants who are bearing the brunt. In April, an inspections blitz by Dublin City Council found that 92% of the rental homes it looked at failed minimum standards checks. These 1,398 flats and apartments were not fit for human habitation, yet they were on the market for prices based not on their quality, but on the desperation of those seeking housing. They were slums.

What we need is an overhaul of standards for private accommodation, of procedures, regulations, oversight and price setting. That is why we have proposed rent controls as an essential measure to help stop the flow of people into homelessness and to make renting affordable for the low paid and unemployed. In Dublin, rents have shot up by 26% since 2011. They have gone up by 10% this year. Accommodation quality has not improved in tandem. Daft and other rental sites have 40% fewer properties available due to the repossession of many homes bought on buy-to-let mortgages. We have called many times for the Minister to carve out a code of conduct with banks in order that tenants are not left in the lurch when a landlord loses control. The average monthly rent across the State is €915, nearly 50% of an average worker's take-home pay. The average rent in Dublin city is now €1,233, nearly 60% of the average take-home pay. Rent controls are not new and have been shown to be effective in conjunction with the State provision of social housing. Rates should be tied to the consumer price index and the quality of the accommodation. On *Daft.ie*, there are utterly substandard rooms, studios and flats being let for extortionate prices. This cannot continue. Focus Ireland, Threshold, Peter McVerry and even the former Minister of State with responsibility for housing, now the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, agree. I was very disappointed by the dismissal by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, of the idea of rent control before the PRTB, Private Residential Tenancies Board, even released its report on the matter.

Another measure in the motion which my Sinn Féin colleagues will elaborate on is the deposit retention scheme, a Labour policy before it entered government.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It will be implemented.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The then responsible Minister, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, even promised to put one in place while rejecting a Sinn Féin amendment to the residential tenancies Bill which would have done just that. Tenants cannot afford to have their deposits withheld without justification which is now such a common practice that nearly every renter has experienced it at least once. Many renters do not even understand they have a right to their deposit back. Such a scheme would be a massive improvement.

We call for a referendum on the right to housing. The Constitutional Convention overwhelmingly voted to support a referendum on the issue. It decided the right put before the people should be robust and cognisable by the courts. This right has been long denied the poorest in our society. One just needs to look at the recent complaint against the State by the International Federation for Human Rights on behalf of 130,000 residents in estates in inner city Dublin and Limerick. Housing is not a right in Ireland in 2014. Instead, it is a very expensive privilege.

Will the Government take on board these proposals? I am sure the Minister, like me, has many people coming to his constituency clinics, breaking down over the lack of housing or their rent supplement being stopped. I have had countless families coming into my office seeking emergency accommodation. Many of them actually queue up at the hotels offering such accommodation as they are told by the homeless services in their local authority that no places are available. For those who secure hotel emergency accommodation, they find they have no facilities for their children or for cooking and have to leave their accommodation during the day as they cannot hang around the hotel lobby. It is an absolute scandal that we are relying on hotels to provide emergency housing. We must be more imaginative in how we tackle this problem.

We raised concerns about the housing assistance payment, HAP, during the most recent debate on housing legislation but the then Minister responsible, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, prevaricated. We identified that anyone who availed of HAP would be taken off the housing waiting list because they would be considered to be adequately housed. The Minister of State responded to our concerns by saying they would be put on the transfer list. The reality is that anyone on the transfer list will not be considered eligible for social housing for two years. Some local authorities do not even have a transfer list. The Minister was misinformed in this regard.

Schemes which allowed people to make a financial contribution towards senior citizen local authority accommodation seem to have fallen off the radar with many local authorities suspending them. Now, there are waiting lists in most local authority areas with people who want to go into senior citizen accommodation. As much of this accommodation consists of bedsits, financial contributions made by applicants could help in converting them into double accommodation, as is happening in some of the schemes in my area. There are options to get extra housing that we need to look at more carefully.

I know the Government made much play about dealing with social housing voids. The voids were a natural progression in our system. If a person died or for whatever reason left their local authority house, the next person in line got it. Unfortunately, the number of empty local authority houses in such cases built up over the years because of a lack of funding to renovate

the void after it was vacated. We need to get back to the roll-on effect with people getting housing in such circumstances and not building up voids.

Landlords the length and breadth of the country are putting up the prices of their rental properties. In many cases people are ending up homeless or looking for another rental supplement to match these increases. This is impossible in the Dublin area. That is why we have called for rent controls but the Government has refused to introduce them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy): I understand Deputies Michael Colreavy and Jonathan O'Brien wish to share time. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: This is a surreal debate. First, we should not talk about houses but homes, although I am certain I will lapse in that regard myself. There is a difference between a house and a home. A house can be used by someone to make a profit on or visit occasionally, such as one at a nice seaside place. A home, however, is where families are reared, shelter is provided and people feel safe and secure. It is their little place in this world.

There appears to be a paradox in this regard in Ireland, however. For the past several years, we have been in the throes of a financial crisis as a result of an economic system where the building of houses, apartments, office and industrial buildings played a major role. However, despite the massive number of units built during the so-called "tiger period", a wholly insufficient number of local authority homes were constructed. Private developers were given the ability to opt out of their social responsibility under Part V of the Planning and Development Act. At the same time, local authorities were also selling off many properties but were slow to replenish stock. While the Government is not responsible for much of what happened then, perhaps the parties opposite should have done more when in opposition to make sure that it did not happen.

The Government is responsible for fixing the problem. That is its job. As an Opposition we are responsible for giving the Government proposals and suggestions to help it to fix the problem that was left by the previous Government. That is the way I see it. We are not here to score political points, we are here to help.

The public private partnership model which prioritised profit over the provision of homes was one which was pursued during the Governments of the Celtic tiger era. Major housing regeneration in Dublin such as St. Michael's estate, in Dominic Street and O'Devany Gardens collapsed when developers decided the profit margin would not be great enough for them or because they got into financial trouble. Let us contrast that with the situation that has developed since the onset of the recession where more than €1 billion has been cut from the housing budget to construct homes for those who need them. That, coupled with cuts to rent supplement and the failure to tackle the crisis in employment has resulted in a spiralling of the number of people who now need homes. The situation is almost past the stage of being able to claw it back.

Even at this late stage Sinn Féin has an alternative vision of how housing needs should be addressed. We believe the right to a home is a basic human right, one which must be protected by the State. Such a right cannot be granted or withdrawn at the whim of a Government or a Minister. We recommend that this right be enshrined in Bunreacht na hÉireann and enforceable by the courts, as was recommended by the recent Constitutional Convention. That change, and the funding to support it, should it be introduced, would transform the situation in terms

of homes and homelessness in Ireland. Adequate housing should be defined as a home with suitable privacy, space, security, accessibility, lighting, ventilation, basic infrastructure, and location with regard to work and basic facilities. Sinn Féin maintains that everyone has the right to protection from homelessness. We also believe that every person has the right to security of tenure, whether in public or private housing.

However, the reality of the current situation is very stark and it is depressing to read the figures and to translate them into the human misery they represent. Currently, approximately 90,000 households need homes. That is more than 100,000 men, women and children. Many are living with relatives or friends in grossly overcrowded conditions; other are living in sub-standard and overpriced rented accommodation while others still are in emergency accommodation for the homeless provided by local authorities or charities or are among the growing numbers sleeping rough on our streets.

Rent supplement costs the State a large sum but it does not solve the crisis that exists in this country. A total of 74,000 households are in receipt of rent supplement at a cost of €344 million a year to the State. The cap that was introduced by the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton, is well below the market average. That is the context of rising rents, especially but not solely in Dublin. In my area the maximum rent supplement that is paid is totally unrealistic and the situation will not change until rent control is introduced to reduce the level of rent currently paid in the private sector. The failure of rent supplement to tackle the housing crisis has forced people into homelessness because they are unable to match the market rate of rents.

The housing assistance payment, which is to replace the rent supplement, will remove recipients from waiting lists and condemn them to stay in private accommodation at the whim of the market for as long as they remain renters. That is the most unkind cut of all. The State has abdicated responsibility for such people who must continue to rent privately. That is shameful. It is a Government attempt to make it seem that the housing waiting list is reducing when in fact the Government is removing itself ever further from tackling the crisis in terms of the provision of homes for those who need them.

During the tenure of the Government there has been a failure to deliver homes that were originally promised by NAMA for social housing. It is scandalous to see so many empty housing units in this country and at the same time to see people lie in the street. It is scandalous that people cannot get a roof over their heads while there are empty houses all over the country. That makes no sense. To date, only 531 of a current total of 5,294 homes that were promised have been completed. As of June 2014, a total of 15 local authorities delivered no NAMA housing whatsoever.

Sinn Féin has identified €1 billion in unused money from Ireland's strategic investment fund. If we were to use the money, an additional 6,600 homes could be built over and above current targets, and 10,000 new social housing units could be built before next summer. The projection is based on costings from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government in addition to figures from the Department on long-term vacant social housing units. In 2012, Sinn Féin proposed a large-scale investment through which it was projected that as many as 9,000 homes could be built for the same money. Failure by Government to act on the proposals at the time has resulted in the estimates being revised downwards. There are also additional benefits to constructing an extra 6,600 homes. I refer to the significant number of jobs for construction workers, many of whom have struggled to find sustainable employment

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since the bubble burst and who are unemployed. So many new homes would generate considerable rent for local authorities and could save the State €29 million if 6,600 households on rent supplement were placed in permanent homes.

8 o'clock

The rising cost of rent is also pushing many who are on the brink into homelessness. Sinn Féin proposes a fair rent control system which bases rates on the consumer price index and the quality of accommodation. Rent controls exist in some form in many European states, including Britain, France and Germany. Focus Ireland, Fr. Peter McVerry, Threshold and even prominent members of the Labour Party have supported the call for some form of rent control. I understand a report on this is due to be published by Private Residential Tenancies Board, PRTB, this month. Unreasonable rent increases cause many to lose a permanent roof over their heads and introducing measures to tackle this problem could, in some way, help our housing crisis.

In the north west it appears that local authorities have no funding to renovate vacated houses for re-letting or to facilitate transfers, even in the most meritorious of cases. Why is this? If we are serious about our responsibility to provide homes for those who cannot afford them, this situation cannot be allowed to continue.

I propose we accept the fact that in this State marriage and partnership breakdowns occur in some families. The State has not tackled this and it must be addressed because couples who divorce and separate are put through great difficulties when dealing with local authorities on housing. I am not saying it is easy - I am saying it needs to be addressed.

I will conclude by referring to a family from Slovakia that I dealt with yesterday. They may as well be Irish. I would not like to see an Irish family in Slovakia treated as this family has been treated here. The family has been here for most of the past seven years and four children were born in Ireland. One of the boys spent four years in Irish secondary school. The family was not familiar with Ireland's system of social protection and the father of the family worked in various odd-jobs for farmers and builders. When the jobs dried up in Ireland, the family moved to England for a short period for work. They did not find work in England and so returned to Ireland. Due to the habitual residence requirement, the father does not qualify for jobseeker's allowance or supplementary welfare, and the family cannot get on the housing list of the local authority. The father cannot pay the private rent and he is to be evicted tomorrow. When I contacted some agencies for the homeless, I learned there was no place available for this man and his family tomorrow. If children are starving and homeless, what am I doing here? What are any of us doing here?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I congratulate the Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Paudie Coffey, on their appointments and wish them the best in their new roles. They face difficult jobs. The housing issues we are discussing were not created by them but they have an opportunity to do something positive and rectify the problems facing many people throughout the country. I left the Chamber to get a copy of the proposed amendment because I did not have a chance to read it before I arrived. It outlines some of the actions taken by the Government since it took power and some are welcome - I will not suggest the Government has done nothing positive. The former Minister of State with responsibility for housing, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, worked on the issue of vacant dwellings in local authority areas and earmarked funding for this. This is starting to pay dividends in my area of Cork city - vacant houses have become available and this is welcome.

The former Minister of State also introduced the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014, which brought in the housing assistance payment, HAP, but I have a problem with this system. In theory, allowing a person continued access to housing supports when re-entering employment is very welcome. I raised my issue with the HAP system at the time it was debated and so did Deputy Ellis. My problem, specifically, is when a person becomes a HAP recipient, he or she is taken off the social housing list. I have read the Government position on this and I have examined the statements of the Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly. They are reflected in the amendment that is to be moved by the Minister, which states that a HAP recipient will be able to access other housing options, such as local authority housing and voluntary housing schemes. However, many local authorities do not operate a transfer list. If the Minister is serious in what he says, he must direct such local authorities to operate a transfer list scheme. He must also outline the basic criteria for operating such a scheme or there will be a haphazard approach throughout the State. Uniformity is required when it comes to transfer onto the HAP system.

Regarding the construction of social housing, Sinn Féin has identified €1 billion that could create 6,600 dwellings at an average price of around €150,000 - this would save around €29 million in increased rents. The amendment to be tabled by the Minister states that 2014 will see the completion of around 11,000 houses and points out that a further 6,000 are earmarked. If this is the case, then I welcome it. However, this brings me to the main issue. It is not just a question of building houses - it will take more than 6,600 newly constructed houses to rectify the problem. This is a multifaceted issue that requires a multifaceted solution of which the construction of social housing is only one aspect.

Newly constructed social housing cannot consist only of standard two and three bedroom houses. I served as a councillor on Cork City Council for 11 years and over 50% of the people on the waiting list there are single applicants. We could build 6,600 or 11,000 two and three bedroom houses this year but it will not cater for single applicants. If we are serious about reducing housing waiting lists through a scheme of social housing construction, there must be a mix that caters for everyone in every circumstance. In addition to this, some areas have an ageing population and in my constituency I know of very elderly people in three and four bedroom council homes who want to downsize. This may be due to disability or difficulty getting upstairs and to the bathroom. Such people tell the council that they no longer require such a large home and would prefer something smaller that will be less onerous - perhaps a bungalow with a walk-in shower. They ask that the house be given to a family that needs it. Unfortunately, Cork City Council does not have that housing stock. Elderly people are forced to remain in three or four bedroom houses where it is impossible for them to get upstairs or access bathrooms. In such circumstances, housing officials recommend the person apply for an adoption grant to convert a bath into a walk-in shower. They might get a stairlift. Then they apply for the housing adaptation grant, only to find there is no funding for it. They are stuck in this situation and meanwhile a family living in very overcrowded conditions and crying out for housing cannot get this house because we do not have the proper mix of house build. The Minister will publish a report on social housing in the coming weeks and I hope any report coming from the Department will take these issues on board. These are the nitty-gritty issues which would go a very long way to giving some relief to many individuals on the housing list.

I also wish to discuss rent allowance, the private sector and individuals on rent allowance schemes, RAS. The Minister will correct me if I am wrong but I believe that in the 1980s we had a rent cap in place, or at least there used to be rent controls. As far as I am aware they were ruled unconstitutional as the result of a court case. Earlier this year the then Minister of State,

Deputy O’Sullivan, stated she was examining the possibility of some form of rent stability measure. Whether she wanted to call it rent control was down to herself. In some of his recent remarks the Minister has ruled out this option, but he does not state this in the amendment to the motion, which states all options will be examined. If this is one of the options which comes forward as part of the report due next week the Minister will examine it, and if it means changing legislation this will be seriously considered. I welcome this. A total of 80% of people who come to my constituency office do so with housing-related issues such as those with a mortgage crisis; those on the verge of being kicked out of a private tenancy because the rent has increased and they can no longer afford to give a backhander to the landlord because the rent supplement is nowhere near adequate; or the standard of accommodation not being up to scratch.

Earlier today I downloaded from the Department’s website the most recent document, which dates from 2011. The document had multifaceted solutions and one of these was RAS. I do not know if the review will take RAS into account but I can tell the Minister hand on heart it is a disaster. People come to my office who went on RAS believing they would remain on local authority waiting lists only to find out later this was not the case. A property may have been up to scratch when it was first inspected but now it is in RAS the owner may have decided he or she is getting the money and will not make refurbishments or maintain the house. At present some RAS properties are a disgrace. RAS needs to be examined because it is a disaster waiting to happen. People are coming to our offices and going to local authorities stating they want to get out of RAS properties and back into local authority properties if possible. It is just not working.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy): The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, will share time with Deputy Michelle Mulherin.

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): I move amendment No. 1:

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

“acknowledges that the economic downturn and contraction in construction activity since 2008 have created significant difficulties for many communities and individuals across Ireland;

recognises the high priority which the Government has assigned to housing and homelessness issues, particularly in the Housing Policy Statement of 2011, the Homelessness Policy Statement of 2013 and most recently in the Statement of Government Priorities 2014 - 2016 published in July of this year;

notes that:

— current house completions data (5,824 units completed by end July 2014) show that nationally there is a 32 per cent increase in output over the first seven months when compared to equivalent figures in 2013 (4,405 units completed) and that new Dublin house completions over the first seven months of the year are up 150 per cent on equivalent figures for 2013, increasing from 678 units to 1,693 units;

— by using the outturn to date, it is currently estimated that between 10,000 and 11,000 units will be completed in 2014, representing an annual increase of approximately 25 per cent;

— the 89,872 households on social housing waiting lists, as recorded by the statutory Summary of Social Housing Assessments as at May 2013, represents a reduction of 9 per cent on the 2011 assessment total of 98,318; and

— within the funding constraints of recent years, the Government has responded in a variety of ways to meet emerging housing needs, including through the expansion of more flexible revenue-based funding and delivery mechanisms including leasing and the Rental Accommodation Scheme;

recognises that, with the more limited resources available, the main focus in terms of housing supports provided by Government must be on meeting the most acute needs of those unable to provide for their accommodation from their own resources;

welcomes the total €647 million housing allocation for 2014 which will result in an investment across a range of programmes and will support the delivery of over 6,000 units this year;

welcomes the provision of a €30 million funding stream to bring vacant and boarded up local authority units back into use, which will provide some 1,960 homes for families on housing lists;

recognises the Government's enactment of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014, which provides a legislative basis for the new Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), which will be of significant benefit to long-term recipients of Rent Supplement;

further notes:

— the Government's commitment that HAP recipients will have access to other social housing supports offered by local authorities through the transfer system;

— that in February 2014 the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government broadened the Mortgage-to-Rent Scheme to provide for local authority borrowers which aims to ensure that local authority homeowners in mortgage distress can remain in their home; and

— that the Department continues to work closely and successfully with the National Asset Management Agency, the Housing Agency, local authorities and approved housing bodies in relation to the delivery of social housing;

recognises the voluntary and cooperative organisations' ongoing work in providing social housing using funding sources under the various Government schemes;

welcomes the Government's commitment to end long-term homelessness by 2016;

supports the adoption of a housing-led approach to tackling homelessness, which involves access to permanent housing combined with appropriate ongoing support, as a core aspect of the Government's Homelessness Policy Statement;

welcomes the ring-fencing of Government funding for homeless services in Budgets 2013 and 2014, in support of the discharge by local authorities of their statutory role in the provision of accommodation for homeless persons;

supports the Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness which

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will deliver 2,700 units for homeless households by end 2016;

notes that the official Dublin rough sleeper count identified 127 individuals sleeping rough on a given night last April – a decrease on the figure of 139 recorded for November 2013;

acknowledges that a regional ‘Housing First’ service will commence shortly in the Dublin region which will have a focus on delivering new tenancies for homeless people with a history of rough sleeping and high level needs;

recognises that the private rented sector is an important element of the housing market, with approximately one in five households now renting their home in the private sector;

recognises that resolution of the housing supply situation is a key element in restoring stability to the rental market;

acknowledges that the growing evidence of increasing rents, particularly in Dublin, is a cause for concern but notes that, on average, rents in Dublin are still 12.7 per cent lower than they were at their peak in the fourth quarter of 2007, while rents nationally are almost 19 per cent lower than their peak in 2007;

notes that the study commissioned by the Private Residential Tenancies Board (PRTB) on rent stability in the sector will be presented to the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government in the coming days;

recognises that the introduction of any rent stability measures will require careful consideration by Government;

agrees that the overriding objective is to achieve stability and sustainability in the market for the benefit of tenants, landlords and society as a whole;

notes that the Government will be introducing legislative provisions for a Deposit Protection Scheme, to be operated by the PRTB, at Seanad Committee Stage of the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2012, which will eliminate the practice of landlords illegally withholding deposits and contribute to the ongoing regulation and development of the rental market;

welcomes Dublin City Council’s ongoing inspection programme for rental properties which is proving to be very effective in targeting non-compliant properties, enforcing minimum standards legislation and bringing properties into compliance to the benefit of over 3,000 tenants since March 2012;

acknowledges the complex issues of law involved in preventing discrimination by landlords against recipients of Rent Supplement but welcomes that options, including that of legal remedy, to address the practice of discrimination in such instances are currently being explored by the relevant Departments in consultation with the Attorney General;

acknowledges that there are, approximately, 74,000 rent supplement recipients, for which the Government has provided over €344 million for 2014; and

welcomes the Government's commitment to:

— address the challenges in the property and construction sectors, including developing an overall strategic approach to housing supply through the implementation of the actions in *Construction 2020 – A Strategy for a Renewed Construction Sector*;

— ensure that all new housing provided, whether for emergency accommodation or for long-term housing, will meet the requirements laid down in the Building Regulations and best practice as set out in the *Quality Housing for Sustainable Communities* guidelines to support the delivery of quality homes which will fully meet the needs of occupants;

— develop and publish in the coming weeks a Social Housing Strategy which will set out a series of actions to address the supply of social housing over the next five years; and

— identify and facilitate the most appropriate models to maximise supply, management and maintenance of social housing in the longer term in order to deliver the key social housing objective of providing both for those households who cannot afford to house themselves and those who struggle to afford housing in the private market.”

I thank the Deputies for proposing the motion. I kick off by saying I welcome the contributions of the Deputies but I find it quite amazing and unbelievable, and I am sure the Deputies across the House will share this with me, that the supposedly main Opposition party does not have one representative during this debate on such an important topic for everyone. The spokesperson might be busy, but it is absolutely unbelievable that not one representative of Fianna Fáil could be here this evening. I have no doubt its leader and spokesperson will be waxing lyrical about housing, social housing and homelessness in the coming weeks, but I will not be short on pointing out that it could not find somebody to be here this evening to discuss a very important topic.

I welcome the fact that Members have raised the important issues of housing and homelessness, thus affording me the opportunity to demonstrate the Government's strongest commitment to tackling these issues through a very wide range of actions, many already under way and others planned. I fully acknowledge the seriousness of the situation and it requires a comprehensive response with specific and ongoing actions, as will be outlined.

Key to an improvement in the housing situation is of course the broader economic recovery. The Government's economic policies are working and as we move on from the legacy of dealing with the collapse of the economy, and in particular the construction industry, very positive trends continue to emerge. The standardised unemployment rate in August 2014 was 11.2%, the lowest it has been since 2009. Also, preliminary estimates for the second quarter of 2014 indicate that GDP increased by 1.5% in volume terms on a seasonally adjusted basis compared with the first quarter of 2014 while GNP increased by 0.6% over the same period.

These are all positive signs that we are in the midst of an economic recovery, from which people and communities are at last beginning to see real benefits. Increasing house prices in certain locations is a double-edged sword. It is a symptom of an improving economy and growth in employment, and it allows some homeowners to move out of negative equity, which I am sure we all wish. However, it makes access to the housing market more difficult, puts

pressure on the cost of living and potentially make us more uncompetitive. It also contributes to rent increases and can also increase the risk of homelessness. It requires short and long-term action and this is what the Government will deliver on, with social housing being at the core of this strategy.

In essence, we are dealing with the legacy of a failed policy of relying on the private sector to deliver our social housing needs. I agree with the Deputies opposite on this point. The developer-led policies of the previous Fianna Fáil regime will become a thing of the past and housing developments of the future will be focussed on people and communities, as opposed to greed. Our plans are about enriching communities as opposed to developers. There are acute pressure points in the housing sector, such as homelessness, which are a direct result of the failed economic policies in the past. There are legacy issues which need to be dealt with. There is no magic wand that wipes them away, but I am fully intent on not repeating the same mistakes of the past and will introduce progressive policies and change.

In a similar vein, I point out that fantasy economics and false promises made outside the Chamber will not deal with the housing crisis in the way Sinn Féin has stated. I am not so sure how many times the strategic investment fund has been mentioned or referenced by Sinn Féin, but it is unsustainable, insincere and not achievable because it has been spent multiple times and again here by Deputy Ellis. I caution against overtly politicising matters such as homelessness, as the problems being experienced in Dublin, which need to be dealt with, are the same as those being experienced in Belfast where Sinn Féin has Executive power. The Northern Ireland homelessness problem has been identified as being one of the worst in the UK. Condemning the problem in Dublin will merely serve to prove that Sinn Féin is bereft of a political soul, prepared to promise money it does not have and we do not have to secure votes. In fairness, this is not the way to do business.

Increasing public and private housing supply is a recognised priority and the Government's Construction 2020 strategy, published on 14 May 2014, is a blueprint for a properly functioning and sustainable construction sector. I and the Minister of State, Deputy Coffey, are absolutely determined to deliver it. Through its 75 actions, it provides for a strategic approach to returning the construction sector, in a sustainable fashion, towards the provision of housing based on real and measured demand and addresses the full range of relevant issues, including the planning process, access to mortgage finance and the construction workforce.

Funding for housing in 2014 by the Department is more than €647 million, which exceeds 2013 levels. This represents almost 70% of the Department's total budget. Earlier this year my Department announced a return to mainstream local authority housing construction and in particular the announcement of a €68 million construction programme over 2014 and 2015 that will enable local authorities to construct more than 450 houses. In May details of capital investment totalling more than €46 million for a range of housing projects, which will provide 416 units of accommodation for people with special needs, were announced. Of the €46 million, some €19 million has been ring-fenced for the delivery of 187 units to be acquired or constructed in local authority areas across the country specifically to accommodate persons and families who are homeless.

Some €10 million is being provided for the acquisition of 66 units by approved housing bodies to address the homeless problem specifically presented in the Dublin city area. The balance of the €46 million, approximately €16.7 million will fund the delivery of 163 units to accommodate persons with a disability and older persons in various locations around the country.

Some €30 million will fund the special measure to bring more than 1,900 vacant and boarded-up units back into social use. I deal with local authorities all the time and I have made it an absolute priority for local authorities to get these units back into place as quickly as possible. These units should never have been left go for the years they have been boarded up. It is scandalous and the local authorities, particularly in this city, need to get these units open and accessible to people straight away. It is crazy that this has gone on year on year over the past decade or so. I find it criminal to see these units boarded up when I have driven around the city of Dublin over the past ten years or so.

A further €10 million will resolve many of the most difficult unfinished housing estates and result in enhanced quality of life for families. Earlier this year, some €38.4 million was allocated to local authorities for the suite of housing adaption grants for older people and people with a disability. These grants will enable people to continue to live independently and remain at home for longer. In the case of local authority-owned properties, funding is allocated each year in respect of a range of measures to improve the standard and overall quality of their social housing stock. I recently announced the allocation of €23 million in capital funding for this purpose. Of this allocation, some €8 million will be provided to local authorities for adaptations and extensions to social housing to meet the needs of tenants with a disability or to areas of serious overcrowding. Some €15 million will be invested in upgrading the energy efficiency of local authority homes this year. This is part of a three-year jobs stimulus programme that will see the energy efficiency of more than 25,000 of the most poorly insulated local authority homes improved. I am sure everybody in the House welcomes that.

This year, under the national regeneration programme, some €70 million is being provided to support regeneration programmes in Ballymun, Dublin city, Limerick, Cork, Tralee, Sligo and Dundalk. This ambitious programme of regeneration projects addresses the causes of disadvantage in these communities through a holistic programme of physical, social and economic regeneration. In all, more than 6,000 social housing units will be provided for in 2014 through leasing and existing capital programmes.

This will include 275 new units for people with special housing needs; a further 150 new units to be provided specifically for people with disabilities leaving institutional care through leasing arrangements, etc.; an additional 200 new homes under social housing investment programmes; an additional 1,900 new units from the construction stimulus package for void properties; more than 350 new transfers under the mortgage-to-rent scheme; approximately 850 new units through leasing arrangements; and a further 2,500 new transfers under the RA scheme. Those are just this year's actions. The housing matter is about much more than money however, it is about output and putting roofs over people's heads. The main engine behind actions on this will be the Government's soon to be published social housing strategy that is being formulated and nearly concluded.

The Government is committed to addressing the range of challenges it faces in the area of social housing. I am absolutely determined to do that. Construction 2020 provides for the development of a social housing strategy. The strategy will propose a range of approaches and many reforms that are innovative and challenging, and will provide a basis for an improved and sustainable approach to the provision of social housing supports in Ireland. It is being developed by my Department with input from key personnel in the Housing Agency and the National Economic and Social Council, following a public consultation process, which has significantly informed the drafting process. My intention is that the strategy will contain clear measurable actions that are to be taken to increase the supply of social housing.

It is clear that present and future solutions must be found to harness new funding streams. That is critical. It is not easy but it has to be done. While the local authorities will continue to have the lead role in addressing social housing need in their capacity as statutory housing authorities, the growing role of the not-for-profit sector, as represented by the approved housing bodies and other potential investors will also be further developed. Through this strategy, the Government intends developing a new vision of public housing provision that provides both for those households that cannot afford to house themselves and those who struggle to afford housing in the private market. I believe that working together we can ensure that people have the homes they and their families need, now and for the generations to come.

Deputy O'Brien made a very important point. The housing requirements of the past as regard the demographic profiles, and the housing requirements of now and the future are very different. There is no longer the same requirement for three-bedroom houses given the percentage of people who are single and need housing, and also single with one, two or three children. It is a completely different profile that we always need to monitor.

The strategy will set out a series of actions to compensate for the short to medium-term shortage of supply and I look forward to working with my colleagues in government in achieving the significant Exchequer investment needed. Given supply issues in some areas, reliance on the private rental sector to meet housing need is not sustainable and the Government accepts that the delivery of significant new build is required.

Increasing the public housing stock will have the additional benefit of alleviating pressure on the private market in terms of rents and purchase prices. The strategy will be finalised over the coming weeks with further consultation as required, taking cognisance in particular of the Estimates process. It is proposed that following approval by Government, the final strategy, including a complete action plan and governance arrangements, will be published thereafter.

I now wish to address the criticisms of the rental accommodation scheme made earlier. The RA scheme, RAS, remains one of the principal mechanisms available to local authorities to provide suitable quality accommodation for those in need of housing. Up to the end of June 2014, close to 49,800 households had been transferred by local authorities from rent supplement and housed directly under RAS and other social housing options. RAS has been, and continues to be, a successful programme which has delivered quality housing to a large number of households. However, there are issues.

If the dwelling that the household is living in becomes unavailable through no fault of their own, local authorities, with the co-operation of the tenants, do and will make every effort to source alternative accommodation as quickly as possible. In seeking replacement accommodation a local authority will attempt to source a suitable alternative within or close to the area in which the tenant is residing. However, as we all know, that may not always be possible. Therefore, in all cases, not just where a tenancy is under threat, there is no bar on RAS households from sourcing alternative accommodation themselves, if they so desire.

Mortgage to rent targets the most acute arrears cases where a situation is unsustainable and where there is little or no prospect of a significant change in circumstances in the foreseeable future. There are chronic arrears cases that have been agreed by both the lender and borrower to be unsustainable. Many of these households are desperately seeking solutions, and seeking certainty for themselves. I presume every Member in this House has met such people. In that context under the mortgage-to-rent scheme families remain in their home and pay a rent which

is based on their household income. A household with mortgage arrears goes from being a homeowner to becoming a social housing tenant.

To be eligible for the mortgage-to-rent scheme a household must also be eligible for social housing support. Taking on board recent criticism of the length of time it takes for mortgage-to-rent transactions to be completed, my Department directed the Housing Agency to undertake a review of operation of the scheme to devise a more streamlined approach that could be expected to accelerate the movement of cases through the system, which is an absolute priority. I am confident the changes made on foot of that review will speed up the process and ensure that those availing of this option can have their situation resolved in a timely and satisfactory manner. In a similar vein, I intend to meet senior officials in the banking sector to remove blockages to people accessing the scheme and I will work with some of the debtor-advocate groups that are campaigning for people in severe debt distress. I expect change as a result of all this work, particularly with the aforementioned advocate groups, working with the banking institutions and with the Housing Agency. The Department also introduced in February 2014 on a national basis a mortgage-to-rent scheme for local authority households similar to that in place for private mortgages.

My Department continues to work closely and successfully with the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, the Housing Agency, local authorities and approved housing bodies in the delivery of social housing. NAMA has worked well with my Department and other key stakeholders as partners in the delivery of social housing.

Deputy Barry Cowen: No, it has not.

Deputy Alan Kelly: More than 700 social housing units have been delivered to date thanks to this collaboration, and in excess of 1,000 units will have been delivered by the end of this year. I also wish to state that NAMA has made available virtually all of its housing stock to local authorities for social housing. However, not all of it was deemed suitable. Nevertheless, I state confidently that NAMA will become a key engine in social housing delivery as it moves further into the space of construction and development. There will be a substantial social benefit from its housing activities.

The issue of the quality of construction standards is also often raised. Gradually, the Government is coming to grips with dealing with the absolutely dreadful legacies of unfinished estates and poorly built, substandard homes and buildings, with examples being the progress being made under the Priory Hall resolution framework and by the Pyrite Resolution Board, not to mention the resolution of a significant number of unfinished estates, in which very significant progress has been made. In a social housing context, standards are ensured through the application of the building regulations setting out the minimum legally-acceptable standards and the quality housing for sustainable communities policy guidance for local authorities, which ensures that individual homes are designed to be part of a well-planned and well-integrated social environment and thereby become a good place to live. I commit here to overseeing a new era of quality in the construction industry, in which standards are maintained and enforced nationwide and I will be working with the Minister of State, Deputy Coffey, in particular on this issue.

I now turn to the private rented sector, which is an important element of the housing market with the proportion of households in this sector almost doubling in the period between 2006 and 2011. I am conscious of the difficulties caused by rising rents and the problem of sourcing suitable accommodation, especially in Dublin, its surrounding conurbation and other urban centres.

I absolutely appreciate that people are under immense pressure in this regard. As with many of the problems being experienced in relation to housing, the fundamental reason behind the rise in rents is a lack of supply. Increasing both public and private housing supply is a critical issue for the Government and will be targeted under the Construction 2020 strategy in tandem with its proposed social housing strategy. In addition, the Private Residential Tenancies Board, PRTB, was asked recently to conduct a study to explore options to address the difficulties being experienced in segments of the private rented sector due to rising rents. It is due to report back to me shortly with policy recommendations. I understand my officials have already received details of the report. It is the first of two studies on the future of the private rented sector and focuses on options to address the recent escalation in rents, particularly in the Dublin area and surrounding conurbation. I understand it explores a range of issues in regard to rent stability ranging from an examination of rent regulation regimes to the tax treatment of the private rented sector and the role of rent supplement. I welcome it and look forward to reading it. It will require careful consideration, together with colleagues in government, before deciding on the best options to address the current difficulties in the market. However, it will be taken seriously.

I remind Members that the Government's overriding objective is to achieve stability and sustainability in the market for the benefit of tenants and society as a whole. While not wishing to understate the extent of the problems being experienced by certain segments of the private rented sector, on average, rents in Dublin are still 12.7% lower than they were at their peak in the fourth quarter of 2007, while rents nationally are almost 19% lower than their peak in 2007. I acknowledge this does not take away from the substantial problem that must be addressed. Nevertheless, there is no question but that low-income tenants are experiencing difficulties in sourcing affordable rental accommodation and I am committed to looking at all possible solutions that can assist the most vulnerable. However, when considering this report and any proposed measures to assist low-income tenants in meeting their housing costs, including any system of rent regulation, it is crucial that these measures are carefully thought out and targeted to meet the needs of low-income tenants. While I have not seen the report as yet, I am in favour of promoting more long-term tenancy agreements as a way of introducing stability to the market. This type of certainty would be beneficial for both landlords and tenants, which coupled with a deposit protection scheme that I absolutely guarantee will be advanced shortly, will help bring some stability to those reliant on the private rental market. It has been suggested that linking rents to the consumer price index may be the solution to the current problem. However, in looking back at rents over the past decade, had such a system been in place, rents would have been higher in every year than were the prevailing market rents. Rent controls such as those suggested by some Members may hold out the promise of affordable and stable rents but it is essential that the Government explores all the options available to it to address the current difficulties and to ensure its policy decisions are informed decisively. The Government must also ensure that anything it does is constitutionally certain.

There rightly has been a major public focus on issues of homelessness in recent times. Indeed, there is significant pressure on homelessness services at present. Recent figures show there are 127 people sleeping rough in the Dublin region, while there are approximately 150 families residing in hotel accommodation in Dublin. In February 2013, the Government's homelessness policy statement was published, in which the Government's aim to end long-term homelessness by the end of 2016 was outlined. The statement emphasises a housing-led approach that is about accessing permanent housing as the primary response to all forms of homelessness. As this is a matter of the highest priority for the Government, the decision was taken to ring-fence funding for homeless services by the Government in budgets 2013 and 2014 in support

of the discharge by local authorities of their statutory role in the provision of accommodation for homeless persons. The availability and supply of secure, affordable and adequate housing is essential in ensuring sustainable tenancies and ending long-term homelessness. In the past two years in Dublin, approximately 1,500 people have moved from homeless services to independent living, with necessary supports. This is to be welcomed but must be built upon. The implementation plan for the State's response to homelessness was published in May 2014 and is a practically-focused delivery plan that contains 80 actions which are direct, immediate and solutions-based and which contribute to the delivery of a ring-fenced supply of 2,700 units of accommodation by the end of 2016. This plan was developed by a team of senior officials from my Department, the Department of Social Protection, housing authorities and the Health Service Executive. The implementation of this plan requires and will get a whole-of-Government approach to addressing homelessness. Progress in implementing the plan is reported quarterly through the Cabinet committee on social policy and a copy of the second quarter progress report is available on my Department's website.

On the question of introducing a constitutional right to housing, the Housing Acts govern social housing in Ireland. The range and extent of measures implemented under the Housing Acts demonstrates the State's long-standing commitment to ensuring that housing needs, especially social housing needs are adequately addressed. The inclusion of a legal right to housing in the Constitution has not been pursued to date on the basis that decisions regarding the allocation of financial resources is a matter for the Government and not the Judiciary. The Government considers that the most appropriate way of addressing the rights issue in respect of housing is to continue the various programmes and fiscal incentives currently in place, to secure the necessary level of funding to support them, to review their operation on an ongoing basis to ensure that they are meeting their objectives and to put in place new programmes or measures as required.

As the Government's housing policy statement of 2011 puts it quite succinctly, the Government's vision for the future of the housing sector in Ireland is based on:

choice, fairness, equity across tenures and on delivering quality outcomes for the resources invested. The overall strategic objective will be to enable all households access good quality housing appropriate to household circumstances and in their particular community of choice.

I do not think anyone in this House would disagree with these principles, which I intend to turn into reality.

I have endeavoured, through my amendment to the motion, to reassure Deputies of the absolute priority this Government attaches to the issues of housing provision and homelessness and remind them of the range of actions we are taking, and will take into the future, to assist the most vulnerable members of our society. I assure colleagues of my fixed intention, together with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Coffey, to address these issues in a timely fashion. We have a plan set out for the coming years to address what is a priority issue for everybody in this House.

Deputy Michelle Mulherin: I begin by acknowledging the seriousness with which the Minister and the Government are dealing with this issue and the multifaceted approach that is being taken. The Minister has set out the range of measures to be taken, some of which have already been implemented. However, problems remain. In the time available to me, I will focus

on a particular aspect of housing, namely, the role played by the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, in the sector.

NAMA is one of the largest property companies in the world and has a major bearing on the recovery of the property market and construction sector in this country via the manner in which it does its business. The Minister indicated that housing units have been identified by the agency and are in the process of being transferred to local authorities to form part of their social housing stock. I welcome that as part of alleviating the shortage of housing. However, as NAMA embarks upon its major plan to construct residential and commercial units, we must have clarification as to what empirical evaluation of market demand has been conducted. It is not so long ago that all the talk was of an oversupply of houses, with suggestions that properties at various locations would have to be torn down. That seems incredible now. We must be sure we are building the right properties in the right areas at the right time.

Earlier today, representatives of the not-for-profit think tank, Property Industry Ireland, appeared before the Oireachtas Committee on the Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht to discuss issues pertaining to supply and demand in both the residential and commercial property markets. While the witnesses welcomed the Government strategy set out in Construction 2020, they pointed out that there is often a gap in the property market data available to Government and other stakeholders which can result in issues in the market being pursued in a vacuum. For example, the Central Statistics Office will publish house price data tomorrow which will refer only to properties purchased using a mortgage. Information on cash transactions, which now account for 50% of all house purchases, will not be included. We have had no further data from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government since it released information last February on the number of commencement notices for new developments received by local authorities. These examples illustrate the gaps in information, which is something the Minister might address in due course.

We need to know what strategies NAMA intends to pursue to ensure a steady stream of supply of new housing units to the market on a yearly basis, which shovel-ready landbanks for development belonging to developers it has under its control, and to what extent such developers are either being assisted or impeded in developing those sites. Has NAMA been restricting supply and, if so, how has this contributed to the property bubble now arising in Dublin and other parts of the country? Of course, if right were right and we were heading back to what could be classed as normal in the construction industry, the business of developing and finance would be a matter between banks and builders. The banks, however, have no money to lend to builders and, instead of that issue being sorted out, NAMA is embarking upon development with no track record in this regard.

Of particular concern in all of this is NAMA's treatment of developers, the very people who have the expertise and experience to deliver the massive housing projects we desperately need to address our housing and homelessness crisis. What is happening, however, is that NAMA is bringing many of these developers to their knees. In its strategic review, the agency admits that at this stage, it is now having to deal with debtor fatigue, that is, cases where developers are so fed up and worn out from dealing with the State body that they are opting for insolvency or bankruptcy. It says a great deal about NAMA that many of these developers are running into the arms of vulture funds and taking their chances with the future of their businesses and livelihoods. It must be pretty terrible for these developers in NAMA.

Mr. Justice Brian Cregan's High Court judgment in the Flynn case was a damning indict-

ment of NAMA. He ruled that the State agency had acted unfairly and unlawfully in calling in loans of €22 million from property developer John Flynn and his family. This case raises serious issues of concern as to how NAMA conducts its business. Mr. Flynn has been reported as likening the workings of the agency to goings on in North Korea. In other words, developers under NAMA had better keep their mouths shut. I have raised on several occasions the need for an Oireachtas oversight committee to bring more transparency to the way in which NAMA does its business. In fact, such was envisaged when the legislation establishing the agency was introduced by the then Minister for Finance, the late Brian Lenihan. I urge that this oversight committee be put in place. In the interim, as I have suggested on several occasions, including in the wake of the Flynn judgment, these developers should be brought before the Oireachtas Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform to give their side of the story. We cannot afford not to listen to what they have to say and learn from it as we seek to avoid another housing bubble and ensure every citizen of this country has a home.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: I propose to share time with Deputy Barry Cowen.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy): That is agreed.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: I support the motion before the House. My party has been very strong on the importance of developing a strong social and private housing sector. Our spokesperson, Deputy Cowen, launched a policy document earlier this year which stated clearly that every citizen has a right to a home and there must be an all-out effort to tackle the spiralling waiting lists in social housing and the supply shortage in the private sector. We are falling way behind on the estimated 25,000 units needed per annum. We hope the Government will, as the Minister has undertaken to do, implement a new home building programme through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, transfer National Asset Management Agency units into social housing, develop housing associations and encourage sustainable levels of construction.

There is a serious issue of homelessness in this country, which I raised by way of a Topical Issue matter only last week. I emphasised during that debate that this problem is not unique to Dublin, although it is very serious there, and there are a range of proposals from different sources to tackle it. COPE Galway, for instance, has proposed an allocation of €500 million for the social housing building programme, with a portion of that ring-fenced to tackle homelessness, particularly in the context of the 2016 Government target to eliminate long-term homelessness and the need to help people who are sleeping rough. I also referred to the proposal from Dublin City Council that prefabricated buildings be installed on derelict or vacant sites to house homeless families. There has been significant opposition to that proposal, largely because most people would favour permanent housing for families. The Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton, has spoken about refurbishing housing, particularly vacant units in Dublin. I hope the Government will give serious consideration to these options. The chief executive officer of ALONE has indicated that 25% of calls to that organisation related to the housing needs of older people. It is a measure of the seriousness of the problem that more 4,700 older people in this country are in need of housing.

We now have a situation where 156 families, including 341 children, are living in Dublin hotels. Brother Kevin Crowley, founder of the Capuchin Day Centre for Homeless People, has warned of the urgent need for emergency accommodation in the city. He pointed to the cessation of the night bus service, the provision for which included ring-fenced accommodation. I hope the very vulnerable people to whom Brother Kevin referred will not be pushed to the bottom when it comes to dealing with the housing crisis. Every effort must be made to identify

housing solutions that could meet their needs.

Several speakers referred to NAMA's role in addressing the housing shortage. It would be an important step in the right direction if every local authority were to establish a dedicated NAMA transfer unit. There has certainly been a shortfall in terms of what was expected from NAMA in this regard. It would be most welcome if more of its properties could be made available. A proposal by the leader of the Green Party, Eamon Ryan, regarding the use of timber-framed housing would offer a speedy way of providing comfortable and warm accommodation in a sustainable way.

It is a cause for serious concern that the chief executive of the Merchant's Quay Project observed recently that homelessness in our society was becoming acceptable.

NAMA is one of the largest property companies in the world and has a major bearing on the recovery of the property market and construction sector by the manner in which it does its business. I understand the agency is working with local authorities, and the Minister referred to housing units that are in the process of being transferred to local authority. It is frightening and worrying if we are going to throw our hands in the air and not tackle the situation. COPE Galway is saying that about 112 families, including 246 children, are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. In Galway city, where people are waiting ten to 12 years for houses, we must act quickly to ensure their concerns are dealt with.

The Department of Social Protection has a policy of setting maximum rent levels under the rent supplement scheme. It is not based on a review of average rent levels but rather on a view that households on rent supplement should be restricted to the lower end of the rental market. The current review plans to push such households deeper into the bottom end of the market. There is no good reason it should be related to the proportion of the total rental market occupied by households on rent supplement and I hope that will be looked at. Over the past six years, we have attempted to drive down the cost of rent supplement but Government policy has undermined the rent supplement system, so it is no longer reliably providing households with the capacity to sustain their homes.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I commend my colleagues in Sinn Féin for putting forward this motion and assure them of my party's support for its content. I do so out of respect for the representations it is receiving, no more than ourselves, in this area and I do so also not seeking to question the good faith of that motion. I refer to a point made by some of the Sinn Féin Deputies last week when I brought a Bill forward in Private Members' business. They could not help themselves but to question the bona fides of my party in bringing forward that Bill. It was unfortunate that they should have done that because we were all elected with the same mandate, namely, to represent those who give us the privilege to do so. Some of us are given the added responsibility on behalf of our parties to speak on and hold the Government to account in various areas.

I notice the Minister, Deputy Kelly, has left the House. He had a lot to say about those of us who were not here when he got up to speak initially. Thankfully, his speech has been provided to us so we can scrutinise it in our own way. What I and others have to say is a matter of public record. I noted that the Minister could not begin to comment in this debate without referring to his belief, and that of many of his colleagues, that the fault for the predicament which we are in lies with previous Governments, in particular Fianna Fáil-led ones, three and a half years after this Government was elected to office and having given commitments to address this issue

among many others. However, that sort of rhetoric and campaigning fell on deaf ears last May and if the Minister continues in that vein, I have no doubt the Labour Party will face similar decimation, and rightly so if that is the sort of politics we can look forward to.

Construction 2020, to which the Minister alluded, rightly recognises one thing, namely, that supply is the answer to the existing crisis. It refers to the potential for 75 different actions to address it. I do not think there is any great need to get into the depth of those actions. A colleague of mine spoke on Leaders' Questions earlier today and put a solution of one action to the Minister for Finance and that was that €1 billion from the National Pensions Reserve Fund be put into a strategic fund and be used to launch a new round of home building across the country. The Government talks about affordability to provide that sort of funding but it was not too shy to raid the National Pensions Reserve Fund when it came to the setting up of Irish Water and to the provision in the State of the new super-quango which is Irish Water. Some €500 million was taken initially for that purpose. Up to €180 million was taken for its start-up cost. We were promised last year that the funds from the local property tax would be available to those who paid it in the areas in which they reside by virtue of the services provided by local authorities but that too was raided and people were sold a pup again. Some €500 million was taken from that source. Those were two avenues of funding which could have been used to address this issue.

Despite the progress being made by virtue of the sort of policies being pursued and that this Government voted against on numerous occasions prior to taking office, it now wants to take the credit for the marvellous figures which exist on a macro basis, based on the balance sheet and so forth. We recognise and acknowledge that those indicators are positive and that without them, we could not look forward to the sort of recovery we would all like to see happen and wish people to become part of because they are not part of it now. Without those indicators, they would have no hope and we acknowledge that. However, it means nothing when one thinks of this crisis.

I started by acknowledging the representations members of the Sinn Féin party are receiving, no more than myself and members of Government parties. It is the predominant representation a Deputy will hear at his or her clinic. The provision of housing is at crisis levels and the figures prove it as does the inaction by Government over the past three and a half years. The mantra was always that the funding model was not available in these straitened times and there was no means by which the Government could generate the sort of revenue required to fund a building programme to address this issue.

Last year we built only 8,000 private and public homes but 25,000 are needed. The crisis is deepening but all the Government can say is that it can do nothing because Fianna Fáil led us down this road and that it will take another term of office to address the issue. The only thing that jumped out of the Minister's speech, apart from repeating much of what was said in this House before by previous Ministers, was that his absolute priority is to produce a plan. He is three and a half years in government and he thinks that because he is in the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government three months, he has the authority to spend the next 18 months producing a plan on which he thinks he will be re-elected. Give me a break is the answer to that.

My colleague, Deputy Kitt, referred to some policy indicators we gave prior to the local elections and which I have repeated on many occasions during Question Time with the previous Ministers, Phil Hogan, and the then Minister of State with responsibility for housing,

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan. I will not waste time or paper outlining 75 actions but will outline four or five which I have done before but which have fallen on deaf ears. I will repeat them in the hope somebody might take notice. The Minister, Deputy Kelly, wherever he is, whether sitting having a cup of tea or in his office, slagged me off for not being here at the start of his speech but saw fit to leave the House himself. However, he can check the record as to our proposals. His colleagues should have given them to him many months ago. He should set up a fund to launch a new round of home building across the country. He should develop voluntary housing associations to a scale where they can access credit and start to build. He can use the tenant purchase schemes to fund future investment and repair works by local authorities. He should also allow families on waiting lists to be given the opportunity to move into accommodation which, according to the authorities, is not fit for occupation but which they and their extended families can make fit for purpose, and let the rent reflect that thereafter.

I have heard the talk about NAMA month after month since this Government took office and of getting 2,000 units from NAMA each year. We should have got 7,000 units by now but how many have we? The Minister thinks we should stand up and applaud him for getting 700 units. Where is the social dividend in that?

9 o’clock

Where is the leadership required from the Government to extract the social dividend that the people deserve? I asked for a dedicated team to be established in each local authority to deal specifically with NAMA. That might allow us to see more than the meagre 30 units negotiated at the Church Hill development in Tullamore, which are long overdue. The Minister spoke about the funding being provided for adapting houses for older persons and the disabled. In my county, up to 70 people have made representations to me because they are in dire need of funds to adapt their houses to meet medical or age related needs. The letters they receive from the local authority tell them there is no funding to do this work and that they need not reapply or ask the same questions on the scheme for another three to five years. That is a reflection of this Government’s inaction in housing policy. Unfortunately, many of the people who are being told to wait three to five years will be in the cemetery when the letter of approval arrives.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: Tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil an t-ábhar seo á phlé againn anocht mar tá sé uafásach in 2014 go bhfuil daoine sa tír seo gan teach.

Mr. Y is in position No. 68 on the housing list. Mr. and Mrs. X are in position No. 123. Ms Y, who is in need of two-bedroom accommodation, is in position No. 288 and Mr. Z is in position No. 760, on band three of the housing list. These are the replies to queries from people in need of housing which I am getting daily from Dublin City Council. There is a housing crisis. We know there is insufficient housing stock, that rents in the private sector are spiralling and that, for various reasons, landlords are taking back properties that used to be available for rent. There are also too many voids in Dublin Central. It is unacceptable that so many flats and houses are lying vacant. The costs incurred in boarding them up and in dealing with the anti-social behaviour they attract could go instead into releasing them. If I want to put a new kitchen into my house, decorate a room or build an extension, I can get quotes immediately, and if I have the money I will have a builder who can start the work within a few days and complete it in a timeframe of several weeks. Why can we not invest the same kind of urgency and money in local authorities in order that voids can be renovated and made fit for people to inhabit?

In regard to rent allowance, the rents people were paying were far too high for the accom-

modation they received but instead of putting caps on the rents that landlords could charge, there was a decrease in the rent allowance. Individuals and families who paid rent to private landlords for several years are facing homelessness because the landlords decided to increase the rent. This aspect of the housing situation is not being addressed.

We are told that the economy is moving out of deep recession but the Simon Community, Focus Ireland and Dublin City Council's homeless section report that sections of society are in dire circumstances. There is a commitment to end long-term homelessness by 2016 but I cannot see it being met. In the north inner city, poor housing standards are compounded by illegal dumping and poor waste management and collection.

Rent allowance has to be increased. It is a short-term measure but it would certainly help. Homeless budgets have to be maintained. Brother Kevin in the Capuchin Centre has pointed out that it costs €1.9 million to feed the people who attend its services. He receives €350,000 from Dublin City Council and €100,000 from the HSE. One practical step would be to increase his funding. Fr. Peter McVerry and Brother Kevin were recently given freedom of the city of Dublin. Both individuals are passionate about homelessness but we are only paying lip service to dealing with it if the people are not being supported.

Deputy Joan Collins: I support the motion, which continues the debate we have held over recent months. On 6 May, the Technical Group used Private Members' business to debate the issue of housing and homelessness because we believed the Government was not serious in its approach or in recognising the crisis that people in our constituencies are facing. The coalition Government has belatedly come to accept the seriousness of the crisis in housing. While accepting the crisis in words, its actions, however, fall far short of what is required. Tinkering around the edges of the problem and continuing to rely on private sector landlords and developers to supply people with affordable housing is not a solution.

The new housing assistance payment, which will replace the rental allowance from next year, was generally welcomed. People receiving the new payment will be able to work while continuing to claim the allowance. However, it was pointed out in this debate that it potentially means recipients can be deemed to have had their housing needs addressed. The Minister spoke about transfers but that is only going to cause further problems.

The rental accommodation scheme is a disaster. In Dublin South Central, people cannot find RAS accommodation and others are losing their RAS accommodation as landlords sell their houses or the banks repossess them. They have nowhere to go other than private rented accommodation. They are told they will be first on the list to get RAS accommodation if it becomes available but landlords are not buying into the scheme.

The private rented sector was encouraged by section 23 breaks to increase its share of housing in Dublin from 19% in 2006 to 32% in 2011. Apart from being unable to provide people with decent housing at affordable rents, the reliance on the private sector and market forces brought about a banking collapse which sent the country to the brink of ruin. More than 90,000 households are in need of social housing which does not exist. Approximately 100,000 households are in mortgage arrears and another 100,000 are renting in an uncontrolled private rented sector without security of tenure and threatened by rent increases. In the past day, I have dealt with two young families who were threatened with eviction because the bank has taken over their homes and they are being forced to look outside Dublin for accommodation. This is a serious issue. Young families are being forced to take their children out of schools. I do not

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care what agency is established to provide the money but we know €3 billion is needed to build a minimum of 20,000 houses in the next one to two years if we are to solve the crisis.

Debate adjourned.

Message from Seanad

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy): Seanad Éireann has passed the National Treasury Management Agency (Amendment) Bill 2014, without amendment, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland Bill 2014, without amendment, and the Employment Permits (Amendment) Bill 2014, without amendment.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.10 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 24 September 2014.