



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 24 Meán Fómhair 2014

Wednesday, 24 September 2014

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 09.30 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Garda Misconduct Allegations

1. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will provide an update on the independent review by counsel of allegations concerning the conduct of members of the Garda Síochána; if she will detail their terms of reference and the way counsel will interact with each complainant; the procedures in place to ensure that no conflict of interest arises in the independent review; the number of cases that have been completed to date; the actions that have arisen out of those cases completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35437/14]

Deputy Niall Collins: I ask the Minister for an update on the 220 allegations against certain members of the Garda Síochána, which are being reviewed by counsel. In particular, can the Minister outline the detailed terms of reference and how the panel of counsel will interact with each of the complainants? It is becoming a bone of contention. Can the Minister address some perceived conflicts of interest that have been raised, of which she is aware because we have written to her? What will flow from the job of work of the counsel?

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Deputy is referring to the independent review mechanism, which was established to review allegations of Garda misconduct or perhaps inadequacies in the investigation of certain allegations, which had been made to me as Minister for Justice and Equality, to the Department or to the Taoiseach or other Deputies, including Deputy Niall Collins, with a view to determining to what extent and in what manner further action might be taken in each case. This was one of the actions agreed as a result of the Guerin report. A panel, consisting of two senior counsel and five junior counsel,

was set up and its members were selected on the basis of their experience of the criminal justice system.

The review is under way and is examining 282 cases that have been referred. This is a significant number of cases and somewhat higher than originally estimated but it was important to refer to the panel all of the allegations on hand, with minimal filtering, to ensure every appropriate case got the benefit of an independent review. The review of each allegation consists of an examination of the papers by a counsel from the panel and does not involve interviews or interaction with complainants or any other form of investigation, although counsel may recommend that I seek further information to assist in coming to an appropriate recommendation in any particular case.

The Deputy asked about terms of reference. I have asked counsel to make a recommendation on what action, if any, might be appropriate in each case. In this regard, without in any way prejudging the outcome in any individual case, it is important to be realistic and to acknowledge that in some cases, and perhaps in a majority, a decision may be taken that no further action is recommended. This might be in cases where all court efforts have been exhausted or there has been a full examination by relevant bodies.

The Deputy asked about a conflict of interest and every step has been taken to ensure that nothing arises that creates a conflict of interest and in any way detracts from the integrity of the process. Just as in court, where there may be a potential for a conflict of interest, we are making absolutely sure that there is no conflict of interest.

Deputy Niall Collins: I accept what the Minister says about a conflict of interest. With regard to how the panel will interact with the complainants, some of the complainants felt they would, at a minimum, be interviewed face to face by the relevant barrister reviewing the paperwork and the complaint. That should be incorporated into the terms of reference. As was correctly pointed out, I have referred some cases to the Minister. In some of the cases that I have referred the paperwork is fairly scant. People simply do not have it, but they have a story to tell and they have issues that they need to explore. I have asked some of them to put these down on paper and forward it on. In the interests of completeness and upholding the integrity of what we are trying to achieve, all complainants should, at a minimum, be afforded an opportunity to interact on a face-to-face basis with the counsel reviewing their allegations.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: That was not in the terms of reference. Deputy Collins will appreciate how it would be giving a very wide remit to counsel. Essentially, this is an opportunity to go through the detailed information on cases and we have asked everyone to submit material in writing. In many cases there is a considerable amount of correspondence. If there is nothing in writing I call on Deputy Collins to encourage people to put as much in writing as they can. We have put no limitation on the material that can be submitted and indeed extra material has been submitted in several cases.

There is a wide variety of circumstances and allegations and counsel have a wide variety of options. It is not a question of findings of fact but a recommendation. The work is similar to what the barrister Seán Guerin did in respect of Guerin cases in that he took the cases, examined them and decided that a portion of them warranted further action.

Deputy Niall Collins: Under the terms of reference will the counsel test the allegations being made by the complainants by referring back to An Garda Síochána? Will there be a back

channel from counsel to An Garda Síochána to check the veracity of what has been stated in the complaints?

Will there be an opportunity to amend the terms of reference as the process evolves? Who knows what we will find out or what the senior counsel and junior counsel on the panel of barristers will find as the process unfolds?

The Minister mentioned that the figure has increased from 220 to 282 and we have taken note of that. Two cases were raised previously in the House, the cases of Cynthia Owen and Sarah Bland. Can the Minister indicate whether they have been included among the 282 cases?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: It would not be appropriate for me to put on the floor of the Dáil the particular names of individual cases that have been referred. However, there has been correspondence with every case. There has also been correspondence to Deputy Collins or whichever Deputy raised cases. This has indicated to Deputies and Senators if their cases have been referred to the review mechanism.

Deputy Collins asked if there would be a back channel to the Garda. There will not be. Depending on the review of the case, one of the options that will be open to counsel, for example, will be to refer a matter back to the Garda Commissioner for criminal or disciplinary investigation. It could be recommended to carry out a statutory inquiry. Deputy Collins will be aware that this is linked to my decision in respect of the follow-up to the Guerin inquiry. I am not keen on continually amending a commission of inquiry based on the outcome of this review. I am not reviewing the terms of reference for this mechanism. I will bring together the findings and ask for an overview of the cases that I will make available. I am keen to ensure that, depending on the findings, some of those cases may indeed be referred to a commission.

Direct Provision System

2. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality to set out her plans regarding the current direct provision system in view of concerns that it is archaic, inhumane and not fit-for-purpose; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35740/14]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: There has been a long overdue focus in recent times on the direct provision centres. I welcome much of what the Minister's colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, has said on the matter. We have been raising this issue throughout this Dáil session. The Minister's predecessor, Deputy Shatter, was deeply disappointing in his responses and attitude to this issue. It is refreshing to hear a new message coming from the Department and the Minister of State. I am keen to get more meat on the bone today in respect of what the Department will do.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I appreciate Deputy Mac Lochlainn has an interest in this area. The Reception and Integration Agency, RIA, of my Department is responsible for the accommodation of protection applicants who come to Ireland in accordance with the Government policy of direct provision. The policy has been of long standing and has had various twists and turns in terms of trying to accommodate the people involved. It is associated with the crisis in homelessness that existed ten years ago when the decision was taken to provide these direct provision centres.

It is important to get across to the public the message that direct provision means full board accommodation is given to people in a variety of centres throughout the country. We have 4,330 people staying in 34 asylum centres. Let us put this in some context. The number of asylum seekers this year is running at a 40% high, although, obviously, from a low base in recent years. There has been a 40% increase this year. That is a reflection of a Europe-wide demand in respect of refugees as well as unrest in many countries. It is important to note the pressures that this creates on the State in terms of resources, accommodation and provision for the people who are arriving and who are often in a distressed state. We want to make real improvements, where possible, and we have made several commitments in the Government programme.

I imagine Deputy Mac Lochlainn will agree with me that the main concern of people who are in direct provision is the length of time involved. It is long overdue to have a focus on the single procedure and that is what we are doing. I will have heads of the Bill to Government within two to three weeks and we will progress that legislation in the coming months. It will probably be Easter 2015 by the time we get to implement it. Effectively, this means new arrivals will be dealt with within a year or a year and a half at the maximum. That will make a significant difference. This has been widely welcomed by the NGO community.

We have established the working party to examine what improvements can be made in the immediate future to the system as it exists at the moment.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Of particular concern is the impact on children in these centres over a long period because of the cramped environment and the food. The food is outside of their cultural experience. I listened to some of the excellent journalistic reports on radio about deep-fried foods. This is food we recommend families should not be eating all the time. Yet this is what is being given to them every day. There is a sum of €15 per week. People are trapped in this situation and impoverished for a significant period. The Minister is right to say we need to speed up the process of application dramatically. Moreover, we need to focus in particular on the rights of the children. It has been said to me that this is like the modern equivalent of the Magdalen laundries. Perhaps it is not as extreme but it is another example of the State failing young people in particular in this situation.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: Some 51,000 people have been accommodated in the centres over a period. There are issues that can be further addressed. We want to ensure the system is as humane as possible. Unlike many other countries we do not detain people here. We make this accommodation available while they are going through the legal system and process. Deputy Mac Lochlainn is right in that we want to give the children who are in direct provision the best possible experience they can have in this country. One of the things that happens here - sometimes people forget this - is that every child in direct provision goes to the local primary school or secondary school. It is a credit to past Governments in this regard. We have a system that ensures children are connected to the local community and get the benefit of our education system.

Deputy Mac Lochlainn referred to cramped conditions. There are a small number of self-catering units. I would like to see more and I would like to see families having greater autonomy in so far as they can within the direct provision system. However, Deputy Mac Lochlainn is aware that there is a resource issue in terms of provision and it is also a question of changing the type of accommodation. The working group will examine what changes can be made to improve the situation of families. Furthermore, there are strong child protection policies in place as well.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The other issue of concern I wish to raise in this area is that of accountability. When we are providing a public service there is freedom of information and accountability to the Ombudsman. However, in the case of the private businesses that provide these services on behalf of the State, these do not apply. Therefore, we cannot look at how the money is spent or the type of food or accommodation provided. They are not truly held to account, even though taxpayers' money is paying for this. That is the first issue.

The second issue is the reports of women in these centres turning to prostitution. I have seen the Minister's concerned remarks about that, but it is the inevitable outworking of a long-term situation when people find themselves trapped. I urge the Minister to move speedily on this. We lost three years with the Minister's predecessor who refused to accept that this is an issue. I welcome the language used by the Minister and her colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, but it is time to move quickly. Three years have been lost due to the appalling approach of the Minister's predecessor. The change must happen quickly.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I caution against unrealistic expectations. As various people have said recently, this is a Europe-wide problem in terms of the demands in Europe, particularly in southern Europe, and the number of refugees as a result of unrest internationally. It is a complex issue that is placing huge demands on countries throughout Europe. I have made it clear that we will do whatever we can to improve conditions and to ensure that human rights are protected. My predecessor did excellent work on citizenship, work that had not been done previously in this country.

I do not accept it is inevitable that women in direct provision must resort to prostitution. I have asked for reports from the Garda on any harassment that might be taking place. If there is information available to show that women are being solicited or put under pressure, that must be examined and managers in local centres must be highly sensitive to it. Certainly, I do not see it as inevitable.

Magdalen Laundries

3. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the way she will address the issues and problems which have arisen in the context of determining the length of stay for the individuals in the Magdalen laundries. [35439/14]

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: My question relates to the Magdalen laundries and the issue of determining the length of stay and the difficulties arising with that.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: This relates to the scheme that has been put in place by the Government for women who were in the Magdalen laundries. Decisions have been made on 80% of the applications so far. A total of 770 applications have been received and 442 applicants have received their lump sum payments to date, at a cost of €16 million. The sum allocated for the scheme is €34 million. The majority of the applications have been processed to the satisfaction of applicants and there has been no systemic issue or problem particular to determining the length of stay. That is not to say that the issue is straightforward in every case. However, less than 4% of applicants have disputed the assessment to date, so such cases are relatively rare.

Mr. Justice Quirke recommended that a fair and robust eligibility process be put in place.

Where there are records available from the relevant religious congregations and the applicant has no issue with them, the process has been very straightforward. Where there is an incomplete or no record or where the applicants disagree with the records, we check out what the applicant says in so far as we can and try to come to a satisfactory conclusion.

We have also advised the applicants to get legal advice. In the vast majority of cases, people have received legal advice before they signed the agreement. A sum of €550, plus VAT, has been made available to the women towards the cost of obtaining legal advice. The vast majority of claimants are being dealt with, so I assume the Deputy is commenting on those cases where there are particular difficulties. There is also an appeals mechanism to the Ombudsman and to a senior official in the first instance.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: I acknowledge the progress that has been made since the exchange the Minister and I had in July. At that stage, 357 claimants had received compensation and the figure is now 442. There are outstanding issues and one of them is the need for reputable independent advocates for women who are in nursing homes or other institutions. There is also the issue of the end date. Mr. Justice Quirke recommended that there should not be an end date. As we know, some people missed the residential institutions redress scheme for various reasons.

In addition, a number of women are finding it difficult to prove length of stay. The McAleese report showed that the date of exit was not available for 58% of admissions to the laundries. The burden of proof appears to be on the women, many of whom are in ill health and of advancing years. It is not the fault of the women that the records are incomplete. Justice for Magdalenes raised the dangers of exclusive reliance on the religious orders’ records and Mr. Justice Quirke was told that the Department had six different ways of establishing length of stay. Will the Minister verify that all of those avenues are being explored? Will the Department accept sworn affidavits from the ladies or from other women who were in the laundries at the same time and would make a sworn affidavit?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: In the first instance, the processing of all applications starts on the premise that the testimony of the applicant is correct. That is the basic approach. We then try to verify it. I accept the point that it is not the women’s fault if the records are incomplete. A variety of other mechanisms are being used. If the applicant disagrees with the officials, a number of inquiries are made. The Department of Social Protection, for example, might be able to indicate various social insurance records from a particular institution, and the Department of Education and Skills has schools records. There are also electoral registers. A variety of other documents are examined to make a determination.

I will consider the matter of a sworn affidavit and whether there is a possibility of using that in some of the disputed cases. I will revert to the Deputy on that.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: I stress the urgency of this because many of the ladies are of advancing years and some of them are in extreme ill health. This week, I had the privilege of meeting one of the ladies who lives outside the State. It was most disturbing to listen to her story of being in one of the laundries. I have no doubt that it contributed to the ill health she suffers now. As she said, she was “dumped” in a laundry at 14 years of age.

With regard to health care, I am aware the Government agreed that the Minister’s Department would co-ordinate legislation with the Department of Health and that her officials are

working with its officials. What is the position on that? There is also the issue of health care for women living outside the State. It would be easier, perhaps, to deal with women living in England, but there are women living in other countries such as the United States and Australia. What input has the Minister's Department had into that issue?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: We have been having detailed discussions with the Department of Health on finalising the legislation, particularly the issue of access to health services for women who are living in the United States, for example. We will have a mechanism to deal with that. It is likely to be through buying an insurance premium for the women, but the final details are being worked out with the Department of Health. The legislation is almost complete. I am awaiting some final decisions from the Department of Health and I expect to have those shortly. The legislation should be introduced in the Dáil within a matter of weeks.

Direct Provision Data

4. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her position with regard to direct provision; if she will provide in tabular form the number of persons in direct provision per direct provision centre; the length of time those persons have been in direct provision; her plans to reform this area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35438/14]

Deputy Niall Collins: Ireland would not be categorised as a target destination for asylum seekers, and that is possibly a by-product of the direct provision system in this country. Genuine issues have been raised about that system, however, particularly humanitarian issues and the issue of catering and providing for children. Will the Minister outline the number of persons in each direct provision centre and her plans for reform in this area?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I can certainly provide the Deputy with the background information, if he has not received it already. I have the numbers but time does not permit giving the details for each place. I can give the Deputy an idea of the scale of the numbers of people living in different centres. It ranges from 31 in some centres to 81 and hundreds in others. The maximum number is 245 in Kinsale. I do not know if the Deputy has visited the Mosney centre but I have. Every effort is made by the managers there to provide very humane conditions. Many of the families are living in their own units. There is general catering and families can do a small amount of self-catering as well.

10 o'clock

The number of centres has been reduced from a high of over 70 to 34. The most recent closure of a centre, that in Donegal town, took place in July 2013. The annual budget for direct provision accommodation at its highest in 2008 was €91 million. This year, the cost will be €51 million. The number of people in direct provision has fallen to 4,300, a reduction of 46% on the figure which obtained at the highest point. As already stated and as conditions change throughout Europe and across the globe, the number is climbing again.

There are two priority areas on which we must work. Deputy Mac Lochlainn referred earlier to food. There is cultural diversity and, in that context, attention is given to people's different dietary needs. I visited the kitchens in Mosney, saw the foods being distributed to families and am aware that a wide choice is available to people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Every effort is made to ensure that this is the case, particularly as it is part of the

conditions relating to the direct provision centres. Of course, there are some who will remain dissatisfied. It is important to note that those kinds of efforts are made.

In the context of public information, the Reception and Integration Agency publishes annual reports and the most recent of these relates to 2013. Protests are taking place throughout the country at present. I appeal to people not to take part in such protests. I am of the view that the way forward is by means of legislation and through the efforts of the working group we are establishing to deal with the issues which Deputies Niall Collins and Mac Lochlainn have raised.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Minister referred to protests. Doras Luimní, an NGO and advocacy body which operates in Limerick, recently organised such a protest. There are two reception centres in Limerick at Mount Trenchard, which is near Foynes in my constituency, and Knockalisheen, which is in the city itself. These centres are very different, mainly because a large number of children are living at the one in Knockalisheen whereas this is not the case at Mount Trenchard. The position with regard to children has given rise to concern, particularly as many of them hold Irish passports. A large number of them were born in this country to parents who entered the jurisdiction in order to seek asylum. This aspect of the issue must be kept centre stage. Why does it take up to three years for 46% of asylum seekers' cases to be processed? Why have 14% of asylum seekers been in the system for more than seven years?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The immediate answer to the Deputy's question is that none of the Governments which preceded this one reformed the application process. The waiting times relating to that process must be reduced and brought into line with those which obtain in every other EU member state. Previous Ministers for Justice and Equality decided to introduce large-scale immigration Bills and did not focus on the single procedure. There is no question that the very large body of work relating to the Bill in question must be done at some point. In the interim, however, we must isolate the single procedure and introduce legislation that will allow us to reduce the number of steps in the process. It is as simple as that.

The cases of 2,000 of those who have been in direct provision for over four years are the subject of judicial reviews. People have a right to use the legal system but, as the Deputy is aware, the number of judicial reviews is endless. A further 800 of those in direct provision are the subject of deportation orders. As is the position in other European countries, it is not possible to return people who are the subject of such orders to countries such as Somalia, Syria and Iraq. A decision was recently handed down in the High Court to the effect that people cannot be detained at their own homes by the Garda and removed for deportation. This has had a significant impact on the number of individuals being deported. This matter must also be dealt with.

Deputy Niall Collins: At the recent protest in Limerick organised by Doras Luimní, residents from the Mount Trenchard and Knockalisheen facilities raised issues in respect of the basic conditions in which they are living. What independent monitoring takes place with regard to the standard of food and accommodation being made available to those within the direct provision system? The Minister indicated that the Reception and Integration Agency has some level of oversight in this regard. Is there an independent body, similar to HIQA, which has overall responsibility in this regard? Has the Minister considered setting up such a body in order that it might assess the standards which obtain and make recommendations in respect of them rather than allowing an agency of her Department to do this? Does she have any plans to establish a body of this nature?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The Deputy referred to a protest organised by Doras Luimní. I hope NGOs are not organising protests outside direct provision centres. I would be very concerned with regard to the impact of this on both the children and families of the protesters.

Deputy Niall Collins: The protest took place in Limerick city centre.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: It is one thing to draw attention to the problem. I again call on people not to protest in a way that makes it impossible to run the centres, to have them cleaned and to have food delivered to them. I am concerned with regard to what is happening. Changes can be made without the need for such protest action.

Accommodation centres are subject to inspection on three occasions each year - twice by staff from the Department of Justice and Equality and once by staff from an independent company, QTS Limited. All completed inspection reports relating to the centres are published on the Reception and Integration Agency's website. I accept that issues arise and there has been much discussion - in recent weeks and even earlier - with individual residents in respect of particular complaints. When I held workshops in conjunction with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Ó Ríordáin, one of the issues which arose related to the possibility of establishing an independent complaints mechanism. This is a matter on which we can and should make progress in order that people will have clarity.

Garda Inspectorate Reports

5. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the progress of the implementation of the Garda Inspectorate report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35741/14]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I am sure that, like myself and everyone else in opposition, the Minister is extremely concerned with regard to the recent revelations to the effect that Sergeant Maurice McCabe has apparently discovered more anomalies in respect of the way in which penalty points are being cancelled. In that context, my question relates to the Garda Inspectorate report published earlier this year. Are the very solid recommendations contained in the report being implemented in full?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The Garda Inspectorate's report is excellent and it clearly charts the way forward for the short, medium and long term. I am aware of the concerns that were raised recently with regard to the operation of the penalty points system in the context of a protected disclosure made to the acting Garda Commissioner. As the Deputy is aware, such disclosures are the subject of examination by the Garda professional standards and internal audit units, as well as a separate inquiry by GSOC. If there has been any infringement of the relevant policies and procedures by a member of An Garda Síochána, it would be a most serious matter. If there are ways in which we can continue to improve the system, these will be identified. It is important, however, that the actual facts be established before any conclusion is reached. That is what is happening at present. Those facts will be placed in the public domain. Work is ongoing on the inquiries at present in order to establish those facts.

The Garda Inspectorate put forward a number of recommendations in its report. A huge change has come about in terms of the way in which penalty points are being dealt with. For example, it is now the case that only three people can make the relevant decision. A new manual

relating to the new methodologies and criteria that apply was developed and made available to all gardaí in June. If issues relating to gardaí and penalty points are raised, these must be dealt with at local level in the first instance before being referred to those responsible for dealing with such matters in Thurles. Particular care is taken to ensure that written records are kept in order that matters might be tracked. There is now a completely different approach being taken and this is in line with what the Garda Inspectorate recommended.

As already stated, we need to wait until all the facts have been established. In regard to the recent information, let us hear the outcome of the investigation before we jump to conclusions. If there is any question of continued abuse, it will be dealt with seriously.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I want to focus on whether a number of recommendations are being implemented - the recommendation that the fixed charge processing centre in Thurles be the sole cancellation authority, that whenever someone petitions to have a fixed charge notice or penalty points cancelled, he or she must provide factual evidence from a third party, that if that evidence is not provided, the petition is automatically refused and that these petitions are made through a proper application process. Are these recommendations being implemented?

A criminal justice working group, made up by the Department of Justice and Equality, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Road Safety Authority, An Garda Síochána and the Courts Service, is supposed to be working on implementing these recommendations on an ongoing basis. Has that group been established and is that work taking place?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The answer to the last question is “Yes”. I attended a meeting of that group with the former Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Varadkar, when he was working on these issues. At that meeting, all of the groups mentioned by the Deputy were represented. The meeting was helpful in terms of monitoring the progress of the recommendations and moving forward with them.

In regard to the question relating to Thurles, the answer is “Yes”. Three people are now responsible for dealing with all fixed charge and penalty points notices. They are working on the basis of what is outlined in the Garda fixed charge processing system manual. This came into operation on 16 June. There is, obviously, a period of transition, but the procedure is in place. In a case where a garda has been driving, written material must be provided regarding a penalty points question by the local station.

In regard to the cancellation of fixed point penalty notices, we must consider the issue of emergency calls. We could have a situation where a garda on duty was called urgently to an area, perhaps to attend a domestic violence incident or attempted burglary, and the case may relate to that. When the assessment relating to the most recent allegations is complete, all of this information will be in the public domain.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Everybody agrees there will be exceptional circumstances where people should have their penalty points terminated. For example, people could be rushing to a hospital with their child. However, there should be documentary evidence or a paper trail that demonstrates that.

The Minister is right to say that we must await the outcome of the current examination by GSOC. However, I am alarmed by the situation. Everybody in the country was focused on the issue of penalty points, but if it emerges that after the investigations of last year by the Commit-

tee of Public Accounts, the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Garda Inspectorate there are still some senior gardaí not applying the system appropriately, they should be demoted by a rank or two. Does the Minister agree with my assessment that after everything that has happened, it is unacceptable for a senior member of An Garda Síochána not to have implemented a system that is fair to all, even before the new directive issued in June?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: There has been significant public comment and discussion on this issue. The public wants to see a fair and just system enacted with no favouritism or inappropriate behaviour from gardaí. I agree with the Deputy on this. Any fair-minded person who is aware of the changes that have taken place will accept the new system is a vast improvement and more robust. If further information on abuse of the system comes in, whether from audits or confidential disclosure, both the acting Garda Commissioner and I will ensure there is a robust examination of the facts and they will be made public. There are new procedures in place and I believe the new system has taken account of the public debate and the need for a fair system that takes account of the kinds of situation described by the Deputy where it would seem reasonable to terminate points, but that will not be open to abuse by anyone.

Other Questions

Prison Discipline

6. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of incidents of violence in Mountjoy Prison; the manner in which the violence is addressed by the prison authorities; and if there are adequate levels of staff to deal with said incidents of violence. [35381/14]

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: This question concerns the number of incidents of violence in Mountjoy Prison, how these are dealt with by prison authorities and whether there are adequate levels of staff to deal with these incidents.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: No level of prison violence or assault is acceptable and every effort is made by prison staff and management to limit the scope for acts of violence. There were 141 incidents of violence in Mountjoy Prison in 2013. In 2012, the number was 111 and in 2011 the number was 177. Of the 141 incidents in 2013, some 107 constituted prisoner assaults on prisoners and 34 were prisoner assaults on staff.

No level of inter-prisoner violence is acceptable. However, no regime can completely eliminate the possibility of violent incidents happening in a prison setting where a large number of dangerous and violent offenders are being held. The figure of 141 in 2013 included a lot of minor incidents and gives an average of 2.7 incidents per week.

On foot of the report of the Inspector of Prisons and Places of Detention, the Prison Service has closed the separation unit, where some of the acts of violence took place. This process has been a demanding one for the prison authorities, because they have had to find places to hold difficult prisoners who present with complex issues. Independent inspections of our prisons have been very helpful and insightful and chart a way forward. Inspector Reilly has commented favourably on the improvements in Mountjoy Prison, the refurbishment of the main building,

the structured activity and adequate out of cell time. The refurbishment is due to be finished shortly. We have seen improvements in the basic standards and this impacts on and helps to reduce levels of violence.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: I visited Mountjoy Prison when under the management of the previous governor. The number of incidents of violence is alarming, particularly recent assaults on prison staff, including a prison nurse. The number of prisoner assaults on other prisoners is particularly alarming and we are aware of a significant number of deaths of prisoners in custody.

I ask the Minister to look at the reasons behind this and the situations where this happens. I believe one cause can be overcrowding. I acknowledge that the Minister moved quickly in regard to closure of the separation unit. We have 4,003 prisoners in this country, but fewer than 50% of them are in single cells and over 300 prisoners still have to slop out daily. I suggest this is a difficult situation for prisoners. We also have prisoners with known histories of violence. Is adequate attention being given to where these prisoners are being placed? Other prisoners are particularly vulnerable to violent attack, for example, those with mental health issues and addicts.

While we can have procedures and policies in place, staff training must be adequate. Is there adequate and continuous training for staff to help deal with incidents of violence?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: Huge efforts are being made to ensure our prisons conform to the highest national and international standards in terms of physical accommodation and the regimes offered to prisoners in care. Many prisons have needed refurbishment and a capital programme is under way.

In regard to the work done with prisoners and efforts to deal with violence in prisons, this is a challenging task. I was in Wheatfield Prison on Saturday at the penal reform conference and was very impressed by the work being done there by the Irish Red Cross with prisoners on eliminating violence in prisons. That is just one example of the initiatives that are under way in the prisons. Clearly, the role of prison officers is crucial. There have been a number of agreements, under the Haddington Road agreement, for example, in which the Irish Prison Service undertook to engage in a joint examination of all the tasks within the prison system in conjunction with the Prison Officers Association. It examines all the issues, including the organisational, structural and operational arrangements, so prisons such as Mountjoy can operate in the most effective and efficient manner.

The point the Deputy made on slopping out will be dealt with within a very short period because of the refurbishment and changes that have been made in Mountjoy. The changes are very significant.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: There is a bigger picture concerning prisons. I attended the launch of a book containing a series of essays produced in conjunction with the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. It raised some interesting and burning issues in regard to prisons generally and the use of prison sentences. My constituency provides so many of the inmates in Mountjoy Prison. It seems 60% of sentences are for six months or less, and those who receive such sentences are poor and often homeless. Prisoners in Ireland are 25 times more likely to come from and return to seriously deprived areas. Over 70% of prisoners are unemployed on acquittal. Homelessness is a major issue for prisoners on release. I accept that the prison au-

thorities and NGOs are working with prisoners but I believe there is a need for a serious debate on the use of prison and the facts that there is a revolving door and prison is a right of passage or way of life for certain prisoners, as opposed to serving as any kind of deterrent.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I agree that there is a need for a debate. Perhaps we could start it here by discussing the recently published report on the penal policy review, which took over two years to produce and which I put into the public arena last week. There are 43 recommendations in the review document and I would like further discussion on them. My position is that serious and serial offenders should be in prison. We do not row back for one moment from that but we do need to debate re-offending. International evidence suggests that if we focus on reducing re-offending, we will keep the country safer and there will be fewer people in prison. This has to be a serious focus if we are not to have people simply coming out of prison through a revolving door, which was the case in the past. There should be a structured approach to prisoners, including prisoners on temporary release, for example. Certainly, prison is to deal with serious and serial offenders.

Many of the people the Deputy speaks about from her constituency are in prison because of fines. The recent legislation will ensure that this will now be dealt with in a different way.

Prisoner Rehabilitation Programmes

7. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the extent to which prisoners continue to have access to ongoing education and rehabilitative training; the percentage of first-time offenders who are referred for such training in the first year of their sentences; the average number who do not have such access on an annual basis; the extent to which adequate procedures are in place to ensure that procedures within the Prison Service are geared to discourage repeat offending; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35375/14]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: As a former inmate, I suppose, of Mountjoy, I could elaborate somewhat further on the conditions inside, but this question relates to the ongoing need to ensure the availability of rehabilitative training for first-time prisoners, in particular. I do not include those convicted for murder. It is important that there be a continuing programme that gives access to training to first-time offenders, in the first instance, rather than putting them on a long-term waiting list.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I know the Deputy has an interest in this area and he has been tracking it in a variety of ways through parliamentary questions in recent times. He is familiar with the fact that there is a wide range of rehabilitative programmes, including educational and vocational training programmes, available in prisons.

The records I have currently do not allow us to differentiate between first-time offenders and repeat offenders. The figures in the latest records available, which are right up to date, show that an overall total of 1,490 offenders participated in education activities at the time the figures were compiled. This represented 37% of the prisoner population at the time. An average of 1,052 prisoners engaged in vocational training activities each day in June, and this represents 27% of the average prison population in that month. A prisoner may participate in more than one activity.

The development of prisoner programmes forms a central part of the Irish Prison Service's

three-year strategic plan for the period 2012 to 2015. There is a clear commitment in the strategy to enhance sentence planning. It is important that we have much more sentence planning than heretofore. This includes the delivery of the services. When I launched the report of the Parole Board of Ireland the week before last, one of the points the chair and members of the board made to me was that if one wants to engage prisoners in rehabilitation within the prison setting and involve them in training and vocational courses, one needs to have discussions with them. They need to be aware of the courses and encouraged to participate in them. This would help reduce the level of violence. It would also mean that, with the approach we are taking to remission, involvement in the programmes would be helpful.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The guiding principles that underpin the prisons' work and training service are to make available work, work training and other purposeful activities to all those in custody. Training activities are chosen to give as much variety as possible and to give opportunities for those in prison to acquire practical skills which will help them secure employment on release.

One hundred and ten work training officers have recently been appointed and assigned to areas such as catering, laundry, industrial cleaning, industrial skills and gym. This brings the total number of work training officers in place to 308.5. In addition, there are also six full-time industrial managers with four acting industrial managers in the prison estate. This will allow the Prison Service to build on the opportunities available to prisoners in the work and training area for the years ahead.

The Deputy will be aware of the Government's commitment to capital investment in the prison estate, and that, despite the current economic difficulties, building work on a new prison in Cork is well under way, as well as the refurbishment and renovation of the D wing, Mountjoy Prison. In addition, a business case for the Limerick Prison project is currently being considered by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. When these projects are finalised, they will allow the Prison Service to provide further enhanced education opportunities for prisoners.

In addition to seeking to draw on best practice in adult and further education in the community, there has been a lot of curriculum development over the years that is specific to prison circumstances, such as courses on addiction, health issues and offending behaviour. Other areas where there has been significant progress in prison education are in physical education, the provision for higher education, the arts and preparing prisoners for release and supporting their transition to life, and often to education, on the outside. A top priority for the Prison Service is ensuring help for those with reading and writing problems, and peer mentoring programmes are currently active in all of our prisons.

The Prison Service has also been expanding the number of accredited courses and opportunities available to prisoners in work training in recent years. Enhanced partnership arrangements with accrediting bodies such as City & Guilds, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, SQA, and the Guild of Cleaners and Launderers and the centralising of co-ordination and quality assurance arrangements have enabled us to extend the number of available courses and activities with certification.

On committal, all prisoners are interviewed by the governor and are informed of the services available in the prison. At this point, prisoners may be referred to services or they can self-refer at a later date. Where governors consider, on the information available, that a prisoner needs a

particular intervention, they will initiate a referral.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for her very comprehensive reply. I very much appreciate it. It would be helpful if it were possible to provide a breakdown of the number of times first-time offenders have applied for rehabilitative training and have not been successful. In my previous pursuit of this particular subject, I came to the conclusion that access was monopolised to some extent by repeat offenders, for want of a better description. Could a special effort be made to make it possible for first-time offenders who have never run afoul of the law before to be diverted into a programme of rehabilitation as a matter of urgency, rather than giving them a PhD in criminal activity?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: When one speaks about first-time offenders, one should note that many of them, particularly those in prison for not paying fines, go to prison for a very short period. This factor must be built into the question asked. Many prisoners go to prison for a very short period, perhaps 24 or 48 hours, for not paying a fine, and this is why we have stopped using imprisonment as a means of dealing with the issue of fines. However, I will try to get the statistics on first-time prisoners with longer custodial sentences. The point made by the Deputy is very relevant, namely, that if one can interrupt the cycle of offending, one will keep people safe in the longer term and reduce the risk of re-offending.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Minister has referred to a sensitive area. Consider the cases of those who are now called drug mules, or individuals who were involved as carriers, who may have a ten- or 12-year sentence for committing a serious offence for the first time. It is crucial that they be diverted from becoming professional criminals because they will not re-offend. Almost in all cases, they have given an indication to that effect. Is it possible to examine their cases with a view to ensuring they get the required training?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The point is well made by the Deputy that we need to differentiate between first-time offenders with long sentences - the Deputy mentioned drugs offenders, in particular - and the others. With regard to the former, we should be trying to engage them early in their sentences rather than later. I will endeavour to obtain the requested information for the Deputy.

Direct Provision System

8. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding the working group to review the direct provision system, including membership; when it is due to report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35407/14]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: This question concerns the working group on direct provision whose establishment has been announced. What will its make-up be? When is it due to report to the Minister? Direct provision has been raised in a couple of questions in the past but, unfortunately, due to meetings I had to attend, I was not able to be here. I hope there will not be too much repetition.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I thank Deputy Pringle. The Government announced in its Statement of Government Priorities 2014-2016 that there would be an independent working group established to report to it on improvements to the protection process, including direct provision, and supports for asylum seekers. I hope to be in a position very shortly to an-

nounce a chairman for the group. The Minister of State, Deputy Ó Ríordáin, and I have asked the working group to report very shortly. This is not a long-term working group. We would like to have a report from it within three to four months. When I met representatives of the non-governmental organisations, NGOs, last week, we made the point that we want a focus on recommendations that can improve the system in the short, medium and longer term. That will be in parallel with the process of working on the legislation to introduce the single procedure. The terms of reference are to consider what improvements can be made in the system, and the working group will comprise NGOs and representatives of Departments. There will be a mixture of NGOs and statutory bodies. We held the round-table discussion last week with a view to discussing and informing the terms of reference of that working group and seeing what the NGOs, in particular, felt should be the terms of reference. Within a matter of two or three weeks we will name the chairperson and announce the terms of reference of the working group. I expect it will report towards the end of this year or the early part of next year. It is a three to four month project and it is not something we want to take years.

This is about focusing on the direct experience of NGOs, their suggestions for direct provision and what steps can reasonably be taken to improve the conditions under which people are living, while at the same time being realistic, as I have been today. I am warning about unrealistically high expectations about changing the system overnight. This is about accommodation for 4,500 people and the direct provision centres were originally put in place because of a homeless crisis, with 9,500 people arriving in the country with no place for them to stay.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Minister for her response. It is vital that the NGOs are represented on the working group and I welcome that they will be present. It is very important that the group's composition should not be biased against non-governmental organisations and weighted towards Departments. I am a bit worried that the terms of reference are to consider how the system can be improved, as the system cannot be improved, so the working group should be considering alternatives to the direct provision system. At the very least, the report should indicate how to achieve the alternative. There is no doubt that the system has not worked and it is causing very serious harm to a very large number of people.

I have worked with asylum seekers in direct provision since they came to Donegal town in 2000. I am thankful the centre there closed in the past couple of years, and I would like to see all the centres across the country close because it would be the only fair and reasonable outcome from any review. We should not only consider improvements and we should examine alternatives. I ask the Minister to consider including that in the terms of reference for the working group.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: Different countries in Europe take a variety of approaches to asylum seekers arriving on their shores and accommodation varies considerably, as the Deputy knows. In some countries, there are detention centres and in other countries, people are allowed to look after themselves without having any financial support, which is very difficult. That is the case in a number of countries. In Ireland, we provide full accommodation or "direct provision", as it is called. An alternative to that scheme would have enormous resource implications.

The working group will report to the Government on improvements to the protection process, including direct provision and supports for asylum seekers. I have no doubt that comments will be made similar to those of the Deputy and they will be examined. These may consider whether there are realistic alternatives. I know the Immigrant Council of Ireland, for example, has made a point about people who have been identified as trafficked. Amnesty

International has identified people in the direct provision system who have been tortured and we should begin to examine those particular categories of people to see if there are alternatives from housing associations or elsewhere. We have housing difficulties in this country and there are 4,500 people living in direct provision centres. I want to make the conditions as humane as possible but this is a large number of people, with 40% arriving now.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: We provide shelter and food for prisoners as well and, in effect, the direct provision system is one of open prisons. It is detrimental to anybody who must live in it, and as a society, we should be able to absorb the 4,500 people living in it. I know these people all want to contribute to our society, with many of them very highly qualified and capable. One person has been trying to enrol in a doctorate course for a number of years but he has not succeeded because of his status. Such people can make a major contribution, which we should recognise. The review should take that into account.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I agree with the Deputy that on a personal level, we want to give people as much opportunity as possible while living in direct provision so they can avail of whatever services they can. That is why it is important that children, in particular, are able to go to primary or secondary school. The length of time is the real issue, and it makes things difficult for so many people. If we can deal with applications more quickly, there could be quite a difference. I assure the Deputy we will certainly examine any other initiatives that we can take and act on as many of the recommendations as we can to improve people's current position.

I recognise the potential contribution of these people and I would like to see people being given an opportunity to make that contribution while they are in the direct provision system. Perhaps we can examine some training opportunities or involvement in local communities that could begin to meet some of what the Deputy has described.

Prison Accommodation Provision

9. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she is concerned at the current limited capacity of the Irish Prison Service; if she will provide, in tabular form, the number of prisoners currently on temporary release broken down by prison; the type of offence of which the prisoner was convicted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35370/14]

Deputy Niall Collins: What is the view of the Minister and the Government on the current limited capacity available to the Irish Prison Service? We can bear in mind that last July, capacity was reached and exceeded in the prisons at Mountjoy, Cloverhill, Cork, Limerick and Arbour Hill. Will the Minister comment on the policy of affording prisoners temporary release to deal with the capacity issue.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I can advise the Deputy that on 22 September 2014, the bed capacity of the Irish Prison Service was 4,120, with the number of people in custody at 3,797, representing 92% of capacity. There are 601 people on temporary release but on the same date in 2011, there were 718 prisoners on temporary release, with 4,319 in custody. There has been a 16.3% reduction from that date to the present date for those on temporary release. The numbers of people on temporary release have been falling substantially.

The Government is clearly committed to capital investment in the prison estate and building work on a new prison in Cork is well under way. As I have mentioned, D wing in Mountjoy

is being refurbished. These will provide further accommodation options for prisoners. The inspector has focused particularly on the Dóchas women's centre and indicated that there is potential and actual overcrowding there, with an open centre needed for women prisoners. We are working on that.

I have mentioned the Strategic Review of Penal Policy report, which I launched last week. It recommends very strongly the development of appropriate non-custodial alternatives to imprisonment and a greater focus on step-down facilities and supported accommodation. It also recommends the use of more community-based open conditions for female offenders. That is important. A business case for the Limerick prison project is currently being considered by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. There is work to be done in Limerick and when that project is complete, there will be additional spaces for the female prisoner population.

Deputy Niall Collins: Will the Minister be a little more exact about the extra capacity which will flow from the example of the Limerick prison just cited, the refurbishment of the D wing in Mountjoy and the redevelopment of the Cork prison? Does the Minister have any figures for the level of re-offending while prisoners are on temporary release? This is an important issue. I accept that there has to be a limit to the capacity to be made available and that numbers go up and down. People are concerned that some re-offending occurs while people are on temporary release, some of it very serious.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The bed capacity within the Irish Prison Service estate is 4,120. The Inspector of Prisons has recommended that the bed capacity be 3,976. The occupancy levels generally are between 92% and 95%. It is intended to align the capacity of our prisons with the guidelines laid down by the inspector of prisons. There have to be enough prison spaces to be compatible with public safety and the integrity of the criminal justice system because the prisons must accept those referred to them. The programme for Government outlines the commitment of Government to finding alternatives to custody. If I have time, I will comment on the Deputy's point about temporary release.

Deputy Niall Collins: I would appreciate if the Minister could reply to my question on temporary release.

What is the progress of the business case for Limerick Prison? What is the procedure from now and how long will it take to assess the business case and roll out the development plan?

Deputy Billy Timmins: The Minister alluded to the Dóchas centre and the recommendation in the prison review report on an open prison centre for female prisoners. This is very important. Shelton Abbey is a step-down facility for male prisoners. While the regime in Dóchas is not as authoritarian or rigid as that in Mountjoy or other centres there are none the less long-term prisoners there who should be rehabilitated outside that centre. There are also young drug offenders who would be more appropriately placed in centres such as Tiglin. I would like to hear a more definitive commitment to a step-down prison centre for female prisoners.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I am involved in budgetary discussions in regard to Limerick Prison. In the initial phase several million euro would need to be allocated to further the project. I will keep the Deputy informed about that. It is important to make progress on improving and developing the facilities and further capital investment would be needed to do that. I hope we will be in a position to do so in the not too distant future.

On temporary release, it does not follow that a prisoner will receive temporary release even

if that is recommended. Each application for temporary release has to be examined very closely on its merits and public safety is a key consideration. Reviewable temporary release, coupled with a requirement to do community service work, is being developed in the community return programme. The evidence from the research to date shows that those who get involved with community return schemes during their temporary release run far less risk of re-offending and being readmitted to prison. These are very worthwhile, tested projects as opposed to a revolving door.

In response to Deputy Timmins, I am committed to ensuring that there is a step-down centre, an open prison for women and a group within the Irish Prison Service has started to examine that. I hope we can make progress on it very quickly. The type of centre needed would not have to be very large. The numbers would be relatively small. There is overcrowding in the women's prison, which was established in 1999. That does need to be dealt with and I agree with the Deputy that many of the women there could be better helped and facilitated in dealing with drug addiction and various other issues in such a setting.

Questions Nos. 10 and 11 replied to with Written Answers.

Penalty Points System

12. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the extent to which she is satisfied that the procedures put in place in respect of the imposition of penalty points and any subsequent deletions are sufficiently robust; if she is satisfied that the oversight procedures continue to be fit for purpose and that recent revelations by the whistle blower are transparently investigated and resolved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35374/14]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This relates to the obvious need to clarify the recent allegations that penalty points continue to be a problem and that penalty points were allegedly written off on a basis that was not too clear. I want to ensure that the issue is dealt with quickly and adequately.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: We have discussed this already but it is important to wait until we have the results of the inquiries before we draw any conclusions. The starting point is that the new policy is in place. It has been designed in keeping with the inspectorate's recommendations, which were intended to restore confidence in the system, and it includes important safeguards to that end. There is an inter-departmental group working on this. I have attended one of its meetings along with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. That group will continue to monitor the implementation of the recommendations from the inspectorate's reports.

There is centralisation of decision-making in regard to penalty points. The number of people who can give and erase penalty points has been significantly reduced to three. That changes the system dramatically. The present situation is different, there is centralised decision-making, a need for supporting documentation as well as much greater clarity about what would amount to exceptional circumstances. We said earlier that there will of course be circumstances, whether for members of the public or for the gardaí, in which emergency services are called and which may lead to a fixed notice charge being issued. There is clarity about those exceptional circumstances that warrant cancellation. Regular audit is a central part of the system. The inspectorate will review it again next year.

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Some allegations were forwarded to me via the acting Garda Commissioner. They are being investigated, not just by the internal and external audit in the Garda Síochána but by the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC. I will get a report on those allegations.

Since June new procedures have been in place and I want to examine how they are working. If it is shown that any garda has abused the system there will be serious consequences.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for the comprehensive reply. To restore full confidence in the system, will the Minister at the end of the inquiry or review of the system, issue a clear statement to the effect that the system is foolproof and only in exceptional circumstances will some discretion be allowed to those with the power to erase penalty points?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I have made a commitment to transparency in the handling of this issue. The acting Garda Commissioner has said the same. We want the public to have confidence in the system and to ensure that the law is applied equally to all citizens and that, if decisions are being taken to cancel penalty points, there are clear reasons outlined for that, that there is a fair and open system in place subject to regular audit and monitoring. That is what we want to see in place. When one changes from one system to another there is a transition. The statistics are not available because the new system has been operating for such a short time but statistical analysis will be available and will be made public.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Technical Group again for giving me some of its speaking time. General practitioners from around the country, who have provided an excellent service to their patients over the years, are coming to Dublin this morning for a protest. It is unprecedented, in my memory, for hard-working GPs to take time out of their busy schedules to engage in such a strong and genuine protest about the detrimental effects of Government policies on their practices. Every politician who is elected to this House knows and appreciates the value of local GPs. Unfortunately, these doctors have had to endure a 40% reduction in funding for patient services over recent years. Many things that have happened are making the operation of GP services very difficult. Distance codes for call-outs have been abolished. This is affecting GPs in rural areas. The people of Feakle have been trying to get a GP to come to the area. Any GP should be able to make a living by operating out of such a location. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to get a doctor to go into the area. It is a fright to think that the difficulties being faced by GPs are making it hard for them to survive financially. The rural allowance, which used to be available to a GP who had a certain number of patients within a three-mile radius, has been abolished.

I wish to refer to the unworkable contract that doctors are being asked to sign up to. Perhaps I should say they are being coerced or forced into doing so. Along with some of my colleagues, I have met large groups of GPs from County Kerry who have explained to us in great detail that certain elements of the document are impractical. The doctors will not sign up to the proposal that is before them. Having read and studied the document, I have seen the gagging clause that will prevent GPs from advocating for the rights of their patients. One of the small and simple

things included in the document is the imposition of certain conditions on doctors' surgeries. The walls and floor coverings, etc., will need to be of a certain type. If this approach is taken to its logical conclusion, it is clear that if one tells a doctor he or she cannot treat a patient in a room that is not of a certain standard, one will do away with the home visit. When a doctor goes to a person's home, it is unlikely to meet the standards that the doctor's surgery will have to meet under this proposal.

The waiting lists for home visits will be very long in the future because of the lack of GPs. We do not have enough doctors in this country. The Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, will be aware that a person who wants to see his or her GP today will be able to do so. That has always been the case. If this unworkable document is implemented, I fear that future patients who want to see a doctor today will not be in a position to do so. That was never the case before now. If a person in any part of Ireland wanted to see a doctor on any given day, he or she would get to see one. This great service was provided out of hours. Doctors called to people's homes. Very bad weather conditions in the winter months did not stop them from calling to see their patients.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this matter on the morning that GPs are taking the unprecedented step of coming to the Dáil to let the Government and the people of Ireland know that they are upset. People always had the idea, found in the expression that "the doctor is well off, he is doing fine, there is no problem with him". I know GPs who are struggling with financial difficulties because it is so hard for them to run their practices. Irish GPs have 24 million contacts with their patients each year. One million of these contacts take place out of hours. The out-of-hours service provided by GPs has always been excellent. Approximately 95% of problems are sorted out by GPs without further referral. It is great that a person with a medical difficulty can go to his or her GP and get sorted on the day without having to be referred anywhere else.

Just 2.3% of the total health budget is spent on GP care. This compares with an equivalent figure of 9% in the UK. As I have said, funding for patient services has been cut by 40% over the past five years. GP costs have not remained unchanged. They have increased dramatically, as the Minister of State knows. In light of the additional cost burdens faced by GPs as they try to run their practices, it is disgraceful that the remuneration paid to them is now at the same level as it was in 2002. I am concentrating on the situation of GPs because it is vitally important. It is hard to believe GPs are struggling through such tough times at present but that is the case. I know other politicians will have had similar experiences in their constituencies. Every Deputy knows the local doctors. I am sure they will say the same thing. I am highlighting this in the House this morning because something needs to be done about it.

When I asked the GPs to make suggestions about amendments to the document they are being asked to sign up to, I was told in no uncertain terms that it is unworkable. It is not feasible to implement it. I was told it needs to be torn up. We should start again. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, and her senior colleague, the Minister for Health, to examine the GP contract with a view to amending it. They need to work with the GPs and their association to agree a workable document that will encourage young newly qualified doctors to stay in this country. It is a shame to think that after we have educated our young doctors, the only realistic option open to these young men and women is to go away and practice in some other part of the world, rather than staying in Ireland. This will lead to some very bad situations. I know doctors who should not have retired, but who did so at an early stage because they think the current position is unsustainable. They decided to get out while they could. Older doctors are

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pulling out early and younger doctors do not want to go into the profession in Ireland because they do not think they can make a living. That will be detrimental to patient care. We will pay a very high price for this in the future, particularly because we have an aging population. Older people who try to live at home have always relied on the good services of GPs. They will no longer be able to avail of those services on a daily basis as they might wish. That will surely be a detrimental situation.

I ask the Minister of State to use her common sense and her knowledge of the situation on the ground. She knows as well as I do that her local general hospital - Cork University Hospital, which provides a great service - is under immense pressure. I will give an example of what is happening in Kerry General Hospital at the moment. In recent months, the blood laboratory at the hospital has been experiencing trouble in processing blood tests. This has led to delays in patients finding out about the results of their samples. These things should not be happening in a modern health service. I hate to be critical of anything - I would prefer to be positive when I stand up here - but I have to criticise situations that are wrong.

11 o'clock

I have had nurses pleading with me to stand up in the Dáil and fight for them and their patients, about whom they are extremely worried. Nurses are under the most unbelievable pressure on the wards, trying to take care of patients. All they are interested in, at the end of the day, is taking care of their patients. That is what is in their blood, if not their DNA. They are finding it genuinely difficult to do so, however, because of cuts. Why are we continuing to spend so much money on agency nurses instead of hiring full-time nurses? If one does the sums it is surely obvious that it costs more to pay agency nurses than to employ young people on a full-time basis. We must increase the numbers working in our hospitals.

On a positive note, some of the services in our hospitals have improved enormously in recent years. People who would have died in the past due to certain conditions now have a better chance of surviving. However, what is missing from the system is the person working in our hospitals as a nurse or doctor. The Minister of State knows that. I know she would not try to cover up for the Government on this issue and would tell the truth in this regard. She has personal experience of this and has seen it herself. As the Minister of State knows, cuts are also having a detrimental effect on our psychiatric services. I ask that the Minister of State takes on board the points I have made and fights with the people on that side of the House to ensure better services are provided to patients who are of paramount importance.

Deputy Liam Twomey: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I also welcome this very important legislation which concerns the regulation and registration of all health care professionals. We are not just talking about doctors and nurses but also opticians, optometrists, radiologists, radiographers and all of those working in the health care sector. Such people must be registered properly and engage in continuing education. This will give comfort to patients and reassure them that they are being looked after in the most professional manner possible.

Some of the remarks made by Deputy Healy-Rae regarding GPs require a response. While I do not want to downplay the seriousness of the concerns raised by GPs, it must be said that being a GP is a great privilege. It is a privilege to be able to work with patients and to have their trust. It is an extremely rewarding job. That said, GPs do have genuine concerns. Their job is not getting any easier but that has a lot to do with the fact that peoples' expectations have changed. The Minister of State has a full grasp of the issues, as does the Minister for Health,

Deputy Varadkar.

Deputy Healy-Rae referred to the fact that there must be certain minimum standards in general practice. It is ridiculous of the Deputy to suggest that patients in the 21st century should be seen in general practice surgeries that do not meet minimum standards. Those who take pride in their work would like to think they are working in premises which are fit for purpose and meet minimum standards. Years ago when I was a locum I worked in GP surgeries which did not have hot water or functioning toilets and which had consulting rooms which were totally unsuited to seeing sick patients. In recent decades, that situation has changed quite dramatically and the quality of GP premises is generally up to standard now. There is no need to worry about the setting of minimum standards. It must be possible to clean a GP surgery properly. Allowances must be made for the possibility of spilling blood or other potentially dangerous substances. All surgeries should have autoclaves for sterilising equipment. It might sound ridiculous to say this, but all surgeries should have running hot water. It is essential that we would aim to achieve such basic standards.

The draft GP contract that was presented earlier this year is not the contract that will be offered to GPs at the end of the day and it is important to put that on record. There is no gagging clause for GPs. An estimated 350 GPs are expected to voice their concerns outside the Dáil today, which indicates that there is no question of them being gagged. There are general practice forums on the Internet. There are health forums where politicians express the concerns of general practitioners. That is the way it has always been and it will remain so. There is no such thing as a gagging clause on anyone who is practising medicine in this country. That notion needs to be put to rest and that nonsensical talk must stop.

It is important to ensure that we have enough GPs in the country and that we have a contract that is fit for the 21st century. The contract that GPs are currently working under dates from the 1970s. It is an acute illness contract and will not work for the future because the future of general practice, sadly, is about developing chronic illness care and management programmes for patients. We have had an explosion of health issues like diabetes, hypertension, obesity, high cholesterol and so forth. These are all chronic illnesses that must be managed. GPs who were practising in the 1970s when the current contract was introduced can tell stories of patients presenting to them with end-stage cancers - fungating masses of breast cancer or bowel cancer that had gone way beyond any chance of effective treatment. Those days are gone because we screen for so many illnesses now. We have very effective screening programmes for breast, bowel and other cancers as well as much more effective treatments for same. The medicine that was practised 40 years ago is not the medicine of today. I qualified 20 years ago and some of the treatments that were lauded at that time would be laughed at now. General practice has changed dramatically in recent decades.

The biggest investment needed in general practice is in ICT. Technology has changed dramatically in the past 15 years. When I started in general practice, many GP practices had no secretaries or practice nurses and no IT infrastructure whatsoever. Nowadays, all patients notes are on computer and all blood test and X-ray results are transmitted via broadband. GPs are not yet able to refer patients to hospital via computer because the hospitals have not developed their IT structures to allow doctors to refer by e-mail, but such developments will come about. I have not vaccinated a child in three years because my practice nurse does all of the childhood vaccinations, as well as the influenza vaccinations for my elderly and chronically ill patients. In contrast, 15 years ago there were very few practice nurses in general practice here. General practice is evolving at a tremendous rate and we must have a contract that reflects that reality.

Change always frightens people and I have no doubt that the draft contract upset many people. Some of the issues raised in the contract were controversial but much of what is in the draft must be included in any new contract. We must have chronic illness care programmes in place. Structures must be put in place to allow us to deal with chronic illnesses for the next 20 to 30 years and the new GP contract must reflect that.

The increase in obesity levels here is shocking. A doctor examining children 20 years ago would have been able to see their ribs but that is not the case today. Obesity is reaching epidemic proportions. I am in favour of what Dr. O'Shea, the endocrinologist who specialises in obesity problems in this city, is saying, that we should ban soft drinks from secondary schools. Soft drinks are a curse on this nation. We should get it across to the public that one should not have soft drinks in the fridge at home and one should not have easy access to them. Soft drinks are a significant part of the problem of childhood obesity. It is amazing the sugar load across a number of products that children and teenagers include in their diet on a daily basis and it has contributed to a significant obesity issue. For many of these children, this leads to issues around their self-image and self-esteem and that then reduces their participation in sports activities which only compounds the problem. When we used to diagnose patients with non-insulin dependent diabetes, we would hardly ever check anybody under the age of 60 to see if they might be diabetic. Now I am diagnosing patients in their 40s and it is becoming quite common to diagnose those in their 50s with non-insulin dependent diabetes. That quite significant change has occurred over a generation and it is one that will get worse unless we take this issue seriously and do something about it. That is built around the issues of preventative health measures and health promotion. These messages do not seem to be getting through to the general public and it is a serious issue. We need to be a little more proactive and we should reconsider the issue of not having soft drinks available. In regard to the health of the nation, soft drinks are more of a threat to this country and others, such as America, than al-Qaeda could ever be. There is a need for us to do something about it fairly urgently.

Deputy Healy-Rae raised the issue of agency staff and retaining doctors. We are in an incredible position in this country where we train 600 doctors a year in six or seven medical schools, if we include the postgraduate schools, over half of whom we export in three years. There must be an issue here. Those graduates are going, for instance, to the HSE, to take up senior positions and consultancy jobs. There must be more of an issue than merely what Government can do in this regard. There is a serious issue around the postgraduate training in this country and that is something that the postgraduate colleges must face up to and do something about. We might as well close two or three medical schools and invest the €20 million or €30 million we would save as a result in postgraduate training or at least in making these positions more attractive for our own graduates to stay in this country. Many of the graduates who leave to go to the United Kingdom enter full training graduate schemes where they start as senior house officers, go right through all of the ranks of medicine and qualify as consultants. We need to put that sort of system in place in this country, where one will finish an internship here, start as an SHO, and go through SHO, registrar, senior registrar and specialist registrar and qualify as a consultant, and that one will know exactly where one will work and for how long in this health care system. Such a scheme does not exist at present and that is why other countries which have better postgraduate training schemes in operation, such as the United Kingdom, Australia and America, are attracting the best and brightest of our graduates. Unfortunately, when someone goes to work in another health care system for more than four or five years, he or she finds it difficult to come back. I have seen that with some of my classmates over the years where they have come back to consultancy posts in this country, stayed for between six or 18 months, and

then gone back to the system that they are used to and comfortable with. We are then left behaving like a parasite towards Third World countries in looking for their best and brightest. It is an unsustainable way of operating the health care system. It is not only the Government that is responsible. There have been many reports, dating back to the Fottrell report in 2006, on this. There were reports on both undergraduate and postgraduate training for medicine. The issue here is that the postgraduate training schools must face up to their responsibilities too. The hospitals and universities are closely linked and they need to put together schemes to train our own graduates and keep them interested in working in this country.

The issue of agency staff also relates to training. I hope that there will be less reliance on agency consultants. The agency consultants issue has nothing to do with the moratorium. The moratorium on employing nurses definitely is having an impact on the hospitals and that needs to be looked at by the Ministers, Deputies Howlin and Varadkar. In many cases, when it comes to hospital consultants it is merely that the hospitals are not attractive for young doctors to work in. Doctors who trained in large hospital training centres where they experience much peer review and many colleagues with whom they can liaise, are not interested in going to work in small departments in medium-sized hospitals where they feel isolated and left to their own devices. The new hospital groups the Government is establishing will improve graduate perception of these consultancy jobs, and we need to speed up the groups' establishment. If such doctors are involved in such groups, if they work with other doctors and if they are able to do specialist operations in the bigger hospitals and then do the more minor procedures in the medium-sized hospitals, that will make a significant impact in hospital medicine in the future.

I welcome the Bill. It is important that every person working in health is registered and regulated and every person who has a role to play in patient management participates in continuous medical education of his or her profession. It sounds astounding but if one qualified prior to 2006, for instance if one qualified as a GP in 1966, one would not have to show any competence that one had kept one's medical education up to date in such a case from 1966 to 2006. That has now changed. We must participate in continuous medical education and that is the right way forward because, as I stated, the treatment options that we would have been using when I qualified in 1993 would be to some degree out of date now. It is important that we keep up to date in what we are doing.

Deputy John Halligan: The Bill, essentially, applies to the professions of optometrist and radiographer.

I take this opportunity to raise an issue which is critically worrying in University Hospital Waterford. The former Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, to great fanfare early in the year, officially visited the hospital to launch the €1.75 million new CT scanner and now the scanner, which patient groups state is critical to stroke victims not only in Waterford but in the south-east region, is still lying idle because there are not enough trained radiographers to operate it. It is outrageous.

This scanner was not a significant cost to the Department because it was funded last year through a donation from the Waterford City and County Infirmary Trust. It is state of the art. It is located in the new unit adjacent to the hospital's accident and emergency department, which was the requirement of the radiographers in the hospital at the time. It caters for a population, as I stated, not only for Waterford but for the entire south-east region.

There have been constant delays in getting this machine operational, first, because there was

not sufficient support staff and, then, because of a failure of the HSE to train diagnostic staff. One would not hear of any other European health service not being able to train diagnostic staff to operate such a critical scanner, one which is of paramount importance to thousands of stroke victims across the south east. On several occasions, I have been told by hospital staff that diagnostic training sessions were cancelled because of understaffing at the hospital. Radiographers could not be released for the training sessions because, as I was informed earlier in a telephone conversation with consultants, it would have created a crisis.

It was anticipated that the development of this second CT unit would provide improved overall access for CT diagnostic services. Its location adjacent to the new accident and emergency department at the hospital would have provided more immediate and safer access for critically ill patients, as well as supporting the implementation of stroke protocols for patients presenting every day to the emergency department at the hospital. Patients requiring CT scans are still being brought to the older machine, however, which is completely unacceptable, as has been pointed out by consultants at the hospital. The machine is located two floors away from the accident and emergency department in the basement of the hospital. Extra staff are required to bring patients to the basement in case there are any emergencies or accidents on the way. Last year, a total of 7,014 CT scans were completed at the hospital, meaning a large volume of patient traffic goes through the basement. The former Minister, Deputy James Reilly, saw the location of the older machine in the basement. It would be interesting to hear an explanation from the present Minister as to why there have been so many delays in the provision of the new scanner. Are there clinical issues?

Radiographers at Waterford Regional Hospital have long warned that they cannot work safely with their current staffing numbers. Patients are undergoing urgent MRI scans at private hospitals following referral from the South Tipperary General Hospital due to insufficient capacity at Waterford Regional Hospital. The weekly slot for MRI access for south Tipperary hospital patients was restricted to two sessions a week earlier this year because of the high volume of patients at the emergency department in Waterford Regional Hospital. I know what I am speaking about as my father recently had a stroke and is critically ill. If the Minister speaks to the specialists at Waterford Regional Hospital, they will all say that immediate and quick access to every piece of medical equipment such as a CT scanner is of paramount importance in dealing with stroke victims. Up to 7,000 stroke patients at Waterford Regional Hospital, however, are shuffled down into a basement or to other hospitals. I cannot believe what I heard from the professionals in the hospital yesterday and today about this facility. Government Deputies have gone to great lengths to give assurances to people in the south east, particularly people in Waterford, that there would be no downgrading of services when the hospital was grouped with Cork University Hospital. This is not the case, however. I appeal to the Minister on behalf of stroke victims in the south east to get the Department responsible to get its act together in ensuring this scanner is operating instead of stroke patients having to go down to a basement to an old CT scanner or be transferred to another hospital. It is appalling and unacceptable.

If I had to do so, I would have no problem in criticising the management of the hospital in this Chamber, on local media or to their faces. In fact, they know I am raising this matter in the Dáil this morning. Hundreds of people have a stroke every day. It is important a stroke victim gets access to vital medical care very early on, but this is not happening. I do not understand how expensive equipment could be left idle in a hospital for months on end when we cannot provide diagnostic training to the radiographers to use this scanner. When will this scanner be up and running? This morning I was informed by a consultant at the hospital in a telephone

conversation that it may be November but that I should ask the Department of Health for more staff to work the scanner. It is unacceptable that stroke victims from the south east - in Gorey, Tipperary and Wexford, constituencies that I do not represent - will be shuffled in, if possible, for a CT scan in the basement of Waterford Regional Hospital.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I must declare a family interest in so far as opticians are covered in this legislation.

The Bill's purpose is to subsume the Opticians Board into the Health and Social Care Professionals Council which has caused some concern among opticians in general. From my point of view as a public representative, I do not have a problem with this move as long as the quality, standards and degree of services available to the public are maintained while nothing militates against the provision of a steady stream of professionals to provide these services, a problem that has occurred in other areas. However, as has happened in other health areas, because of the competing demands within a professional council, there might be a diminution of interest or emphasis on supervision, encouragement or representation of individual professional areas.

In recent years, the view has emerged that by putting several agencies together, one gets efficiencies. This is not necessarily the case. One may get financial efficiencies with a reduction in overall costs but one may not get an improvement in the provision of services by professional bodies. For example, the idea of administering the medical card system from a single centre did not work simply because the sheer volume of queries to that single centre was impossible to be dealt with unless massive numbers of staff were recruited. The economies achievable in such circumstances are debatable at the best of times. If it has worked well, then let it continue, but if it is not working well and it needs review and revision then by all means let us deal with it. That is the purpose of Bill in general.

We must remember one point in the context of the delivery of health services that has been referred to by a number of speakers. I was concerned to hear GPs are protesting outside the House. That is a serious issue for a number of reasons. The issues involved include lack of resources and a lack of investment in the provision of the services they require. Changes continue to take place in the way the health service is being delivered throughout the country; some for the better. Other changes are still in the test phase. We must be mindful that health services in general are demand driven. It is not something for which one can necessarily plan ahead in general because one cannot anticipate various illnesses or epidemics that might occur. We must examine the extent to which the professionals in the field are happy in their work. If people are content in their workplace and have job satisfaction, they will deliver a better quality and standard of service and in general the community at large is the better for that. I hope in the course of the discussions now taking place both in the context of the Bill and in the general area of the delivery of health services that sufficient dialogue can be entered into with the professionals to try to ensure the issues on which they have expressed concern are addressed.

Deputy Twomey referred to the training of junior hospital doctors and the fact that so many qualified professionals and postgraduates go abroad. There are various reasons for that – sometimes conflicting ones. For the past 15 years I have made the point that it should be a priority to encourage, or at least give the opportunity to professionals to provide a service in this country in the first instance, having trained them to a high standard. The lure of other parts may be great. Sometimes, far away hills are greener than they look. It would be hugely detrimental to the delivery of health services if it were to transpire that our professionals go abroad on graduation. I was given various reasons for that when I raised the issue previously. They range from a lack

of job satisfaction, lack of fulfilment and doubt about a reasonable career. They are all issues that must be addressed. That said, we must also try to encourage graduates to have a greater regard for the needs of the population in this country, which is growing. It is almost twice what it was in the mid-1950s. In the next 20 years we can expect the population to grow further. We must plan ahead for the provision of the full range of disciplines that are required in the health service in the future.

There are plenty of examples from which we can choose. We heard in recent years about the French system, the Dutch system, the Canadian system, the Cuban system and other perfect systems. In Cuba, the professionals might not be at the top of the salary scale. The fact remains that health is a serious issue that concerns every single person in the country; the young, the old and middle aged, without exception. At some time in our lives every person in this House will have to have recourse to medical aid in one form or another.

It is obvious there are serious deficiencies in the health service at present. They are not new as they have existed for some time. I was strongly opposed to the dissolution of the health boards and the creation of a single system of administration for the entire country. It did not work. It is as simple as that. Every time the current system comes under pressure we hear the same story and the same issues arise again and again. One of the reasons given for the dissolution of the health boards is that different criteria were applied in respect of qualification for medical cards in different areas. The simple response to that is to ask why that was the case when the same legislation applied across the country without exception. If some people took the law into their own hands and decided to set their own standards, there were ways and means of dealing with them and the issue should have been addressed. Having served for a long time on a health board, it was clear to me that the quality and service was much more personal, available and accountable than is the case currently. The key word was “accountability”. All of the responsible professions came before a board on which they themselves were represented and they had to answer questions in a meaningful way that were raised by public representatives and their own members. Matters had to be addressed at an early stage.

I have listened with a certain amount of inward mirth to the calls from some Members on the other side of the House. I remember being in this House when the system was breaking down simply because the plan was not right. Once the system broke down and the focus was taken away from the management and delivery of services to the public, and people began to defend their own turf, then the health boards became weak and unaccountable. People went through the form and did not engage to the same extent. The sad part about it was that as a result the then Government decided to increase the number of health boards to 11 or 14, which was another foolish mistake. It was a case of going in the wrong direction. The proper structure to deliver the health services in a country of this size is approximately four regional structures, all of which are governed by the same rules and laws where the health Act applies, not one which we had until recently – we are gradually moving away from it – whereby a single health board administers the entire country. There was a time when you and I, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, could table a question and have an instant answer but that is no longer the case and has not been for a long time. I compliment this Administration not for political reasons, but due to the major improvement in the response we can get to some of the questions we raise. We at least get a reply which says the matter has been referred to the HSE and it will correspond with the Deputy in due course. It does not always happen in the way intended but there is a considerable improvement between what happens now and the situation that prevailed during the previous seven or eight years.

In the context of the various reformations of the health service, we must upgrade our services and provide a higher quality and standard of service. We must also provide state-of-the-art services that are accessible in all regions of the country without exception. It should not have to follow that somebody in one part of the country has better access to health services because of their geographic location. It is as simple as that. Many consultants' reports have been produced on the management and delivery of services in this country and elsewhere. It seems to be difficult to achieve what is required, and from time to time there are changes in how best to deliver. Delivery is the important part. If we lose contact with the need to deliver a service quickly then we have lost the battle in terms of the provision of health services. There is no good in people on the opposite side of the House saying that did not happen in their time. I am sorry; it did but it was a lot worse. There is no doubt about that and such improvements continue to be made. I hope this remains the case but we must recognise that we cannot relax on this issue because it changes from year to year and sometimes from month to month. Demands change all the time and if we do not make provisions, we will not be able to provide the service the public deserves.

In the 1980s there were five or six health boards in the country and administration was duplicated. Comparisons were made between Ireland and the Greater Manchester, Calderdale, area, which had a similar population, and it was suggested our health system should be similar to the one in Manchester. That was wrong as the situations were like chalk and cheese. One place was a concentrated area of population that one could walk across in a couple of hours while the other was a country a couple of hundred miles in breadth. The comparison was nonsense and this has been proven over the years.

The Irish health service is in a state of evolution and we must take account of how to deliver an efficient service quickly and evenly throughout the country. This does not mean we should cut back on what is required to deliver the management of the service but that we should plan for the future. We should plan in terms of the number of consultants and radiographers required and continue such plans across the board. It is no good starting to plan when deficiencies become obvious as it is necessary to lay the groundwork well in advance.

I welcome recent indications relating to the national children's hospital as the matter should have been dealt with years ago and I am glad it is coming to fruition. There are competing suggestions as to where the hospital should be located but I hope this issue has been resolved. Some of these competing suggestions only served to delay the provision of the service and we cannot afford this.

The public, rightly, has higher expectations now than in the past as standards have risen in every profession across the board, with the possible exception of the likes of the construction sector. The public expects improved service delivery. I was amazed in previous debates on the location of the children's hospital that proximity to public transport was deemed to be an important factor. However, when the mother of a sick child learns that child needs urgent treatment, she will not take the bus, train or Luas to the hospital, rather she will take the fastest mode of transport available to take the child to emergency treatment in the shortest possible time. This is of great importance when it comes to some illnesses, such as meningitis. I could never understand why bus access was deemed a reason to promote the previously suggested location because that is not how it works. At last, this part of the problem has been resolved. It is a question of providing maximum quality of service in a place that is accessible at all times, regardless of time of day, traffic and so on.

This legislation is, essentially, regulatory and I hope my optician friends will be satisfied

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with the final draft, after amendments. I hope the other professionals affected by the legislation will find that it does not impede their enthusiasm for providing health services to the public through the public health sector. I could go on about the differences between the public and private sectors, including costs, but I will not. Instead I compliment the Minister of State on her work and dedication and her knowledge of the health service in general.

Debate adjourned.

Visit of Iran-Ireland Parliamentary Friendship Group

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I offer céad míle fáilte, 100,000 welcomes, to the members of the Iran-Ireland parliamentary friendship group, led by Dr. Javad Heravi, who are currently visiting Ireland. I hope they are enjoying their trip and I welcome them to Leinster House today. We will move on to Leaders' Questions at midday.

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak on the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014, which has three main objectives. First, it will provide for the subsuming of the Opticians Board into the Health and Social Care Professionals Council, CORU. Second, it will make certain amendments to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 in the interest of efficiency and to ensure consistency with legislation governing other health regulators. Third, it will amend the Health Act 1970 to ensure the statutory contribution payable by recipients of residential support services who are maintained, though not directly accommodated, by or on behalf of the Health Service Executive.

The regulatory body, the Health and Social Care Council, currently has the power to regulate 12 professional groups under a series of registration boards. Under the system of statutory registration that is being rolled out by these professions, individual members of a profession are recognised by a special body as competent to practise that profession under a formal mechanism underpinned by law. The council voted to establish a corporate requirement for the organisation to oversee and co-ordinate the registration board and to deal with complaints against registrants of the profession through the establishment and management of a fitness for practice regime.

The object of the council is to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among registrants of the designated professions. To date, six registration boards have been established for the professions of social workers, radiographers, dietitians, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists. It is planned to have all 12 boards and registers established by the end of 2015. When all the registration boards are in place, CORU will be responsible for the regulation of approximately 20,000 professionals. The word CORU originates from the Irish word cóir, meaning fair, just and proper. In time, when the registers are established for the receipt of registrants and a two-year transition period is completed, during which existing practitioners can register on the basis of recognised qualifications, 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.

The dissolution of the Opticians Board will result in the statutory regulation, under CORU, of the professions of optometrists and dispensing opticians. A specialist regulation board, the optical registration board, will be established for this purpose. The change, supported by the Association of Optometrists Ireland, will affect 739 optometrists and 176 dispensing opticians who are currently registered with the Opticians Board and are likely to transfer to the new board.

The profession of radiographer will be divided to distinguish radiation therapists, who have distinct training and experience. Radiation therapists work with cancer patients and radiographers work in diagnostic X-ray departments. The Bill amends the Act to allow registration boards under CORU to regulate more than one profession, such as the two professions to be regulated by the Radiographers Registration Board. Under existing legislation, CORU may only provide full registration. The Bill provides that where a person has a physical or mental disability, the council may register him or her with conditions attached to practise.

I wish the Minister, Deputy Leo Varadkar, the best and I thank the former Minister, Deputy James Reilly, for the work he did over the past three and a half years.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, and congratulate her on her reappointment. I welcome our friends from Iran to the House and thank them for being here. It is very important that we build on democracy throughout the world and I hope we can forge new friendships and mutually benefit each other in the pursuit of democracy on the world stage.

Today is an extraordinary day because we are beginning the design stage of the national children's hospital and I had the privilege of being at the launch at the Chester Beatty Library this morning when the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, and the team unveiled the plans. At 2 p.m. GPs will come to Leinster House to advocate on their behalf and we are also dealing with the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. It is extraordinary that we speak about reform of the Dáil and the Houses of the Oireachtas, but no members of the Opposition are present. They lament the Government putting a guillotine on Bills but where are they now?

As Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children, in my opinion the Department of Health is the most important Department. In this Bill we see a continuation of reform and updating our systems of regulation for health professionals. This process has been going on since the enactment of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005. At present, 12 professions are regulated by CORU, which is Ireland's multi-professional health regulator. The Bill will add to this list and will bring the regulation of opticians in line with the new regulatory regime. As Deputy Fitzpatrick alluded to in his remarks, the Bill also reclassifies radiographers into two groups, namely, radiographers and radiation therapists.

The changes introduced in the Bill are very much a welcome development. If we analyse and examine health care professions, it is important that we have a proper and robust system of professional registration and regulation in place which protects patients and health professionals. I state this as somebody who was in the teaching profession; the introduction of the Teaching Council caused much commentary in the education system. I have met various groups and when we exercise our legislative role in health it is always important that we have at the centre of everything we do the protection of the patient and that the patient remains paramount to ev-

everything we do. It cannot be about saving money or introducing change unless that change is to the betterment of the patient. By improving the system of regulation, we are doing just this.

I compliment the Minister of State on her speech to the House yesterday. The Federation of Ophthalmic and Dispensing Opticians, which represents independent and corporate opticians, has concerns about the Bill and I met its representatives in this regard. We should tease out their concerns, which include that the Bill as it is drafted could result in restrictions in access to eye care including sight tests, which would raise the cost for members of the public and the taxpayer and would increase prices for patients, and may threaten the continued employment of optical assistants in the business. During the passage of the Bill through the House on Committee and Report Stages, it is important that we examine this.

At present, an optometrist conducts an eye examination and the prescription is dispensed by a dispensing optician. They are assisted by other trained members of staff with regard to selecting frames and processing payments. The role of the optician has changed completely over the past decade with regard to family-run shops and corporate businesses and how we view eye care and eye testing. Competition in the market has made it better for customers and patients which is to be welcomed.

With regard to the specifics of the Bill, sections 81A (1) and (2) to be introduced by the Bill state spectacles may only be dispensed or sold by a registered medical practitioner or a registrant of the designated profession of optometrists or dispensing optician. This section is a source of concern, as it may put an end to the current practice whereby the examination is conducted by an optometrist, the dispensing optician dispenses the prescription and both are assisted by trained members of staff. I am sure the intention of the Bill is not to impact on how services are developed, provided or delivered but to ensure we maintain the excellent quality already in place in the provision of eye care for members of the public. The Department of Health is acutely aware of these concerns and as the Bill progresses through the House it is important that we examine this. Perhaps an amendment can be made to the Bill or clarification and reassurance will be provided to allay these concerns so we will have a Bill which is mutually beneficial to the customer and the health care profession.

On the wider issue of regulating various medical professions, the matter of the registration of counsellors and psychotherapists is still outstanding. The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children has debated this and Deputy Dan Neville, who has been a very strong member of the committee, raised it with the former Minister, Deputy Reilly. The two professions are not regulated. The survey published in the *Irish Examiner* yesterday and today regarding mental health in rural Ireland shows the issue of psychotherapists and counsellors is one we need to examine and address as a society. There is nothing to stop me from attending a ten-week course and setting up as a counsellor. I am sure members of the Opposition would be very welcome to come along and I would be happy to hear their concerns and share with them a platform to go forward.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We listen to enough rubbish from you.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: On a serious level, the quality and availability of psychotherapy and counselling is not something we can leave to chance. We must avoid the five-eighth merchant setting up an operation which could do more harm than good. This concern has been expressed by many people at meetings of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children and on the floor of the House. We must consider the qualifications and training available

to counsellors and psychotherapists because if we do not regulate them, we will have serious trouble. We also have a duty of care and we owe it to highly qualified and reputable counsellors and psychotherapists to put in place a regulatory system which recognises and supports them and gives them a safety network.

The Minister of State knows the issue of mental health quite well. The country has made significant strides through the National Office for Suicide Prevention. I do not mean to patronise her, but the Minister of State has been a very strong advocate with regard to mental health issues. We must take another step forward on this issue.

Debate adjourned.

12 o'clock

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 Michael Moynihan - the need to address poor broadband service on the Banteer exchange, County Cork; (2) 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 anti-virals; (3) Deputy Timmy Dooley - the need for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to address issues regarding his direction to the Commission for Aviation Regulation on 15 September 2014; (4) 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; (5) Deputy Derek Nolan - the need for a new emergency department unit at University Hospital Galway; (6) Deputy Brian Walsh - delays to the commencement of flood prevention works on the River Clare, County Galway; (7) Deputy Seán Crowe - the need to address concerns over cuts to funding for the school completion programme in officially designated disadvantaged areas; (8) Deputy Dan Neville - the bypass of Adare village, County Limerick; (9) Deputies Paul J. Connaughton and Brendan Griffin - the need to review the appeals process for the allocation of teachers to small schools; (10) Deputy Brendan Smith - the need to discuss the role of Ireland in the devolution of powers to Northern Ireland following the Scottish referendum result; (11) Deputy Terence Flanagan - the need for Irish Water to ensure that water meters are fully accessible to those with disabilities; (12) Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl - the need to reform the direct provision system; (13) 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; (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 Seán Kyne - the need to commence the Claregalway drainage scheme; (16) Deputy Róisín Shortall - the need to review the medical card guidelines and procedures relating to the assessment of those over 70; (17) Deputy Jonathan O'Brien - the need to address the conditions in Kinsale Road reception and accommodation centre, Cork; (18) Deputy Frank Feighan - the need to include Cloonakilla national school, Bealnamulla, County Roscommon, in the school building programme; (19) Deputy Clare Daly - the need to address homeowners' expenses under the terms of the pyrite remediation scheme; (20) Deputy Pat Breen - the need to provide additional funding to maintain

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services at the North West Clare Family Resource Centre, County Clare; and (21) Deputy Mick Wallace - the need to introduce a new tax on zoned development land banking.

The matters raised by Deputies Paul J. Connaughton and Brendan Griffin; Frank Feighan; Catherine Murphy; and Robert Troy have been selected for discussion.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Dara Calleary: Over the past three and a half years the Government has been at pains to spin that the health service was being reformed and transformed. Figures produced this week show that nothing could be further from the truth. In fairness to the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, since being appointed to the job he has spoken the truth only to be slapped down by the Taoiseach, who seems ignorant of the truth.

A few months ago the Taoiseach told us that Fine Gael had tackled waiting lists. He told the Fine Gael Ard-Fheis that the problem was resolved. However, the evidence is very different. The number of patients waiting more than nine months for inpatient or day-case treatment has risen by 1,000% in July. There are now 5,448 people waiting more than nine months for a day-case treatment. There has been a fivefold increase in the number of patients waiting more than a year for inpatient and day-case treatment at Beaumont and there are significant backlogs at the Mater, in Galway, in Cork and at St. James's.

In 2011 the Taoiseach said, "My Government is keenly aware of the stress that waiting for treatment causes to the citizens of our country and in response to this the Minister for Health has instructed public hospitals to ensure that by the end of 2011 they have no patients waiting more than 12 months for treatment". Today there are 20,928 patients waiting more than 12 months for treatment. Those are the real figures. They show the extent of the Government's misleading of people and inability to manage the difficulties of our health service. The Government was warned about that and yet it introduced a flawed health budget that took €200 million from hospitals. The cause of these delays was a flawed service plan and now we have the proof.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Dara Calleary: In light of the evidence of those waiting list figures, does the Minister agree that the health service plan agreed by the Government and by the Minister, Deputy Reilly, was flawed or at the very least unrealistic and is not meeting the demands of the people? How will the Government resolve the issue?

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): I thank the Deputy for the question. I think it is fair to say that everyone recognises the challenges that exist in our health service. Since 2008 the budgets of the Department of Health and the HSE have been cut by €3.8 billion and there has been a very significant reduction in staffing levels. Despite that, the Department of Health and the health services are increasing their treatment of patients. That is the backdrop here. Some 115,000 more patients are being treated in our hospitals today than was the case four years ago; so much more work is being done.

The other aspect clear in today's figures is that the emergency department workload has significantly increased which is putting pressure on elective surgery as it always has done in the past. There is no doubt that there are challenges here, but the truth is that reform in the delivery

of the health service remains the only route to resolve these issues. We need to move to systems that can better manage the flow. We still have problems with that. Too many people are turning up in the emergency department when they could be treated in primary care and the strategy is to roll out primary care.

We still have problems with discharges from our hospitals and there is also a strategy to address that. The reform plan is clearly on the right tracks, but there are difficulties as everyone acknowledges. These figures show some areas of significant improvement. As the Deputy can see, the waiting lists for outpatients are much improved and the waiting lists in emergency departments are much improved, but there are other areas where there are continuing challenges.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Minister shout get his head out of the sand. Some 20,928 people particularly appreciate the challenges. The clinical director in the Minister's local hospital, Beaumont, described some of the facilities there as unsafe. The Minister spoke about the difficulty with getting people out of hospital beds. The situation in Beaumont is being worsened by an increasing number of patients fit for discharge but in acute beds while on a waiting list for nursing home beds because the Government cannot manage the fair deal scheme.

The Minister spoke about primary care. What will he say to the 350 GPs who first time ever have been forced to take to the streets to wake up the Government to the reality of the crisis in primary care?

Deputy Finian McGrath: One cannot even get a trolley in Beaumont, never mind get a bed.

Deputy Dara Calleary: In respect of issues with primary care, hospitals and nursing homes, the former Minister for Health, now the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, is responsible for all of it. It was a flawed service plan. The Government took €200 million out of the hospital budget which had a direct consequence.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Minister should wake up. The Government is not transforming the health service. People are on waiting lists. There is a 1,000% increase in the numbers on waiting lists and the Government is ignorant of the problem. I cannot understand why the Minister for Health, who has the courage to tell it as it is, gets slapped down and those who were cheerleaders for this disaster - this crime against citizens of the country - are promoted within the Government.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I will take no lectures from Fianna Fáil on the issue of health reform.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Why not?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Deputy Calleary's leader committed in 2004 that he would eliminate health waiting lists.

Deputy Dara Calleary: After three and a half years, what has the Government done?

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry-----

Deputy Richard Bruton: He also presided over a Department of Health that increased its

budget by 50%-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Minister should answer for his Government's stewardship now.

Deputy Richard Bruton: -----and added 30,000 people to the health service, but he still did not resolve any of those issues.

Deputy Dara Calleary: From the end of 2011 on.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, will Deputies stay quiet please?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Going back over the years - I well remember it - Fianna Fáil had 25,000 people waiting more than six months to have treatment.

Deputy Dara Calleary: What about 2014?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The problems were there in Fianna Fáil's time; it threw money at it and did not deliver.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Minister is in Cabinet and should tell us what he is going to do.

An Ceann Comhairle: Would you stay quiet, please?

Deputy Richard Bruton: We have to resolve the challenges in a very difficult environment where budgets and staff numbers are reducing.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: People are still sick.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The people are fine.

An Ceann Comhairle: Stay quiet.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Despite that, more patients are being treated, fewer people are waiting for outpatient treatment and fewer people are on trolleys. So progress is being made. However, I am first to acknowledge that this is a challenging area of reform. We have a new Minister who is setting out his priorities and he will get the results in this area.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yesterday, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: The comedian.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Finian McGrath should give it a rest.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----was asked to justify the imposition of water charges on citizens and families at a time when the Government beats its collective chest about a recovery. Yesterday he failed to answer that question. Of course, he is not here today; perhaps he is off wooing some unsuspecting cailín to waltz with him.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It will not be Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Today I will return to the issue.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we get back to Leaders' Questions, please?

Deputy Eric Byrne: It is all about taking business-class flights.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How can the Government talk about a neutral budget as it prepares to land this unjust tax on citizens and families? How is it neutral to land an additional bill on the doormat? How is it neutral to ask families who are just keeping their heads above water to pay yet another bill? Is it neutral to ask families, who are in financial distress and struggling to keep a roof over their heads, to pay for the water they use to wash, to cook and to live? Is the Minister's own domestic water supply safe? The water in the taps of many people in County Roscommon is not, as I am sure he is aware as he traverses that county looking for people's votes in the by-election.

Deputy Frank Feighan: A total of €20 million was granted a year ago.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Is it neutral to demand a water charge from families who have contaminated water in their taps?

Deputy Richard Bruton: As the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, pointed out, the recovery Ireland is enjoying has not happened by accident. It has happened because the Government made certain choices, one of which was to broaden the tax base in order that it would not be taxing employment. That had been advised by everyone who has examined the challenge of an economy like Ireland's and we are getting the result from the difficult choices we have made. There are now 70,000 more people at work than when the Government started the Action Plan for Jobs process. As for the prosperity one is starting to see regenerate in the economy, the Deputy's party has opposed every single measure.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It has opposed everything. Its proposals would have spent our capital fund, that is, the National Pensions Reserve Fund, in the very first couple of years.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government itself has spent most of it.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It would have been blown by now. The Government is now using those resources to fund small and medium-sized enterprises and to fund enterprise growth.

I will turn to the issue of why there must be charges in the area of water. Ireland has struggled with years of underinvestment in the water system. That is the reality and here, in my own city, we are on a knife edge.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Who is responsible for that?

Deputy Richard Bruton: As the Deputy rightly points out, many parts of the country do not have an adequate water supply. As nearly 40% of that water is leaking away, it is necessary to invest in a modern 21st-century water system to deliver for jobs, families and everyone. This must be done through charges to generate the revenue to make the investment. The Government's approach has been to establish a State company that will roll out that investment. This was a choice the Government made, which the Deputy opposed. However, it is the right choice. Every country in the world regards water as an important resource in which one must invest and

that one must manage properly, which is what the Government is doing. However, the Government also has built into that system genuine reliefs for people who are in difficulty. Those who are in receipt of the household benefit package will get €100 in relief taken from their bill, children who qualify for child benefit will get a free allowance and people with medical conditions will have their payments capped. Consequently, the Government has rolled out a system that is fair but correct. It is the right approach that needs to be taken and we must embed the recovery to be able to enjoy the fruits of the sacrifices people have been obliged to make in recent years.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The ironic thing is that as the Minister lauds the sacrifices of families across the State, the Government comes back to those same people and seeks more. I asked the Minister to identify how it is neutral for a family that is under financial pressure to burden them with an additional bill. Moreover, it is not any kind of bill but one that relates to something as basic and fundamental as water. The Minister of course has not answered that question because he cannot. He knows, as do I, that it is farcical to talk about a recovery or a neutral budget when one makes such a demand of families. In the real world, people right across the State await the pronouncement of the regulator to find out just how much they will be obliged to pay.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: These same families can tell the Minister, as they have told me, that they will not be in a position to meet this bill. They do not regard it as progressive or fair. They do not feel it as a sign of recovery but will experience it as yet another imposition on them, that is, on the very population which at this stage has endured years of austerity and cuts.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, we are over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How on Earth is this a neutral position to take? Could it simply be-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry Deputy, you are over time. Please resume your seat.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ----- that the neutral budget rhetoric is simply camouflage for more pain on low and middle-income families-----

Deputy Paudie Coffey: It will come from Sinn Féin's magic pot of gold.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----the same families the Government has targeted throughout its entire time in office?

Deputy Ray Butler: Do not fly business class to Australia.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the Minister to reply. The Deputy might be a Minister some day if he keeps the head.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The reality is that the Deputy's own party announced that it would cut off all the lending lines to the troika and would make the budgetary adjustments all in one year. Sinn Féin was going to lay aside a whole swathe of public services. It was going to push up taxes and would have destroyed the economy with such an approach.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Nonsense.

Deputy Richard Bruton: That is the reality of the approach Sinn Féin adopted.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: Not at all.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Government instead has adopted a prudent approach, which now is seeing the benefits. As the Deputy rightly states, the Government will not be obliged to impose any new taxes in the forthcoming budget.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: It is imposing water charges, not taxes.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It will not be obliged to impose any net spending decreases and has reached a position where it now is moving out of the period of difficult adjustment. Moreover, we are seeing the fruits of this in employment growth. This is how one spreads the benefits. This is how one reduces poverty in the country, by addressing those employment needs.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: By charging people for water.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Of course the Government recognises that people do not like to be obliged to pay for a charge which they were not obliged to pay previously.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: They cannot afford to pay.

Deputy Richard Bruton: However, as I set out in my earlier reply, this is absolutely a correct way to manage and expensive resource in which there has been years of under-investment.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The pipes are still leaking after three and a half years.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It costs €1.2 billion to deliver water and the thought that 40% of that is being wasted is an appalling vista. It is necessary to make the investment, which is what Irish Water will do. It has a rolling programme of €1.8 billion investment in the water system-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: Roll it out.

Deputy Richard Bruton: -----that will upgrade the supply and make it fit for the 21st century to create employment and to support families. This is the choice the Government made and it is one over which it absolutely can stand. It will manage this resource in a more efficient way and will allow resources to drive employment growth.

An Ceann Comhairle: I see we have a new entrant today. The Deputy is very welcome.

Deputy Mick Wallace: America has been at war, in the form of troops on the ground, air strikes, drone assassination missions, bloody and violent occupations and illegal covert special operations, almost non-stop since the Vietnam War in more than half a century of bloodshed, terror and violence. In recent years, the Americans have invaded more than 20 countries without United Nations sanction, thereby breaching international law. However, Ireland supports them at every turn and the hypocrisy is frightening. It is not long ago since Members were absolutely shocked by the beheadings carried out by the Islamic State, which are shocking. However, when the Minister went on a trade mission to Saudi Arabia, I asked him whether he had raised the issue of human rights and he replied that trade missions are not the place to raise human rights issues effectively. We appear to have no problem with the fact that an average of 20 beheadings per month take place in Saudi Arabia but yet, we support United States-led sanctions against Russia, which are damaging our own agriculture trade. Can the Minister please

explain the basis of this double standard?

In addition, at the International Atomic Energy Agency conference, a vote will be taken tomorrow on a draft resolution from 18 Arab nations that proposes to compel Israel to join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. How mad is it that Israel has never signed up to this? As Ireland voted against this resolution last year, how does the Government intend to vote this time? Israel's recent campaign of collective punishment against the people of Gaza, in which more than 500 children were killed, is nothing short of a genocide. Ireland's decision to abstain from the vote on the Human Rights Council resolution setting up a commission of inquiry into Gaza was a betrayal of these innocent people. Why do we stay silent on the issue of Gaza?

Deputy Finian McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Richard Bruton: There were a lot of questions there that were rolled into one.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Three.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: I hope the Minister has all the answers.

Deputy Peter Mathews: It was a cluster-question.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is all about an ethical foreign policy.

Deputy Richard Bruton: As for the position with regard to ISIS or ISIL, it undoubtedly is an extraordinary challenge to human rights within the area in which it is operating. As the Deputy rightly pointed out, aid workers and journalists have been assassinated in the most appalling situation. This represents a difficult challenge and the Irish Government certainly is alert to the need to get a long-term resolution there. There is a great deal of extraordinary bitterness between the Sunni and Shi'ite Muslim communities, which has been allowed to fester and there is now a very difficult situation to manage. The Deputy also raised the issue of trade missions and whether one uses such missions as a vehicle for human rights. One plainly does not, as trade missions are about bringing Irish businesses to meet their counterparts in different countries. Ireland trades with many countries, to some with policies to which the Deputy might object. However, one must pursue these issues through the arena in which issues of human rights are resolved.

Deputy Mick Wallace: What about Russia?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The issue regarding sanctions against Russia has arisen within the European Councils in which Ireland, as part of the European Union, has taken a collective view. That action came in the wake of the taking over of Crimea by Russia and, following that, a series of difficulties within Ukraine. All of these issues have been thoroughly debated in the public arena and the European Union has taken the view that sanctions are appropriate. Those sanctions have been limited and have initially targeted individuals who were very close to the regime. There has been an effort to increase the level in order to secure a fair settlement that would resolve what is an extraordinarily difficult situation.

Ireland uses foreign policy in a judicious way and we have always valued our neutral stance, which allows us to take positions in a balanced way. In each of the cases cited, if the Deputy submits questions to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, the latter will provide a thorough briefing. As I said, we pursue a balanced policy and it has always redounded to our re-

spect. This week, once again, there was a recognition that Ireland is playing a very important peacekeeping role, which we will continue to maintain, in the difficult situation in the Middle East. We are committing to maintain our presence there because of the value other countries put on the role of Irish troops and the approach they bring to peacekeeping in the regions where they take it up.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Minister says we have a balanced approach and a neutral position in our foreign policy dealings. Do I take it, then, that we will be voting to have Israel signed up to the non-proliferation treaty tomorrow? In addition, if we are so balanced and neutral, can the Minister explain why, on 1 September, when the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, was asked about the sanctions against Russia, he responded that the invasion of Ukraine is against international law and must stop? On 23 September, when Syria was mentioned to him, he said “targets need to be particularly precise”.

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

Deputy Mick Wallace: There is little sign of balance there. A year ago, the United States threatened to bomb Assad’s forces. Now that country is bombing the latter’s enemies. The place is gone mad and the United States-led militarisation of the whole region is causing chaos. The United States and its allies are at the heart of the problem; they are not the solution.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have a question?

Deputy Dominic Hannigan: He is making a Second Stage speech.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The United States war machine has been nothing short of a destructive force.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is Leaders’ Questions. The Deputy must put a question.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Will we continue to support the promotion of the arms industry, no matter what? Are we no longer to have any individual, unique opinion of our own? Will the Government continue to facilitate imperial warfare through the use of Shannon Airport, which has, at this stage, gone too far?

An Ceann Comhairle: In future, the Deputy must confine himself to one topic on Leaders’ Questions. I was very liberal today because it is his first time.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett should mind his own business. I am trying to guide Deputy Wallace, but people like Deputy Boyd Barrett only disturb the situation.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This issue is the business of all of us.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am trying to be helpful, not obstructive.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I do not doubt Deputy’s Wallace’s concerns about the situation in Syria and Iraq following the takeover by Islamic State in parts of the region. There is no doubt, as he points out, that the Assad regime was under attack from certain groups, and those groups were being supported by other players. Likewise, there is no doubt that some of the behaviour of those in the Islamic State represents an affront to any reasonable approach. Islamic State is a piracy - not a state, as it presents itself to be.

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On the other issue the Deputy raised, Ireland has a very well worked-out approach in respect of any materials that are exported from the State and which could be used in the arms sector or related sectors. We have an export control system which ensures not only that items which could be used in armoury, but also dual-use items are subject to export licensing. That is rigidly policed by my Department operating in conjunction with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. We are very alert to the dangers in this regard.

The Deputy should address his questions on the position that Ireland will take up in forthcoming votes to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, who can give him the detailed position.

Order of Business

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): It is proposed to take No. 15a, motion re ministerial rota for parliamentary questions; No. 15b, motion re membership of committees; No. 4, Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014 - Second Stage (resumed); and No. 5, Sport Ireland Bill 2014 - Order for Second Stage and Second Stage. It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that Nos. 15a and 15b shall be decided without debate. Private Members' business shall be No. 159, motion re housing (resumed), to conclude at 9 p.m. tonight, if not previously concluded.

It is proposed that 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 - Second Stage (resumed).

An Ceann Comhairle: There is one proposal to be put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with Nos. 15a and 15b agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The national cultural institutions Bill, which is on the long list, will revise the governance arrangements for cultural institutions, including the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Will this Bill include provisions dealing with the short-term appointment of board members in order that they should qualify for Seanad elections? What is the Minister's view, as a Minister of considerable experience and integrity-----

An Ceann Comhairle: This is the Order of Business. Does the Deputy have a question on promised legislation?

Deputy Dara Calleary: -----of the charade that is occurring in the other House, with the appointment of a person to the board of a cultural institution which will come under the Bill to which I referred, in order to qualify that individual to stand for a Seanad by-election?

An Ceann Comhairle: That question is not in order.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have asked about a Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: To which legislation is the Deputy referring?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I referred to the national cultural institutions Bill. In addition, an election to the other House is a matter of business for this House.

An Ceann Comhairle: However, it is not in order to raise it on the Order of Business. The

Deputy can raise it at another time.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Bill to which the Deputy referred will be brought forward late next year.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is sometimes fun to go through the new legislative programme at the beginning of the parliamentary year to discover which Bills have fallen backward, moved forward or remained in the same position. Section A lists Bills that are expected to be brought forward this term, while section B includes those Bills for which the heads have been agreed. In the last session, the then Minister for Health promised that the national paediatric hospital development board (amendment) Bill would be forthcoming in that session, the same undertaking having been given in previous sessions. Now we see that the legislation has moved to section C on the legislative programme. The announcement by the Government at the beginning of its term in office of its intention to proceed with the establishment of a national children's hospital was welcome. The question is why there is this delay in putting together a legislative framework for the development board, which is already in place? Why is it not possible to indicate at this stage when that Bill will be published? It should be one of the priority Bills, given that it is concerned with underwriting a huge investment by the State in paediatric services.

Deputy Richard Bruton: There is a great deal of planning going on within the Department of Health on this particular project, but I do not have a publication date for the Bill. The A list is put together by the Whips and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, based on their confidence of which business can be delivered to the House. The publication of the legislative programme gives Deputies an opportunity to prepare for the debate on those Bills which are closest to delivery. It is a normal approach to managing business. However, I will seek information on the Deputy's behalf regarding the status of the particular Bill to which he referred.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The problem is that it has dropped from the B list to the C list. This indicates that the heads of Bill have not even been agreed, whereas the indication last session was that it had reached that stage.

Deputy Richard Bruton: In general, where Bills are included on the A list, it means their heads have been agreed by Government and they are expected to be published this session. The Bill we are discussing is not yet at that stage.

Deputy Brian Walsh: The Minister will be the first to agree that the seed capital relief scheme has been very successful in attracting investment in companies. In the context of the finance Bill, does he expect any amendments to be brought forward to allow those provisions to cover sole traders who might wish to avail of a similar relief?

An Ceann Comhairle: That matter would be better dealt with by way of a parliamentary question.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Yes, it would. All I can say is that the Minister for Finance is examining that particular scheme.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The European Stability Mechanism (amendment) Bill is promised legislation to allow for the creation and operation of the ESM's direct recapitalisation instrument. Have the heads been cleared by Cabinet and is it likely to be brought before the House before the end of this session? Have the heads of the credit guarantee (amendment) Bill

been cleared and is it likely to be brought before the House?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The first Bill was cleared by Cabinet this week and will be discussed by the end of October. The heads of the credit guarantee (amendment) Bill have been approved and we will bring them to the committee so that it can have an input into the pre-legislative phase.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Constitutional Convention, of which I was a member, successfully concluded its deliberations. There are a number of outstanding reports to be debated in the House and to which the Government must respond. Will the Chief Whip, on behalf of the Government, give us a date for a debate because it is important we bring the work of the Constitutional Convention to finality in this House?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I understand the Chief Whip has had a meeting on that and he is hopeful one of the reports will be before the House next week for debate.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Will general practitioners get a proper, practical and workable contract rather than the unworkable contract which is on the table currently? This relates to the health information Bill.

Deputy Richard Bruton: That Bill will be taken next year. On the wider issue, I understand discussions are taking place with the Irish Medical Organisation.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: On assuming the leadership of the Labour Party, the Tánaiste expressed great concerns about the levels of pay in this country and announced that as part of her price for continuing-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Could I remind you that this is the Order of Business?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: -----in government, the Government would immediately bring in legislation to establish a commission on low pay. According to this list, the legislation just to establish the commission to look at the subject will be brought forward at some unspecified time next year. It has not even been approved by Government yet. Will the Minister confirm that is the case because if it is, it calls the Tánaiste's genuineness into account?

Deputy Richard Bruton: It is certainly promised legislation. It is part of the revised agreement between the parties which the Deputy rightly said followed the Tánaiste assuming the leadership of the Labour Party. It will be developed by the Minister of State in my Department, Deputy Nash. He has already engaged in a number of meetings both here and in other jurisdictions to examine best practice in this approach. This is a priority for Government but it will not be on this list until a legislative proposal is set out in a framework. Work is very actively being undertaken in my Department and we will be in a position to brief Cabinet in due course of the approach that will be taken.

Deputy Ray Butler: I refer to the social welfare Bill and measures to be announced in the budget. Will the Government look at the Mangan report on the new social insurance stamp for the self-employed? It is a huge issue and everybody wants such a stamp. When is publication of the family leave Bill to consolidate with amendments all family leave legislation expected?

Deputy Richard Bruton: As the Deputy knows, there is an annual social welfare Bill which incorporates any changes that would be introduced into systems, such as social insurance. That would be a matter for budgetary consideration. The family leave Bill will be intro-

duced early next year.

Deputy Robert Troy: Last week I raised the issue of the Government's independent rapporteur on child protection. His report was given the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in January or February of this year and it has yet to be laid before the House. Could I get an indication as to when that report will be laid before the House?

I refer to the independent commission of investigation into the mother and baby homes. We all agree it is important that we get the terms of reference right. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has engaged widely with the interested parties but the Government promised that the terms of reference would be published before the summer recess in July of this year. It is now almost October and we are still awaiting publication of the terms of reference. One of the key issues here relates to the adoption (tracing and information) Bill to give people who were adopted, whether forcibly, illegally or otherwise, the right to their identity. When will the terms of reference be published and when will the important adoption (tracing and information) Bill be brought before the House?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I understand the Tánaiste is replying to the Deputy in regard to the rapporteur's report. The hope is that it will be laid before the House shortly. In regard to the terms of reference, there have been some changes in ministerial office but it continues to be a priority so I do not think there will be a delay. I think the adoption (tracing and information) Bill will be brought forward next year. Much work has been done by the Attorney General in that regard and advice has been given. It is hoped that Bill will be presented next year.

Deputy Arthur Spring: The Government promised there would be free GP for those under six years of age. It then promised the legislation would be enacted by July 2014. The Minister for Health has indicated that he is unsure of the timeframe for when it will be implemented. It is a deliverable for this Government but we do not have a timeframe for it. Is there any certainty in Cabinet as to how this will be developed and is there a timeframe around the negotiations with the Irish Medical Organisation and the general practitioners?

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not really a matter for the Order of Business because it has nothing to do with legislation.

Deputy Arthur Spring: It relates to promised legislation.

Deputy Richard Bruton: This is part of the revised programme for Government. The Government intends to implement this but negotiations are an essential part of rolling out this commitment. The Minister is committed to delivering it as quickly as he can but the State must negotiate terms for the delivery. One cannot set a firm date until one has-----

Deputy Arthur Spring: We have one.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The issue of negotiations is a crucial part of this.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The lesson is not to make promises.

Deputy Pat Deering: As the Minister well knows, the south east of the country faces a difficulty from an unemployment point of view. One of the best ways to try to sort out that issue is through education. As the Minister is probably aware, Carlow IT and Waterford IT have done much work in proposing the formation of a technological university. Will the Minister give me a timescale on when the technological universities Bill will be introduced? In regard

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to planning legislation, when will legislation be introduced to underpin the Construction 2020 strategy?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I understand the technological universities Bill will be taken this session. I know the planning legislation is being treated as a priority by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly, and it is hoped it will be brought to Government this session.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I was going to ask about the planning legislation also. Has the noise nuisance Bill completely gone off the clár? There are a couple of issues in the Minister's and my constituency and this could be important legislation in respect of them.

I refer to an earlier discussion and the proposal by the Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, to give families €5 or €10 per week back in the budget in a few weeks time. Has any consideration been given simply to scrapping the water tax at least until the general election? Perhaps the general election could be used as a referendum to decide whether we should go ahead with this morass that is Irish Water and this terrible imposition.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please resume your seat, Deputy.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: This is becoming the straw that broke the camel's back.

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I am just asking-----

An Ceann Comhairle: On the Order of Business.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: -----if the Government will give consideration to removing this tax.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please resume your seat.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: That could be a proposal for budget 2015.

An Ceann Comhairle: What legislation-----

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: As Deputy McDonald said earlier, we are crushing-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please resume your seat. I call the Minister to address the noise nuisance Bill.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I do not have a date for it.

Deputy James Bannon: In light of the presence of Asian clam in the hot water stretch of the River Shannon at Lanesborough, County Longford, we have had previous outbreaks in 2010 in the rivers Barrow and the Nore. This is a dangerous species which can wipe out native fish stocks. It can be carried by nets, boats, fishing rods, clothing and cruisers. When will we have the inland fisheries (modernisation and consolidation) Bill? I understand it is expected in 2015 but it is urgently needed now. We have been forewarned and we should bring the Bill forward at the earliest opportunity.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It is listed for next year but I will convey the Deputy's concern to the relevant Minister.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I have acknowledged on a number of occasions the good work that the Government has done on the issue of the Magdalen laundries. However, there was a specific commitment in the programme for Government regarding the 32 survivors of Thalidomide. The previous Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, abysmally failed to address the plight of those people. Can we get an assurance that the present Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, will now take on board the commitment made in the programme for Government and will do something concrete to resolve their plight?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I am not in a position to give the Deputy a detailed answer. I will bring the matter to the attention of the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, so that he can issue a reply to the Deputy.

Deputy Joe Carey: I ask the Minister when he expects the credit guarantee (amendment) Bill to come before the House?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I addressed that issue already in response to Deputy Durkan. We have approved the heads of the Bill and they are going to the Oireachtas committee to give its members an opportunity to comment on the proposals. We will then proceed to introduce it to the House.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 9th March, 2011, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Finance

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 9th March, 2011, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Education and Skills.”

Question put and agreed to.

Membership of Committees: Motion

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

That Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin (*Minister of State at the Departments of Justice and Equality and Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht*) be discharged from the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and that Deputy Ciara Conway be appointed in substitution for him.

That Deputy Ann Phelan (*Minister of State at the Departments of Agriculture, Food*

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and the Marine and Transport, Tourism and Sport) be discharged from the Select Committee on Transport and Communications and that Deputy Anne Ferris be appointed in substitution for her.”

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended at 12.45 p.m. and resumed at 1.45 p.m.

Topical Issue Debate

Acting Chairman (Deputy Olivia Mitchell): The first issue is in the names of Deputies Connaughton and Griffin but I understand it is to be withdrawn, pending a Minister becoming available.

Deputy Paul J. Connaughton: I believe it will be taken next Tuesday.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I understand a Minister from the Department of Education and Skills will be available next Tuesday.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Olivia Mitchell): Is that acceptable?

Deputy Paul J. Connaughton: We received notification at 11.20 a.m. from the Ceann Comhairle that this issue had been selected for debate. I only received a call at 1.20 p.m. to inform me that nobody from the Department of Education and Skills was available to take it. Why was there a delay in telling us that nobody would be available? Our staff had left when the call was received but we were told we could take the debate today if we so wished. It is a very serious issue and we deserve a bit more respect than that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Olivia Mitchell): I will mention your concern to the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I understand the Minister for Education and Skills is dealing with legislation. It is not as if any disrespect is intended.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The Minister for Education and Skills is attending a meeting of the education committee. I request that the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O’Sullivan, take the issue next Tuesday. It is her direct responsibility and it is very important for her to be here to answer our concerns.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Olivia Mitchell): The Deputy can request it but there can be no guarantee.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: No, that cannot be guaranteed, although Ministers endeavour to do their best to be here in person.

Schools Building Projects Status

Deputy Frank Feighan: I am delighted to have the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, here, as she is very aware of this issue and she will relay the seriousness of the issue to the Minister. I thank her for attending.

We want Cloonakilla national school at Bealnamulla, which is the Monksland area of County Roscommon, to be included in the schools building programme. There is an urgent need for funding to progress the new school project at Cloonakilla national school. This south Roscommon school is located in an area with the fastest growing population in the midlands, and as far back as 2006, the Department acknowledged that enrolment projections at Cloonakilla national school indicated the need for a 16-teacher school. The Department subsequently acquired a greenfield site a year later for the development. A design team was appointed in 2011 and architectural planning commenced. The project has reached stage 2(b) of architectural planning, an advanced point which includes securing planning permission, a fire certificate, a disability access certificate and preparation of tender documents. Currently, many pupils are being accommodated in prefabs, with the school having to turn away new enrolments this year because of capacity issues. I understand a new portakabin joined the five others on the one-acre site in August.

I have called to the school on two occasions and I met the principal, Ms Mary O'Rourke. In my time going around to schools, I have not seen anything quite like this, with queues of parents outside. I ask the Minister to do everything possible to move on this issue. The school services the Monksland and Bealnamulla area, which has seen enrolments increase from 266 last year to 310 pupils this year. The school is turning pupils away. I ask the Minister to see if we can get the funding for this school as soon as possible.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): I am taking this issue on behalf of the Minister for Education and Skills, and I will convey the Deputy's concerns to her. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it provides the opportunity to clarify the current position of the major capital project for Cloonakilla national school. The Deputy is aware of the demographic challenge facing the education system in the coming years. Primary enrolments, which have already risen substantially in recent years, are projected to rise by over 36,000 pupils by 2016, and they are set to continue to rise, with a likely peak at around 574,000 pupils to be catered for in 2018. This compares with some 526,422 pupils enrolled in primary schools for the 2012 and 2013 school year. It is vital, therefore, that there is sufficient school accommodation to cope with these pupil enrolments.

In order to meet the needs of our growing population of school-going children, the Department must establish new schools as well as extending or replacing a number of existing schools in areas where demographic growth has been identified. The delivery of these new schools, together with extension projects to meet future demand, will be the main focus of the Department's budget for the coming year. The Department would seek to provide additional accommodation to meet demographic growth but it would also aim to ensure maximum use of existing school accommodation. A priority, therefore, for the Department is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking places.

For school planning purposes, Cloonakilla national school is contained in the Athlone school feeder area, which has been identified by the Department as an area requiring increased accommodation to meet demographic demand over the period between now and 2019. A major school building project at Coosan national school has already been announced and is being progressed as part of the Department's five-year construction plan to meet this demand. An additional project is also being progressed through the Department's architectural planning process in respect of Cloonakilla national school. The project at Cloonakilla comprises a new 16-classroom school with ancillary accommodation. This project has reached an advanced stage of architectural planning, stage 2(b) which includes securing planning permission, fire

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certificate, disability access certificate and the preparation of tender documents. All relevant statutory approvals have been obtained and the design team is working on the preparation of the tender documentation. The design team expects to be in a position to submit the stage 2(b) report to the Department for review in the coming weeks.

Due to competing demands on the Department's capital budget, it is not possible to progress all projects within the Department's building programme to construction concurrently. However, the project for Cloonakilla national school is now well placed to progress to tender and construction in the event that further funding becomes available to the Department in the future. I hope this is of some help to the Deputy. I will relay his concerns on this issue.

Deputy Frank Feighan: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. It was not the reply that I expected but if some further funding becomes available, this is a needy case. The parents and teachers in that area are at their wits' end wondering why their school did not get the go-ahead. I am sure there are schools all over the country competing for funding. In my constituency this school is crying out for funding. I would like to see this being progressed. We have a greenfield site with portakabins, which does not make sense. If funding becomes available I would appreciate if this school were put at the top of the agenda. I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House today. I wish the new Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy O'Sullivan, well in her job. She is doing an excellent job.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: Maybe the public does not understand this but while some schools have progressed to a certain point, others may not be as advanced or may not get planning permission or the other things they need. It is important that they are ready to take advantage when space becomes available on the list.

National Cultural Institutions

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Our cultural institutions are a shop window to our culture and heritage. We have to note with alarm the concerns being expressed about the National Museum which says it has to cut back on tours and opening hours. The National Library and the National Archives are stretched to breaking point. Their funding compares very unfavourably with that in other countries, for example, Denmark and Scotland.

We all know the great affection people who were not born here have for this country. Some identify with it and that affinity brings a tremendous benefit because they come here as tourists and buy Irish produce, and are well-disposed to Ireland in all sorts of ways. Our cultural institutions must be resourced as part of that. The grant aid to the National Museum has been cut by 40% from €19 million to €11.5 million per annum. The National Museum and the National Library have also lost income from other sources, such as sales in the book shops. We lost our public records in 1922 which should make us all the more careful with our records. Only 1% of the National Library collection is conserved to international standards. In the National Archives there are 70,000 boxes of records that have not even been catalogued and cannot be searched.

These institutions do fantastic work on a shoestring. They are at breaking point, and have been for some time. The amount of money taken from them is disproportionately large in comparison with that taken from some other public services. Their contents belong to the Irish people. The Department's role is to preserve and protect them. There has to be serious rein-

vestment in all those institutions. The amount of money needed, relative to the return, is small.

2 o'clock

For example, people queue down the stairs in the National Library each July and August to avail of the genealogy services it runs. The library is trying to maintain such services, which matter greatly to the public. People are prepared to come into the library to engage with the records stored there. I would like to Minister to set out her approach to the budget with regard to all of these institutions. Does she accept that they are at breaking point at this stage? If so, it is obvious what approach she will take at the Cabinet table.

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank Deputy Catherine Murphy for raising this matter. I agree with her that our national cultural institutions, including the National Library, are doing fantastic work even though they have unavoidably suffered cuts in their allocations in recent years. Every publicly funded body has had to deal with this difficult reality during the economic crisis. I assure the House that the Government has done its utmost to minimise budget cuts to the cultural institutions, in so far as possible, while being cognisant of competing demands on the public finances. Despite these challenging financial circumstances, the National Library has continued to attract increasing numbers of visitors. More than 250,000 people passed through the doors of the library in 2013. In addition, the library has had in excess of 7 million views on its website and its Flickr page and has approximately 10,000 followers on each of Twitter and Facebook. This successful deployment of social media shows that the National Library is a current and vibrant entity that continually reaches out to audiences of all ages.

The National Library's collection has increased in recent years through donations, legal deposits and purchases. There are more than 1 million printed books in the collection. Among the most notable acquisitions are the Fishamble Theatre archives, which is a valuable resource that contains early material from playwrights who went on to achieve great success. The library has also acquired the important Haberer Heaney collection of letters that are of academic interest and of interest to those who wish to obtain a fuller picture of this great man and Nobel laureate. The library recently acquired the Christy Brown archive, which will shortly be made available online.

The National Photographic Archive, which is a key part of the National Library, comprises approximately 5.2 million photographs, the vast majority of which are Irish. The subject matter ranges from topographical views to studio portraits, and from political events to early tourist photographs. The library maintains an active collecting policy. Material is constantly added to the collections, often following generous donations from various sources. If it is said that a picture paints a thousand words, then the comparative collection in the National Photographic Archive is no less than astounding. In addition, the archive has hosted several superb exhibitions on the Google cultural institute portal. This is an indication of how current and relevant its collection is.

The National Library has a varied collection consisting of an estimated 170,000 printed items, including historical proclamations, broadsides, broadside ballads, posters, playbills, handbills, concert, theatre and souvenir programmes, memorial cards, calendars, postcards, flyers and pamphlets. It is sometimes easy to overlook such items, which represent a unique snapshot of the national consciousness at a given time. They encapsulate a point in time in Irish history.

The remarkable progress and work of the National Library is to be commended, particularly in a time of economic challenges. We are all aware of the current difficulties. We are working to resolve them in order to put Ireland back once again on a solid financial and economic footing. This will benefit everyone. The dedication and professionalism of the staff and board of the National Library will continue to ensure this national collection is available for future generations.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I recognise much of what the Minister has said from the National Library report that is on my desk. I did not ask for a synopsis of that report; I wanted to hear what the Minister intends to do about it at budget time. Does the Minister accept that we are at a critical point? The Oireachtas allocation to the National Library was €12 million in 2008, but it is just €6.3 million this year. The upshot of this reduction is that fewer people are employed. It is not the only source from which income decreased. The income from royalty and reproduction has decreased by 84% since 2007. Income has decreased across the areas from which the National Library can get income. I would not like to patronise the various institutions by saying they are doing great work without also calling for that to be recognised through the provision of the necessary resources to enable such work to be done.

The National Library's core responsibility is to protect the actual material for which it is responsible. It is not being given an opportunity to carry out that role. There are ways in which things could be done better while reducing costs. I suggest that there could be a combined look at how material is stored off-site in various locations. If someone has to physically retrieve material from three different locations, it can be quite costly. The front-line services to the public are being protected as far as possible. The cost of that is seen in the inability to properly conserve, catalogue and place in the public arena certain kinds of records. We are not getting to see these treasure troves because this service is underfunded. Given that 400,000 people go to the National Museum each year, the notion that we are going to cut down on guided tours and opening hours is absolutely scandalous. At a time when we are trying to build up our tourism numbers, it seems that certain services could be withdrawn because of underfunding in this area. There needs to be a serious look at this. Investment in this area is necessary. I want to hear what the Minister has to say about her approach to the budget. Does she accept that a critical point has been reached?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As I have said, it is unfortunate that all the national cultural institutions, including the National Library, have unavoidably suffered cuts in their allocations in recent years. I accept that it has been very difficult for them. As Minister, I will try do my utmost to minimise any future budget cuts to the cultural institutions. I will do what I can to that end, while being cognisant of competing demands on the public finances.

On the question of storage, I remind the Deputy that the National Archives warehouse project has been approved and will commence in 2015. The National Library is talking to University College Dublin and Trinity College to see whether a combined solution is economically feasible. The amount of genealogical material made available on the Internet by the National Archives has increased in spite of the tight budgets. The 1901 and 1911 census returns have registered more than 1 billion hits. This is a testament to their popularity. I will be pursuing with the boards of the National Library and the National Archives the digitisation of material in both institutions.

Earlier this morning, I spoke to John Harnett, who is the chairman of the Inspiring Ireland international advisory board. I foresee the exciting prospect of making our cultural collections

available online. While the cutbacks are acknowledged, positive developments such as the visitor numbers and the acquisitions must also be recognised and applauded. These achievements have resulted from the hard work of the staff.

Medicinal Products Supply

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Ceann Comhairle's Office for affording me the opportunity to raise this extremely important topic. I ask the Minister for Health to intervene to ensure that the HSE puts in place an early access programme for patients with hepatitis C to a new direct acting antiviral drug. We all know that these patients were infected with hepatitis C through no fault of their own. Their infection came about as a result of negligence on the part of the State.

A couple visited me at my constituency office before the summer recess with a harrowing tale. My constituent, Mrs. Kennedy, who does not mind being named in the House, was infected with hepatitis C 15 years ago. At that time, the then Minister for Health, Deputy Michael Noonan, assured her and approximately 1,000 other patients who were accidentally infected that they would receive the best possible care and treatment. Mrs. Kennedy is now dying from cirrhosis as are around 200 other patients. There is a legal issue here as the court judgment stated that if the condition of patients deteriorated and they developed cirrhosis, their cases could be reopened. However, these people do not have the time to go to court. The Kennedy family examined the possibility of purchasing the new drug privately abroad but to no avail. The cost of purchasing the drug here is close to €50,000.

A consultant from St. Vincent's University Hospital has told me that the drug Sovaldi offers my constituent and many other patients a 90% chance of survival. It has been approved in almost all other European countries but Ireland is lagging behind. The consultant wrote to me informing me that Mrs. Kennedy attends the hepatology clinic at St. Vincent's University Hospital in Dublin and that she was infected with hepatitis C following a contaminated blood transfusion many years ago. She has established liver cirrhosis and has developed a complication called ascites. Without viral eradication, according to the consultant, Mrs. Kennedy's prognosis is poor, with an annual risk of further decompensation or death of approximately 20% per year. Viral eradication could dramatically alter this prognosis and is potentially life-saving. He stated that the current standard method of care, which includes the drug Interferon, would be deleterious to Mrs. Kennedy, given the advanced stage of her liver disease. The consultant maintained that exciting developments in the field of hepatitis C virus biology have led to the development of new direct acting antiviral, DAA, drugs. These agents provide, for the first time, an effective curative therapy for patients with advanced cirrhosis.

The consultant went on to explain that the first DAA drug with potential in these patients has recently been licensed in Europe. The Scottish Medicines Consortium completed its assessment of Sofosbuvir and approved it for use in Scotland. Recently, an early access programme using Sofosbuvir and Daclatasvir in combination has been approved by the NHS in the UK to treat a cohort of 500 patients whose condition is similar to that of Mrs. Kennedy. They are in the advanced stages of the disease and are likely to develop serious complications while awaiting National Institute for Health Care and Excellence, NICE, approval for more widespread use. Early access programmes have been developed and are under way in several other European countries and are providing life-saving therapy to the most critically ill patients. The

consultant also informed me that a funded early access programme for DDA drugs in Ireland would have an enormous impact on Mrs. Kennedy and similar patients, with expected cure rates of greater than 90% and a risk reduction rate for complications from cirrhosis and death of in excess of 80%.

Does the Minister of State agree that these high-risk patients need an early access programme now? Such a programme could be initiated through the Irish Hepatitis C Outcomes Research Network, ICORN, at the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics. If something does not happen in the next few months, these patients will die.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I thank Deputy Troy for raising the issue of hepatitis C which is not just topical, but also a significant public health problem with its associated burden on individuals, families, health services, communities and society. We all know the origins of the difficulties for many hepatitis C patients in Ireland, although the people to whom Deputy Troy refers are not the only sufferers in the country. We are talking about a specific cohort of people in this instance but there are other hepatitis C sufferers in Ireland.

The development of new and innovative medicines for the treatment of hepatitis C is an opportunity to alleviate the burden for patients, their families and society as a whole. There are a number of new direct acting antiviral, DAA, therapies licensed in Europe for the treatment of hepatitis C. It is expected that several other therapies will be licensed in the coming months. However, these products have a significant cost. One of these new treatment regimens includes Sofosbuvir or Sovaldi which has been the subject of recent attention. The HSE received an application in February 2014 for the inclusion of Sofosbuvir in the GMS and community drugs schemes. The application is being considered in line with procedures and time scales agreed by the Department and the HSE with the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association for the assessment of new medicines. I am sure that Deputy Troy would agree that we must ensure the safety of patients in Ireland.

In accordance with these procedures, the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics initiated a pharmacoeconomic evaluation of this new product in June 2014. The health technology assessment report on Sofosbuvir is expected in mid-October. This evaluation will provide detailed information on the potential budget impact of the medicine. It will also assess whether the products are cost effective at the price quoted by the manufacturer, and I am sure the Deputy will accept the importance of that point. This evaluation provides valuable information to enable the HSE to take a decision on the funding of this new medicine and ensuring that it is clinically appropriate, fair, consistent and sustainable.

With the advent of these new treatment regimens which are better tolerated by patients, it is necessary to consider how to optimise access to these treatments in a managed way over the coming years. In that regard, my Department is chairing an expert advisory group to advise the Minister for Health on the optimal management and treatment strategy for patients with hepatitis C. This group will advise on the development of a public health plan that will focus on the treatment and management of people with hepatitis C which will lead to reduction in prevalence in the population and a reduction in infection and spread of hepatitis C. Decisions around the feasibility of a HSE early access programme to these drugs will be considered in this context.

I hope this information is of some help to the Deputy. We are all very conscious of the urgent need as outlined by him.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Minister of State for the response but she has not answered my fundamental question, namely, whether the Department of Health will instruct the HSE to initiate an early access programme. Quite frankly, we do not have time for feasibility studies. The Minister of State made reference to significant costs but these people were infected as a result of negligence on the part of the State. What cost do we put on a person's life? That is the fundamental question. We do not have time to wait. Other countries did not wait. This drug is being used in England, Scotland and other countries across Europe.

The Minister of State also made reference to the expert advisory group - the setting up of which I welcome - which will look at the long-term roll-out of treatment for these patients. However, those same patients feel that they do not have any input into that process. They are also very concerned that they also have no input into the decision-making process regarding an early access programme. That is the issue we are discussing here today. We are talking about a specific cohort of patients who urgently need an early access programme. These patients have been identified. The Minister of State is worried about costs. That group, ICORN, has identified the patients most in need of this treatment and it is willing to identify the patients who should avail of the early access programme so that we can keep control of the costs.

We need to act now to ensure that my constituent and in the region of 200 others do not die. We simply do not have time to wait. If we do not act now, people will die prematurely.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I am not certain Deputy Troy heard fully all of my reply. I stated that the health technology assessment report is expected in mid-October. We are almost at the end of September and it is just another month away. It is important, and I am not dismissing for one minute the urgency of all of this.

We are also taking a serious look at clinicians who would have to identify who within the 200 to 300 - it would not be only 200 - would have significant clinical need. We all are conscious of that. Equally, for our own sake - because there have been issues with medications, although I am not saying that in this case it is so - it is important that within our own domain we have clinical governance over what we use in this country. I have always been a strong advocate of that. We cannot merely accept what others say.

In terms of cost, which is an issue, it is a terrible pity that we do not have some kind of collaboration within the European Union on such drugs. If there were and if one decided to use it, the bigger the market the better the deal and, therefore, the better the service one would be able to get for those who need such extremely expensive but innovative and exciting drugs. We must accept that medication is changing constantly.

It will be mid-October when we will have this report back to us and a decision will be made then. That is not too long to wait. If we were talking about June next year, I would be agreeing with Deputy Troy.

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Clare Daly: I listened before lunch to Deputy Buttimer berate the Opposition for the fact that there were no Opposition Members present when he was giving us his deliberations

and it is somewhat striking that there are no Government representatives here now either. It is a ridiculous point to make, given that what is happening in the health service and the future of that service is being dictated outside, rather than inside, of here. I refer to the fact that today there is the first ever GP protest outside the doors of this House because ordinary doctors feel they have not got the wherewithal to continue and many new entrants to the profession are being forced to leave these shores because they simply cannot make ends meet. We listened to them on the radio this morning talk about the significant reduction in income to their practices.

We must see this Bill, yet another on the health service, in the context of the overall situation with the health service, which is not unfair to characterise as a bit of a shambles. There was the recent appointment of the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, who verified what we all knew anyway about the ridiculous universal health insurance proposal that the Government had put forward lying in tatters. As nearly once a week there is some sort of health service amendment Bill in the House, we must start by asking whether the best way forward is this patchwork quilt of changes onto a dysfunctional health service and whether we would be better off stepping back and looking at the whole proposition.

Sadly, in terms of context, the Irish people have never had access to a universal health care system. We rely on a procedure whereby there is a means-tested medical card giving access to State-funded care or, if one does not meet that means test, one can opt to apply for private health insurance, or else one can take one's chances and not do anything. The VHI was set up as a semi-State body with the Minister for Health as the sole shareholder. In the absence of proper State-funded health care, it was supposed to provide affordable health insurance subsidised through income tax relief for those who would not qualify for a medical card. Instead, there is this hybrid system which is in tatters. In terms of private health insurance, while it may mean faster access to care facilities, in fact, waiting lists are still a problem. The reason for such waiting lists is that the number of inpatient beds has been cut by over 5,000 since 1981, and this has not been compensated for by the increase in day places. Cuts in public beds have led to growing inequalities of access, waiting lists and all of the other problems that were highlighted earlier in the debate. There is an Irish apartheid in the health system. The idea of universal health care and all of the other grandiose proposals that were flown like kites reflect an influence from the private health market and the globalised private health insurance allegedly promoting competition but, in effect, introducing an American health model into Europe which the public does not want. We must look at any changes we make in the context that in basic health care we are in Ireland way behind the European average. Ireland has lower mortality ages, a higher burden of chronic long-term illnesses, poorer outcomes and survival rates etc. We must look at this legislation in the context of that background.

I do not agree with the piecemeal approach. In an overall sense, it is good to raise the standards of health and care professionals. The idea, for example, of including opticians, is a laudable objective, but we would be one-sided if we looked at the addition of that profession being covered by CORU and did not look at the experience of how CORU has been working already. If the body that is supposed to regulate is not working all that well, there is no point in adding a new profession. I would like to look at that because the addition of opticians *per se* in some ways is neither here nor there. The opticians made the point articulated already that it is a little excessive that the new registration would require all staff, including non-clinical staff, to be registered with CORU. That seems excessive. Such non-clinical staff are not involved in medical procedures and in giving medical advice and in that sense, they should not be included.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: They are not.

Deputy Clare Daly: They will be reassured by that. It does not get us away from the bigger picture of what being included in CORU means. Have we created a myth that this is a professional standard, to which the professionals are being asked to sign up and which means that everything is going well, or is it merely a fig-leaf where everything is not going well? It also does not get us away from the question of how to improve standards because simply bringing a profession under the scrutiny of CORU will not automatically achieve that. I will use the example of social workers to illustrate that point. There is a crisis in social work at present. Everyone will be aware of the tragic reports of thousands of children waiting to be assigned a social worker because of the shortage and yet less than 3,700 social workers have signed up to register with CORU. Hundreds of those social workers have not been approved. Earlier in the year, the former Minister, the new Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Reilly, told us he would give us a report on these figures, but there is a differential in that regard. We have been led to believe by some social workers that some people are being paid by the HSE but have not been approved by or registered with CORU while qualified social workers are struggling to come up with the fees for the body. We need to examine this anomaly. How can health professions conform to a standard if it is being implemented against the backdrop of vicious cuts in health budgets? Is it the case that these professions will be scapegoated for not meeting the standards expected of them as a result? They have to pay a fee to CORU but get no representation if something goes wrong.

The point was previously made that these fees are applicable to students and the unemployed who registered with CORU before they qualified. This led to scenarios of unemployed social workers not being accepted for interviews unless they had already registered with CORU. At the time the fee was €350, ten times the amount charged in Britain. While I accept this fee has been reduced since, where is the analysis that CORU was working to raise standards? How can standards be raised against the overall backdrop of cuts in health services?

For example, the Nurses and Midwives Act 2011 was meant to provide an efficient, transparent and accountable regulatory system, in effect good governance. Who is going to argue against good governance? No one. That is an objective to which we all strive. Those at the coalface, namely, the nurse and midwives, however, made the point that section 40 of that Act has led to serious problems and incursions into their professional autonomy which needs to be re-examined. As a result, we have had cases of midwives being suspended with patients left without appropriate care. There is a belief there is micro-management, making it difficult for these professionals to do their job and threatening their professional autonomy and livelihoods because of this Big-Brother-is-watching-you scenario. Some involved have described it like an Iranian theocracy where orthodox viewpoints are foisted upon the State which in turn creates a state-surveillance system, monitoring people trying to do their jobs. How will the regulatory process enable professional autonomy to be maintained and strengthened for the professions involved? That is critical if we are looking at good governance.

In harmonising this Bill with existing legislation, how will a transparent process of redress for recipients of services be built into the regulatory framework? As well as the professionals involved, patients and service-users need to be protected too. We need to get the balance right between these two. I do not have a particular problem with opticians being included in this system but the debate needs to go far more than that so as to examine how the health professions are regulated. Is it reasonable to expect health professionals to conform to standards against a backdrop of cutbacks in health services which make it difficult for them to do their jobs? Are we setting up the scenario where they could actually be scapegoated if something goes wrong

because of cutbacks?

Section 3 deals with the statutory changes for those who support residential support services. As the home help area operates without proper scrutiny by HIQA, the Health Information and Quality Authority, and other organisations, how are we monitoring this area? There have been horrific reports of how many people who availed of FETAC level 5 courses to upskill to work in this area are going into an industry that is more or less unregulated. Many of them are asked to care for someone for half an hour some 30 miles away but do not get a basic allowance or recompense. This undermining of the HSE system of home help is not healthy. If we are talking about improving governance in health care and of health care professionals, we need to examine it at this level. If people have to pay for these services, then they have to be on a better regulatory footing than they are currently.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call on Deputy Seán Kyne who I understand is sharing time with Deputy Dan Neville. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I welcome the introduction of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014. The regulation of health services is essential for patients and also for genuine professionals who spend so much time training and studying to become practitioners. Unfortunately, in most sectors we have seen cases where regulation failed, leading to negative consequences. However, there are few other sectors than health care where regulatory failures can be as devastating and actually be a matter of life or death. The Bill represents another step by the Government in further regulating health services and improving safety, confidence and, hopefully, medical outcomes.

The Bill builds upon the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 which empowers the Health and Social Care Council, CORU, to regulate 12 professional groups. That principal Act played an important part in establishing that a health or social care profession is any profession in which a person exercises skill or judgment relating to preservation or improvement of health; diagnosis, treatment or care of persons with illnesses; resolving, through guidance or counselling of psychological conditions; and care activities for any person in need of protection or support.

These definitions emphasise how important this area is and how legislative amendments must be thought through and thoroughly drafted. We are gradually moving, perhaps not fast enough, from a system whereby only five professions were regulated, namely, doctors, dentists, nurses, opticians and pharmacists, to a system where the majority of medical professions will be regulated. This is necessary for several reasons.

First, advances in medical treatment and health care in recent decades have caused the establishment or recognition of new professions, of new distinct areas of care including dietitians, occupational therapists, biochemists, social care workers, speech and language therapists and radiographers. We can see the continued progression of this trend in this Bill where it divides the category of radiographer into two - the first being radiographer, the second, radiation therapist. The former is concerned predominantly with the traditional role of diagnostic services in hospital X-ray departments while the latter is more concerned with radiation treatment services for cancer patients, an area of treatment which is thankfully improving and advancing all the time.

Second, self or voluntary regulation has been the norm. While this type of system might

be less expensive, faster to organise or in decision-making, it can also have substantial failings in independence, transparency and objectivity. Oversight and scrutiny will be better served by having independent regulation. The current Health and Social Care Council achieves this by getting the balance right on the council. The council has 12 representatives, one from each of the professions, as well as 13 representatives not connected to the professions, thereby ensuring a lay majority on the council.

Provision of proper, adequate care and treatment is an integral aim of our health care system. However, of equal importance should be the aim of keeping people out of the hospital system by providing enhanced primary care in the community. The Association of Optometrists Ireland welcomes this Bill, describing it as good for eye care. The association has also identified that it will facilitate the development of the role of optometrists by enabling them to “provide more care at primary level in the community rather than have to make immediate referrals to secondary or tertiary care”. This is an objective which must be facilitated by the Government and the Department of Health.

Another important objective to be achieved is ensuring the public has confidence in health care and in the professionals administering that care. It is particularly important considering the vulnerable position which a person with an illness will be in. It is thus encouraging to see the amendments contained in sections 27, 29 and 38. Section 27, which amends section 53 of the principal Act, promotes the public interest by enabling the council to cancel registration of a professional in the case of a complaint on the grounds of a conviction secured by judge and jury. Similarly, section 29 amends section 60 of the primary Act which empowers the council to apply to the High Court to secure an order suspending the registration of a practitioner. However, in accordance with natural justice, the hearing will not be held in public in order to protect the reputation of the practitioner pending the outcome of investigations.

Another section - section 38 - creates a new section in the primary Act which further strengthens the council’s powers to protect the public through powers to investigate contraventions of the Act by persons other than practitioners. The Bill continues the important role of regulating medical services. It strikes the important balance of ensuring the highest safeguards for the public while providing certainty and reassurance to genuine practitioners. I welcome the Bill.

Deputy Dan Neville: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Bill, which is fully supported by all in the House. This is the second amendment to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005. I welcome the amendment. I wish to restate what I said during the debate in 2005 on the proposal that psychotherapy and counselling be included as designated professions. At present, there is no regulation in this country for the registration of psychotherapists and counsellors and no State control over the qualifications held by those practising in the area. It is dangerous for untrained and unskilled people to probe a person’s unconscious. They are dealing with human vulnerability and serious damage could be done to such delicate people.

The Act provides for the registration of persons qualifying under the title of a designated profession for the determination of complaints relating to their fitness to practise. Some 12 professions are listed as designated professions under the Act and the Bill introduces two further professions. The professions of psychotherapy and counselling are not included. When I challenged the former Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, Mr. Tim O’Malley, who dealt with the Bill in 2004, he stated that the professions included in the legislation had become so regulated by a process of discussion and consensus. However, at the time psychotherapists and counsellors failed to agree an approach to such registration. The then Minister of State

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indicated that statutory regulation in such circumstances would have serious legal implications, which we accepted. He accepted the principle that all psychotherapists and counsellors should be properly qualified and pointed out that he would not be in a position to regulate the area without consultation with the professional groups involved. He was anxious to obtain agreement.

In response to the position of the then Minister of State, 22 organisations established a psychological therapies forum for counselling and psychotherapy. The forum accepted that it is imperative that the public is protected by the promotion of high standards of conduct, education, training and competence among the professionals of counselling and psychotherapy. The forum pointed out that all of its constituent bodies provided a code of ethics by which their members must abide. The forum stated that, while this form of self-regulation provided protection to clients of the organisations, it fell short of optimal protection as, under our common law system, it was possible for any person to take the title of counsellor or psychotherapist and practise accordingly, without training or competence. Any person could put up a sign to say that he or she is a counsellor or psychotherapist and charge to perform psychotherapy and counselling, but I am sure Members would agree that it is extremely dangerous for such untrained people do so.

I am aware of the provision of certain courses. One course that ran for a duration of eight weekends lead to one gaining a diploma in eating disorders. I have a copy of the brochure. I was informed the course was only open to professionals. I asked my parliamentary assistant to apply for the course which was to run for eight weekends. The area of eating disorders is one of the most difficult areas involving experience in psychological, psychiatric and physical difficulties. It is a psychiatric disorder that can be fatal for young people. My parliamentary assistant was accepted on the course. The eight-week diploma started at 11 a.m. on Saturday and ended at approximately 4 p.m. on Sunday. The diploma was provided by the Eating Disorder Resource Centre of Ireland. My parliamentary assistant received a note, as follows:

Enclosed booking form for 2010. Training commences this Saturday 27 March. I don't have any hard copies of the module info as they are being printed up for next course (2011). It is available online... If you can ring me to confirm if you wish to attend 2010 training course that would be great.

The note was signed by the director and founder, a certified trainer in practitioner skills for eating disorders and obesity. The course duration was eight short weekends to obtain the diploma.

I am aware of another weekend course which led to a higher diploma in suicide studies. It is highly dangerous for people to counsel anyone with suicide ideation following such a short course, as one would not be fully competent or trained to do so. My objective is to include psychotherapy and counselling in the Bill. A leaflet advertising the advanced course in suicide studies states: "Participants will gain sufficient knowledge, skills strategies, and theoretical background to enable them to serve those who are at risk of taking their own lives, those who are survivors of suicide, and the family members of those who have taken their lives." Two weekends cover suicide prevention. Another two weekends cover suicide intervention, while a further two weekends in January cover suicide postvention. Following the course, one is awarded an advanced diploma in suicide studies.

The Health and Social Care Professionals Act, an amendment to which we are discussing, provides a mechanism to drive forward the clinical governance agenda. It creates a framework

through which practitioners are accountable for continually improving the quality of their service and safeguarding high standards of care by creating an environment in which excellence will flourish and optimal protection is offered to members of the public who access psychotherapy and counselling.

I am conscious that my time is running out. I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, on her great interest in this area. It is two years since I raised the matter so she can hardly say I am raising it every day of the week. I also compliment the previous Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, who wrote to me on 20 March 2014. I will read from the letter:

I have today written to Mr. Tom Jordan, Chairman of the Health and Social Care Professionals Council, informing him that I intend, in the public interest, to designate by regulation the profession(s) of counsellor and psychotherapist under section 4(2) of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005.

Under section 4(2) of the Act, I am obliged to consult with the council in the first instance and to give interested persons, organisations and bodies an opportunity to make representations to me concerning the proposed designation. I have requested my officials to put the necessary arrangements in place to initiate this consultation process as soon as possible.

I am also awaiting the 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 H&SCPC [Health and Social Care Professionals Council] of the qualifications of those currently in practice. QQI has now advised that this report will be available in May, 2014.

Once the outcome of the consultation process has been assessed, I will then be in a position to make the decisions necessary to proceed with regulations designating the profession(s) to be regulated and prescribing the title(s) to be protected. The registration board will then be established by [statutory instrument] SI and the Public Appointments Service will be requested to advertise for expressions of interest in being appointed to the registration board.

Can the Minister of State inform us how this has since developed? Mr. Tom Jordan asked to meet me with the chief executive of the Health and Social Care Professionals Council and he informed me of the difficulties he experienced. It is often worth doing something difficult. I compliment the former Minister for Health, Deputy James Reilly, on acting on this issue because some forces suggest this should not happen and things should be more open. I understand how complicated the process of regulation can be and the difficulties involved but it has been done in other countries. I spoke at a conference on this elsewhere in Europe and regulation was in place in that country.

It is important to protect the public from unqualified mavericks who want to make a quick buck from the vulnerabilities and difficulties experienced by those with mental illness and emotional problems. We must protect such individuals as they seek help and doing so will create a framework in which practitioners are accountable for improving service quality. We must safeguard high standards of care by creating an environment in which excellence will flourish and optimal protection is offered to people accessing psychotherapy and counselling.

I have a copy of the report of the Psychological Therapies Forum on public protection and the statutory regulation of counsellors and psychotherapists in Ireland. It is an excellent docu-

ment, though I do not say we should treat it as a bible for this framework. It will be helpful to the Health and Social Care Professionals Council. Some 12 professional organisations are involved and their practitioners are regulated. I do not suggest that psychotherapists and counsellors are not regulated - they are regulated by their professions. We aim to regulate those not already members of those professions. The 22 organisations involved produced the document as a response to the difficulties faced by the former Minister, Tim O'Malley, relating to the original Bill - those difficulties related in part to psychotherapists and counsellors. I congratulate the 22 organisations involved and they include Accord, the Catholic marriage care service, the Association for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy in Ireland, the Irish Association of Cognitive Analytical Therapy, the Irish Association of Alcohol and Addiction Counsellors, the Irish Association of Christian Counsellors, the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, the Irish College of Psychiatrists, the Irish Council for Psychotherapy, which incorporates cognitive behavioural therapy, the Family Therapy Association of Ireland, the Irish Analytical Psychology Association, the Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy and the Irish Forum for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy. I want to give a flavour of how broad this area is.

I know the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, is supportive of this and I have thanked the former Minister, Deputy James Reilly. I had not yet raised this with the new Minister, Deputy Varadkar, but I felt this was an opportunity to do so.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach(Deputy Paul Kehoe): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill as it will bring changes to health professions. If we are to improve the health system changes are necessary. This is a technical Bill with 44 sections and some primary objectives. First, the Opticians Board will be subsumed into the Health and Social Care Professionals Council. Second, the Bill will make amendments to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 to ensure consistency with legislation governing other health regulators. The Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 currently provides regulations for 12 professions, including clinical bio-chemists, dieticians, medical scientists, occupational therapists, orthopaedic physiotherapists, podiatrists, psychologists, radiographers and other social care workers, such as speech and language therapists. CORU now regulates and oversees all of these professions and upholds high standards in professional education, training and competence. All of these professions are phasing in registration - social workers are now obliged to be registered and radiographers will have to be registered by October. Speech and language therapists, dieticians and occupational therapists will be registered by the end of the year. All registers will be complete by the end of 2016.

The Bill refers to the meaning of the term "health and social care profession" and it is defined as "any profession in which a person exercises skill or judgment relating to any of the following health or social care activities". It goes on to refer to activities such as the preservation or improvement of the health and well-being of others, the diagnosis, treatment or care of those injured, sick, disabled or infirm and the resolution through guidance counselling or otherwise of personal, social or psychological problems. It also refers to the care of those in need of protection, guidance and support.

The people to whom this Bill applies are in caring professions that form a crucial element in the introduction of the fitness to practise regime for health and social care workers. Part 6 of the Bill will allow complaints to be made about registrants. Another objective of the Bill is amending the Health Act 1970 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. The aim is to modernise the contributions regime in residential settings to reflect current models of residential care, particularly as it pertains to mental health, the disabled and older people. Accommodation needs must be met by agencies of the State, such as local authorities.

3 o'clock

The fair deal scheme is raised with me on a regular basis. When a family applies for the scheme, it is an anxious time with regard to a mother, father, aunt or uncle. Will the Minister of State examine the delay in processing fair deal scheme applications? Is there a better or more simple system which would help the applicants and their families? It would be very welcome if the Minister of State examined this area. When I put people in contact with the local HSE office in Wexford it is very helpful, but it can be an anxious time for families as they wait for an application to be processed. Part of the Bill deals with this issue.

It is vital that the people of all counties, including my home county of Wexford, are legally protected with regard to health and social care professionals. The Bill provides for this and I commend the outgoing Opticians Board, which has existed for more than 60 years, on protecting the interests of the public. I also commend the work of CORU. Since it came into existence it has played a very important role in the oversight of professional qualifications in extremely sensitive areas such as social work.

I welcome the news from the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, that the registration of professions such as occupational therapy, podiatry and speech and language therapy will be included by the end of 2016. These are three professional areas in which I have seen a shortfall in my county, and I do not speak just for Wexford. Parents want a service to be available for their children. The HSE, the Department of Health and the Minister of State are well aware of the financial strains which exist. If one compares Wexford to Kerry, Tipperary or Sligo, one sees it is lagging behind with regard to speech and language therapy services. The earlier one assesses a child, the better the prognosis will be and he or she will be able to receive therapy and treatment. A large number of families in Wexford are being forced to obtain services privately because they want the best for their sons or daughters. They are unable to afford this private service and are straining other areas of their household budgets, and we know the financial strains some families face. Will the Minister of State examine County Wexford and ensure an equal service is available throughout the country and that everyone is treated equally?

I welcome the Bill and I believe that change is good. Further improvements can be made after the Bill has gone through the House when the Minister examines regulation and professionalising other areas. I am not sure what the financial saving will be but I have no doubt the Bill contains a financial saving.

Deputy Joe O'Reilly: When I and other Members of the House go around our respective constituencies and hold advice clinics, one of the perennial complaints we receive from people in business, farmers and various interest groups is that they are over-regulated and that the EU has imposed too much regulation. I have never met, and I am never likely to meet, someone who would not accept the need for the most stringent regulation of health professionals. This is not to suggest for one moment that we should not be thankful for and very happy with the high professional standards of the medical people in the country. Having said this, a person in the vulnerable position of being sick or dependent on a service should receive the service in the absolute knowledge it is subject to the most stringent regulation, and that the most stringent dis-

ciplines and standards of a professional nature apply. Those who are ill, people with intellectual disabilities, people with addiction and people with various illnesses and, in this very specific instance, people with difficulty with vision and related areas are vulnerable and dependent, and when one is in a position of dependency one needs to be assured of the highest standards and complete care. In this context I welcome the legislation and the tightening up and administrative changes involved.

The substantive matter in the Bill is to subsume the Opticians Board into the Health and Social Care Professionals Council. It merits saying, and I am very proud, that my niece has just opened her own business as an optometrist in Loughrea in the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's constituency. I know from her and the young people in the profession whom I meet that the educational standards and entry requirements are very high. It is encouraging that there will be transparent and very clear regulation. The work of the Opticians Board in ensuring the standards we have today needs recognition, but the Bill is an important reform and it is important every profession in the health area is brought into a very transparent and defined regulatory process.

The second objective of the Bill is to make certain amendments to ensure efficiency and consistency with the legislation governing other health regulators. The Bill will also ensure statutory contributions payable by recipients of residential support services who, while maintained, are not directly accommodated by or on behalf of the Health Service Executive. The Minister of State has explained this is custom and practice at present, and I understand it to be so, but it needs to be included in the legislative and regulatory framework.

The Health and Social Care Professionals Council is an independent regulator established to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among the registrants of 12 designated health and social care professions. The highest educational standards are crucial. It was established under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005. It is the extension to include opticians that is at issue. The objective of the council is to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among registrants of the designated professions. To date, six regulation 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 12 boards and their registers established by the end of next year. That is all to be welcomed.

I turn to a question that was raised earlier and is very dear to my heart; I look forward to the Minister of State's response. I refer to the registration of psychotherapists and counsellors. We have an increasing need for psychotherapy and counselling in so many spheres to deal with the results of substance abuse and various psychiatric or psychological difficulties arising from the various stresses of modern living. People now tend to search the Internet for everything, including accessing the name of a counsellor or psychotherapist, and without much thought just become a dependant and client of that professional. Happily in many instances, there is no difficulty. However, if there are a few, we need to know that the highest educational standards exist, that the highest training and clinical practices exist, and that the counsellor or psychotherapist is of the highest standard or as they would say in the first language of our country, loved by you and me, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, that they are den céad scoth, tharr barr or nach bhfuil amhras ar bith fúthu. It is important that they are of the highest standard possible and that people can enter into what is an extraordinarily dependent relationship fraught with all sorts of danger because in many instances the client becomes very dependent on the psychotherapist or

counsellor.

Tragically, the whole country is blighted by death by suicide. It is particularly prevalent and I have come across many instances in my own community and area. It is a tragic outcome for people. Those who die by suicide do so through no fault of their own; they are in a very dark place from which there is no escape. I am told anecdotally that we need more intervention here. I would be interested in the Minister of State's response. I believe we need a better cohort of professionals - not better in the sense of a higher standard, but a bigger number of professionals functioning in this area, in the whole area of addiction and the whole area of therapy to prevent death by suicide and to prevent various outcomes. This was drawn to my attention as late as yesterday when I met people at home. That is an important area. I look forward to the Minister of State responding in this regard. I understand from a remark I made privately to the Minister of State that it is her intention to ensure that psychotherapists and counsellors come under this legislation and are so regulated very shortly. It would be nice to hear that again on the record of the House during her response.

It is important that we have a system that investigates complaints which will be the case here. If there are specific professional complaints, we need a procedure for them to be investigated. There must be an assumption that there is a basis for a complaint without demonising the professional or putting his or her career in jeopardy for the rest of his or her life. At the same time, there must be a transparent process of examining complaints, following due process and ensuring that complaints are taken to the nth degree and fully investigated. It is very necessary for the public to know that process exists and that complaints will not just be treated as fanciful or fantasists' material and they will be properly dealt with. Often tragically in the psychiatric area and in that space around depression and addiction there can be a tendency on all our parts to be slightly dismissive of complaints. That should be the last area that we are insensitive or unresponsive about.

It is important that the legislation brings optometrists and opticians into the regulatory framework and the proposal is to so extend into the future. I share the concern expressed by the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, and would be interested in hearing the response on the number of professionals available in the various spheres.

I ask the Minister of State to ensure the regulation of psychotherapists and counsellors, and to ensure there are an adequate number of these professionals to deal with the awful blight of suicide in our society. Tragically, the community that I have the privilege of living in and representing has been blighted by death by suicide right up to the present day. I am particularly concerned in that regard and I look forward to the Minister of State's response.

Deputy Regina Doherty: I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words on the Bill. I welcome the changes it brings to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act. Obviously, the amalgamation of the 12 registered bodies under the one umbrella and under the one consistent regulatory code of practice with the same guides of quality and consistency in coming months is very welcome. The purpose of the body is to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct through education, training and competence among registrants of designated professions. That will ultimately result in a better service across all the professions for the public, which is welcome.

I wish to talk about one specific change. Subsuming the Opticians Board into the Health and Social Care Professionals Council is very welcome. However, one of the changes in updat-

ing the previous Act, which is 50 years old, does not quite make sense to me or to the professionals. They have asked me to represent them today, which I am doing.

The practice that will come into play if the Bill, as it stands, is passed will mean that opticians will be involved in the process of dispensing glasses right from the very beginning where patients come in, get their eyes tested, get a prescription and have their glasses made and presented. This continues right up the point where a patient leaves the shop and pays for their glasses. Their concern is that no other profession is quite as restrictive as that. I can go to a doctor in the morning, get a diagnosis of a sore throat, and then go out and pay the lady on reception the 50 quid I have to give her for the privilege for being there. That is the current practice in our opticians and the practice they would like to see remain.

I am not sure what the benefit is of having the legislation as drafted which ensures that the optician is there from the very beginning of the process right up to the writing of the cheque for the glasses at the end. I ask the Minister of State to consider changing that so that the receptionist in the optician's practice can take the final payment and hand over the product at the end. That would obviously allow the opticians more time to conduct the eye tests and carry out the consultations with patients, as is their wish.

Otherwise, I am very supportive of the Bill. It will offer a consistency and equality of approach across a wide variety of professions that we do not currently have. Deputy O'Reilly spoke about dieticians, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and suicide counsellors all being involved and brought under the one umbrella. I do not want to be disparaging to any of those people but because there is a potential inconsistency in the quality of care provided, that will now be changed and the regulatory processes will apply to all and one. I am happy to support this Bill, with the possible exception of asking the Minister of State to consider again the amendment that potentially could be made to free up or loosen the restrictions on opticians.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: While I am happy to support the Bill, I wish to make a couple of points. The opticians did not contact me, although as is pretty clear from what is on the bridge of my nose, I contact opticians from time to time. However, my colleague, Deputy Regina Doherty, made an interesting point and raised a fair question on some of the standards these changes might impose on opticians, as opposed to other health professionals. I welcome the progress that is being made on the registration boards for the various health professionals, and this legislation is another step along that particular route. I have no other particular observations to make specifically about the role of opticians.

However, I wish to take this opportunity and as this issue is relevant to the Minister of State who is present, she might be able to allay some of my concerns and answer some questions about a group that has contacted me repeatedly in recent years. I refer to psychologists and this carries on from some of Deputy O'Reilly's earlier remarks and on the standards that are employed within the HSE regarding the hiring and promotion of psychologists. Psychologists tend to be broken down into two principal categories, namely, clinical psychologists and counselling or educational psychologists. There appears to be a practice in play - perhaps this has been rectified in the recent past but it certainly had not been earlier - that opportunities for promotion and for further hiring appear to be limited to the role of clinical psychologists, to the exclusion of counselling and educational psychologists. As matters stand, this practice is not commonplace either in the neighbouring jurisdiction or in other countries I have been able to take as examples. The professional organisation to which I refer has raised a legitimate con-

cern that effectively since 2009, the previous Government and the Health Service Executive operating under it more or less formally blocked promotional opportunities for counselling or educational psychologists within the system. I understand that more than 20 vacancies existed for a period of between 18 months to two years, two of which were filled in the end by clinical psychologists. However, educational psychologists - these are people who are working within the HSE at present - were more or less barred from applying for those positions.

I reiterate that in the North of Ireland, across the water and further afield, including the United States, Canada and Australia, such differentiations do not appear to exist. Moreover, I note that in a reply to a question I tabled a number of months ago, the then Minister outlined that a working group had been established within the HSE to agree appropriate eligibility for a set of criteria for the recruitment of senior psychologists. I am not clear at this point whether this particular group has reported, whether its report has been acted upon or whether its report seeks to remove what many within the educational psychologist profession would regard as an artificial differentiation between the categories of psychologists that operate within the health service. While I acknowledge this may be at a slight tangent from the issues under discussion with regard to this particular health Bill, the Minister of State might be in a position, either now or at some later stage, to address the concerns of this particular group, which I consider to be legitimate and which have not been addressed heretofore.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I welcome the opportunity to make a few brief points on the main thrust of this Bill. I feel like a character in the film "Titanic", because I am about to ask whether there is anyone alive out there and whether anyone can hear me. I do not know whether it is me or the Minister of State but it appears as though each time I rise to speak on legislation in this Chamber, I am stunned by the presence, or the lack thereof, of some of our Opposition colleagues. While the legislation before Members is technical in nature and seeks to tie down a few loose ends with regard to representative bodies and so on for a number of health care professionals, it also is an opportunity to reflect on the work actually done by some of the professionals named in the legislation. There are two such groups to whom I wish to refer briefly, the first of which relates to orthodontics while the second is to follow on from my colleague, Deputy John Paul Phelan, with regard to psychology services and child psychology services in particular.

In the previous two Dáileanna, extensive work was carried out by the Oireachtas health committee on the treatment of young people, that is, children in primary school, with regard to orthodontic care. Although a number of recommendations were made at the time in respect of the roll-out of orthodontics and on the time being taken for the delivery of good orthodontic services, to be honest we still are long distance from this in 2014. At the outset, I pay tribute to a man from my own part of the world, who will not mind me saying this. I refer to the orthodontic surgeon in Limerick, Dr. Ted McNamara, who over a number of years has pioneered the need for reform of this sector and to bring practice in Ireland into line with what happens elsewhere around the world, which is that orthodontists work with orthodontic therapists to carry out the work that is needed for young people in particular. This is with a view to doing two things, namely, saving the State money and, more important, seeing children at a much earlier stage and thereby reducing the waiting lists. While previous speakers may have referred to this point, for many parents of primary schoolchildren, their children's teeth are of huge concern to them. The question, as the children emerge from primary school to go into secondary school, is whether their teeth will be dealt with but at present, the length of time it is taking on the waiting lists is unsustainable. A solution is being proposed, which is that orthodontic therapists could

work in parallel with and under the supervision of orthodontic surgeons. This would ensure that some work that need not necessarily be carried out by an orthodontist could be carried out by a therapist, thereby reducing the waiting list.

This reform has been spoken about since Job was a boy but, until recently, very little has been done. I welcome the recent encouragement by the Department of Health and the Minister of the engagement of the Dental Council, the HSE and others to try to resolve this issue because, ultimately, the key point is that the child whose bite is wrong or whose teeth are in great need of such treatment should receive it much faster. If this can happen in continental Europe, and there has been much talk recently about Dutch, Norwegian, Finnish models and so on, why not make use of best practice from elsewhere to examine this issue from the perspective of the delivery of treatment to children who ultimately will be its main beneficiaries? As all Members are aware from working in their constituency office, the alternative is that parents will take their children off the waiting lists or will opt for private care, thereby incurring massive costs and in some cases even being obliged to borrow to do so. Not only does it lead to obvious issues with the physical appearance of the child's mouth, as the child gets older it also leads to difficulties with teeth being taken out and lost unnecessarily because of the existing delays, many of which could be dealt with through dental therapy.

The other area, which is of equal importance to many people, concerns child psychology services. As a teacher, I have seen at first hand the good work that is available from the child psychology services in respect of getting children assessed for intervention at primary school level in particular. However, there is more than anecdotal evidence, as the Minister of State will know as well as anybody else from her constituency, that in some cases parents are able to jump to the top of the queue if they can afford to have their child's psychological assessment carried out privately, and may thereby have quicker and easier access to hours. It is not fair that children whose parents cannot afford a private assessment are thereby disadvantaged and will spend more time on the waiting list before being assigned hours.

I have emphasised on previous occasions the importance of early intervention, and the earlier the intervention the better. I have seen this at first hand in my constituency, where the Limerick early intervention service recently opened a new premises in Newcastle West, which was partially funded by the Department. The excellent staff provide a safe place there for children and their families, as well as for the psychologist. The system is family and community inclusive and, most important, child inclusive. For too long, these types of services were designed merely as box-ticking exercises whose only purpose was to ascertain whether a child required X, Y or Z. Now, however, we are moving to a situation where intervention does not just happen at the start but is extended over a period of time, thereby giving parents, communities, schools and the psychological services themselves the capacity to see a child's progress over a period of time. That is ultimately what we should be striving for across the board. Budgetary constraints notwithstanding, no child should be disadvantaged in terms of his or her ability to access that type of service. Specifically, no child should be disadvantaged on the basis of his or her socio-economic background. As I said, middle class parents with disposable income can secure a psychological assessment privately for their child, and good luck to them. However, such capacity should not in any way disadvantage the child who does not have that access.

We have seen evidence in recent months that the economy is beginning to improve. The Government's position in this regard has been proven correct, contrary to what the Opposition would have us believe. There is no more vulnerable group than children who require orthodontic, eye, ear or psychological care, much of which is encompassed in this Bill in respect of the

professionals who deliver it. In the past three years the two cohorts with which I have interacted most often are those children requiring psychological services and orthodontic care. In both instances, the professionals involved have tangible and positive contributions to make by way of their views on how waiting lists can be shortened and services enhanced within existing budgets. We must engage with these professionals and encourage them to bring forward any suggestions they might have. If they are off the wall, so be it. When one hears that recommendations made by an Oireachtas health committee in 2002 or 2004 are only now, in 2014, at the pilot stage, it is easy to see how a level of frustration has built up among professionals and parents. The Minister of State is committed, together with the Minister, Deputy Leo Varadkar, to address that disservice.

This is a technical Bill which might not light too many fires in terms of the headlines it attracts. However, the people who deliver these services and the representative organisations to which they subscribe can have a real impact on individuals, families and communities. Anything that helps them to carry out their work must be welcome.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): I thank Deputies for their constructive contributions and broad support for the legislation that is before us today. As I indicated earlier, the chief purposes of this mainly technical Bill are to subsume the Opticians Board into the Health and Social Care Professionals Council, make a number of amendments to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 in the interest of efficiency and to ensure consistency with legislation governing other health regulators, and correct a lacuna in the Health Act 1970 concerning residential support services maintenance and accommodation contributions.

Parts 1 and 2 will achieve the first two objectives by repealing the Opticians Act 1956 and amending the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 to apply its provisions to the optical professions. Part 2 also seeks to update the 2005 Act in many other respects. Part 3 ensures the new statutory framework for contributions by service users towards ongoing daily living costs will be applied appropriately across the various models in place to support independent living in community settings.

I agree with Deputy Billy Kelleher that a new, streamlined regulatory model will lead ultimately to increased public confidence in the health and social care professionals regulated under the Bill. People are sometimes at a loss to know where to go if a particular complaint arises. It does not happen very often, but that eventuality is covered in respect of the professions regulated.

In response to Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, I can clarify that the rules regulating the prescribing and sale of spectacles will not change under this Bill. In other words, people who work within the premises can still deal with the cash or other transaction and may help with other aspects of the purchasing of spectacles. The current practice of employing sales assistants to help with choosing frames and processing sales will not be affected. In addition, since 2003, the definition of “spectacles” specifically excludes ready-made reading spectacles, and this is carried forward in the new Bill. It means that reading glasses can still be sold by persons other than opticians.

Deputy Finian McGrath raised concerns about staff transferring from the Opticians Board to the Health and Social Care Professionals Council. The Bill provides the standard public service provisions in these cases such that all benefits and conditions of employment will transfer with

staff on a no less favourable basis.

I share Deputy Olivia Mitchell's frustration with the relatively slow implementation of the provisions of the 2005 Act. However, the rate of progress is accelerating. Six registration boards have been established and the remaining six will be up and running by the end of next year. In addition, the order commencing the Act's fitness to practise regime will be made at the end of this year. This will be a crucial milestone in the regulation of these professions.

We have made significant progress on negotiations in regard to the regulation of counsellors and psychotherapists, and it is hoped the regulations can be made early next year. The first stage of the designation process, involving a detailed consultation with the Health and Social Care Professionals Council, is under way. I acknowledge the concerns expressed regularly by Deputy Dan Neville on this issue. Qualified and competent counsellors and psychotherapists are just as concerned about regulation and will welcome the provisions set out in the Bill. The details are still open for discussion, but we are making progress.

Deputies Kelleher, Ó Caoláin, Finian McGrath, Mitchell and Healy-Rae raised a range of issues relating to the resourcing of care and standards of care generally, particularly care in the community for persons in residential placements. Part 3, in common with the Health (Amendment) Act 2013, relates only to service users' contribution towards maintenance and accommodation costs. It is a case of keep, not care. Care standards and the resourcing of care are of crucial importance, however, and there will be many opportunities to debate these issues with a view to continual improvement of standards across the health system.

I refer to the contributions of Deputies Ó Caoláin, Finian McGrath, Mitchell and Kelleher. HIQA does not yet monitor, supervise or inspect the provision of care in the community. I hope that will happen as we progress, as it is essential. However, we have a whole set of standards and reports and it is the Government's intention that people in congregated settings will live in the community. It is important we regulate that as far as we can. There is a concern, which I share, in regard to residential settings for people with disabilities. The new regulations in regard to disabilities have been in place for 12 months and we will take a look at them because it is not fair to impose the type of regulations which are crucial for long-term care for older people. That is not how we want people with disabilities to live their lives. These places are their homes and we should not apply that type of medicalised standard to them. If HIQA came into my house to inspect standards, I probably would not pass, and I do not believe I would be in the minority in this respect.

I appreciate Deputy Mitchell's supportive comments in welcoming the Bill generally and, in particular, her supportive remarks in regard to the flexibility of the HSE in providing different models of provision of residential supports. Deputy Finian McGrath also welcomed the Bill. I take their contributions, not more seriously than other ones, but from the point of view that they are both parents and have had personal interaction with the disability services. From that point of view, it is important we listen to those issues raised.

Deputy Kelleher mentioned concerns regarding the potential impact of Part 3 on those in respite care. There is nothing in this Bill or in the 2013 Act which introduces any difference in regard to respite care as between the existing system and the new framework nor is there any separate reference to respite care or to any other subset of long-term residential support services. The current provisions in regard to charges for long-term respite services will continue under the new residential support services regime.

Deputy Ó Caoláin sought reassurance that reductions referred to in Part 3 could not be interpreted in a manner which could result in reductions in supports to service users or in reductions to service levels. I am happy to provide that reassurance. The Bill contains no provisions which could be interpreted as relating in any sense to reductions in supports or services to service users. There is a reference in section 43(c) to reducing the contribution amounts which service users will be required to pay, in certain circumstances, towards their accommodation and maintenance costs. I presume the Deputy has no difficulty with that. If it is considered beneficial that someone go on social outings maybe twice a week or whatever, the same as the rest of us, there will be enough flexibility in that section to allow the HSE or service providers to take that into consideration in terms of the contribution made. It is about standardising the system and giving a degree of security to people. These places are their homes and they need that degree of security.

I thank Deputies for their contributions to the Second Stage and look forward to further constructive examination of the Bill on Committee Stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2014: Referral to Select Committee

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

That the Bill be referred to the Select Sub-Committee on Health pursuant to pursuant to Standing Orders 82A(3)(a) and (6)(a) and 126(1) of the Standing Orders relative to Public Business.

Question put and agreed to.

Sport Ireland Bill 2014: Order for Second Stage

Bill entitled an Act to provide for the administration of sport in the State; to provide for the establishment of a body to be known in the Irish language as *Spórt Éireann* or in the English language as Sport Ireland; to provide for the dissolution of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority; to update the law in relation to doping in sport; and to provide for related matters.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): I move: "That Second Stage be taken now."

Question put and agreed to.

Sport Ireland Bill 2014: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to introduce the Sport Ireland Bill 2014. The purpose of the Bill is to establish

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Sport Ireland, a new body which will replace the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority. The merger of the council and the authority is one of the measures in the Government's programme for the rationalisation of State agencies.

Sport Ireland will take on the functions of the council and the authority. It will continue the work currently being done by the council in promoting, developing and co-ordinating sport in Ireland and also the work of the authority in developing the National Sports Campus at Abbotstown. Both of these organisations are delivering important outcomes for sport and I am confident this will continue under the new structure.

As Minister of State with responsibility for sport, I am very aware of how important sport is in the lives of Irish people, both socially and from a health point of view. I strongly believe that sport has great potential to contribute to a much healthier society. We, in Government, are fully aware that we must continue to promote sport and physical activity and to support our sporting organisations. We must also try to provide the best sporting facilities we can, not just for our elite sportsmen and women but for people of all ages and all abilities.

I am pleased to say that we have been able to do a lot for sport in recent years. We have maintained Government funding for sport as much as possible to ensure the continued development of sport. The budget for sport this year is €95 million, an increase of 28% on 2013. This includes additional funding of €11.5 million under the Government stimulus plan for the sports capital programme and €13 million towards the development of the indoor arena at the National Sports Campus. This is a very significant investment in Irish sport and is a strong indication of our commitment to sport.

I am sure that Deputies will join me in acknowledging the value and role of the sports capital programme. More than 9,100 projects have now benefited from sports capital funding since 1998, bringing the total allocations in that time to over €820.5 million. Deputies will have first-hand experience of how the programme has transformed the sporting landscape of Ireland with improvements in the quality and quantity of sporting facilities in virtually every village, town and city in the country. These facilities range from the smallest clubs to national centres of sporting excellence.

One of the key features of the sports capital programme is that it helps to take some of the pressure off sporting organisations by providing much needed finance to assist in the completion of projects. We were delighted to make allocations of €31 million under the 2012 round of the sports capital programme. This was the first round of the programme since 2008. We were also delighted to be able to make changes to the programme in 2012 to make it accessible to more clubs and organisations than ever before. The record number of 2,170 applications in 2012 showed that the 2012 round of the programme was much needed. With such high demand, it was never going to be possible to fund all applications. I was pleased, therefore, that we were able to press ahead with a new round of the sports capital programme in 2014. This was great news for sports clubs across the country. A total of €40.5 million was allocated under the 2014 programme. A total of 2,036 applications were received, the second highest number ever received, which shows the continuing demand and need for investment in sporting facilities. A total of 821 of the successful allocations were for local sports clubs and organisations, with the remaining 59 allocated to regional or national projects.

While funding to the Irish Sports Council has had to be reduced over recent years, we managed to offset this as much as possible and to keep the reduction as low as possible. The council

received €42.5 million in funding this year and I am hopeful this can be maintained for 2015. The focus of the spending this year is on increasing participation in sport and physical activity, which is one of the key objectives of my Department. In this context, I acknowledge the huge efforts of the Irish Sports Council, the local sports partnerships and the national governing bodies in encouraging greater participation in sport. This important work has paid off, as can be seen in the most recent figures from the Irish Sports Monitor report for the first half of 2013 which show that participation has increased from 45% in 2011 to 47% in 2013. This is a great result and we will continue working to increase this figure further.

Since it was established in 1999, the Irish Sports Council has played a very important part in the development of Irish sport at all levels. We are lucky to have a host of very talented sportsmen and sportswomen in Ireland. The structures put in place over the years to support our elite athletes have helped them to reach the top levels across a wide range of sports. Last year, Irish athletes won a record 67 medals in international competition at junior and elite levels. This is a huge increase from the 16 won in 2008 and a remarkable achievement over five years which reflects the excellent work that is being done for high-performance sport in Ireland. Although it was established more recently, the National Sports Campus Development Authority has made a major contribution to Irish sport through the development of world-class training facilities at the National Sports Campus. The campus has seen very significant progress in the last several years. We now have facilities in which our elite athletes can prepare for international competitions. New facilities opened in the past year include a world-class national horse sport arena, a national modern pentathlon centre, a national diving training centre and a multi-sport synthetic pitch facility. On-site accommodation has also been developed to allow athletes to live and train on campus.

The Irish Institute of Sport is based on the campus at Abbotstown. In 2013, 185 athletes from 20 sports drew down expert services and support, including Fionnuala Britton, who has won gold medals at the European Cross Country Championships among many other great performances. The list of other athletes like Ms Britton is a long one. Beneficiaries include Ireland's sailors, including Annalise Murphy who recently qualified for Rio, the Irish high performance boxing squad, the Irish equestrian team which did so well at the recent World Equestrian Games and the highly successful Paralympic team. They are all supported by the council's high-performance plan, which includes coaching, training camps, competition and other services and can access a range of excellent campus facilities. We now see Irish elite athletes happy to base themselves at home because they are supported by a world-class and distinctly Irish system at the National Sports Campus. This is a major departure from days when athletes chose to leave our shores if they wanted a real chance of succeeding at the top level internationally.

This year will see more significant developments at campus, including the commencement of work on the national indoor arena, which the Government is funding from the proceeds of the sale of the National Lottery licence. Work will also commence shortly on a high performance training centre at the Institute of Sport. The FAI and the GAA are also progressing the development of pitches for their sports. I am confident that it will be possible to maintain this momentum and develop more facilities in the coming years.

One of my other priorities for sport in the coming months is the development of a national sport policy. This document is designed to get all Government Departments working together on sport and it will set out the policy framework for sport Ireland. Another issue that I intend to examine over the coming period is the proposed regulation of the adventure activities sector. The Irish Sports Council recently submitted a report to me, which I will be considering.

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It is important for me to place on record my thanks to the Irish Sports Council, the National Sports Campus Development Authority and the national governing bodies for the efforts they are making every day on behalf of Irish sport. I must also mention the volunteers who are a vital part of every club and sporting organisation around the country and who are doing wonderful work for sport in their communities.

I will now turn to the main provisions in the Bill. The Bill includes the provisions necessary for establishing sport Ireland and dissolving the council and the authority. Many of the provisions are standard provisions for establishing a new body. It also combines the relevant provisions from the Irish Sports Council Act 1999 and the National Sports Campus Development Authority Act 2006. The Bill is divided into four Parts and contains 45 sections. Part 1, covering sections 1 to 4, deals with standard provisions regarding the legislation. Part 2, covering section 5 to 28, provides for the establishment and functions of Sport Ireland.

The functions of Sport Ireland are set out in section 7. These functions are broadly in line with the functions currently performed by the council and the authority. I will mention some of the main features. Sport Ireland will have responsibility for developing strategies for increasing participation in sport at national and local level. It will also have responsibility for supporting our elite athletes in achieving excellence in sport. This reflects the work of the Irish Institute of Sport. A new function is included in this section to reflect the role of Coaching Ireland in developing coaches and tutors at all levels in sport. Sport Ireland will continue the development of the sports campus. It will manage, operate and maintain the campus, along with any other facilities that may be approved by the Minister.

Overall responsibility for the research function, which was the responsibility of the Irish Sports Council, will revert to my Department. The programme for Government states that policy making will revert to Departments, while agencies will be accountable for implementing policy. As research is a key tool in policy making, responsibility for the function is being brought back into my Department. While the Minister will set direction, sport Ireland will be conducting the research. I intend to introduce a process whereby my Department and Sport Ireland will work together to set out plans for what research will be conducted each year. Sport Ireland will also have responsibility for anti-doping. I will deal with that subject later.

The provision of grants and other assistance to national governing bodies of sport and athletes will also come under the remit of sport Ireland. This will be similar to the role that the Irish Sports Council now plays in allocating funding. Responsibility for the sports capital programme will remain with my Department. Many of the other sections in this Part of the Bill are standard provisions. They cover matters such as engagement of consultants, strategy statements, annual reports, accounts and service agreements. Sections 18 to 20 relate to sport Ireland's responsibility for the development of the National Sports Campus. Section 19 allows Sport Ireland to establish subsidiaries and to enter into joint ventures and partnerships. It also provides that the subsidiary company established by the authority to operate the National Aquatic Centre and other facilities will continue as a subsidiary of sport Ireland. Section 21 provides that the first chief executive will be appointed by the Minister. The board of sport Ireland will appoint subsequent CEOs. The CEO will have responsibility for carrying on, managing and controlling the administration and business of sport Ireland. Section 22 provides that the CEO will be accountable to Oireachtas committees, including the Committee of Public Accounts.

4 o'clock

Section 28 provides that sport Ireland will continue the development of the National Sports Campus in accordance with the plan prepared by the authority. It allows sport Ireland to amend the plan and provides that any amended plan must be submitted for the approval of the Minister.

Part 3, covering sections 29 to 39, inclusive, deals with the dissolution of the council and the authority. It contains standard provisions for dissolving the two bodies and for such matters as transferring land, property, rights and liabilities of the council and the authority to sport Ireland. Section 37 provides that employees of the council and the authority will become employees of sport Ireland on the day it is established. Section 38 provides that employees who were members of an existing superannuation scheme before the transfer will continue to be members of the scheme with the same terms and conditions.

Part 4 of the Bill, covering sections 40 to 45, inclusive, deals with anti-doping measures. There was a general provision on anti-doping in the 1999 Act establishing the Irish Sports Council. Technology has moved on since and measures for anti-doping worldwide are much more sophisticated now. I commend the council, as its work in this area is highly regarded internationally. With new anti-doping provisions in this Bill, I intend to give a stronger statutory basis to the work already being undertaken. Section 40 designates sport Ireland as the national anti-doping organisation for the State. It will perform the relevant functions referred to in the world anti-doping code, the UNESCO anti-doping convention and the Irish anti-doping rules. Section 41 gives sport Ireland responsibility for taking appropriate measures to deliver an effective response to doping in sport, including testing and education. It also gives sport Ireland responsibility for making and amending the Irish anti-doping rules. However, as set out in section 44, the existing Irish anti-doping rules made by the Irish Sports Council will continue to operate; they will be deemed to be the rules made by sport Ireland. The anti-doping rules include rules and arrangements relating to such matters as testing of athletes, banned substances, sanctions and so on.

Section 41 also provides for sharing of information with the Health Products Regulatory Authority, the Garda, Customs and Excise, and other anti-doping organisations for the purpose of combatting doping. Section 42 deals with data protection measures for sharing of information relating to doping. Sport Ireland will put information sharing agreements in place with the bodies I mentioned. This will be done in consultation with the Data Protection Commissioner. Any sharing of information will only be to the extent necessary for the purpose of preventing and eliminating doping. Section 43 means that any person who is a member of a sports national governing body, which receives funding from sport Ireland, or any person who represents the State in sport must comply with the anti-doping rules. Anyone who fails to comply with the rules will not be eligible for funding and will not be allowed to represent the State. Section 45 lists the definitions used in this part of the Bill. These are important measures which will allow Sport Ireland to inspire fair play in sport. The anti-doping programme is critical to help ensure that Irish athletes can compete cleanly on the world stage.

Schedule 1 of the Bill deals with matters relating to the board. This includes matters such as the appointment of board members, the establishment of committees and the procedure for meetings. It also addresses disclosure of interests by members and the disclosure of confidential information. This section requires sport Ireland to establish committees to advise on the functions of anti-doping, the National Sports Campus, coaching and high-performance sport.

Schedule 2 lists the provisions that apply in the event of any compulsory acquisition of land. This Government has demonstrated its commitment to investing in sport and sports clubs.

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We saw some of the results of that last week with the announcement by UEFA that Dublin will be a host city for the European soccer championship in 2020. This is a great result for Ireland and I hope it will encourage more young people to get involved in sport. It is one of the greatest major sporting events that will ever come to this country. I compliment the chief executive of the Football Association of Ireland, FAI, Mr. John Delaney, as well as Dublin City Council. I compliment people in my Department, including Mr. Tom O'Mahony and Mr. Donagh Morgan, as well as the hard-working officials who worked with other Departments to ensure Ireland became a host city. These are the people who work behind the scenes. We might not see them on a daily basis but I take this opportunity to thank every single one for helping the Government and the FAI to get this major sporting event for Ireland. It will help us in future years in getting tourists to the country.

I welcome the decision by the Government yesterday to change the way rates are charged on sports clubs. Under the new rules agreed by the Government, clubs will only be liable to pay rates on the part of the club that generates income, such as the bar area. This is a welcome change that will particularly benefit sports clubs that are struggling with debt. Many sporting clubs in the country, particularly in the good times, built massive facilities but are now struggling, so they need whatever support they can get from the Government. I welcome yesterday's Government decision. That is something we have lobbied for, and I did so personally. The Department has sought this for many years and I am delighted with the decision.

We have continued to support our elite athletes and we have seen some excellent performances and results from them. I take this opportunity to congratulate our most recent medal winner, cyclist Ryan Mullen, who won a silver medal in the men's under-23 time trial at the world championships in Spain this week.

The Irish Sports Council and the National Sport Campus Development Authority are doing great work in developing sport in Ireland. Under this Bill, the two bodies will merge and the baton will pass to sport Ireland. I know that sport Ireland will continue in the tradition of serving all our athletes and all our citizens well.

I am pleased with the sports capital programme and we would love to see another round, as it is important for many clubs throughout the country. The sports capital programme has worked very well, especially for small clubs. Sports is not all about elite athletes but rather participation. It is about giving young boys and girls the opportunity to participate in sport in this country and have the chance to use even basic facilities in every corner of the country. As Minister of State responsible for sport, I will try to ensure we can get another round of the sports capital grant, although it will not be easy. The Government gave a commitment that we would have two rounds of the programme in the lifetime of this Government and they are in place. I would like to get a third round. Many sporting organisations were disappointed they did not get grant aid the last time and I would like to give them a chance on the next round to get the funding to develop even simple facilities. We have national stadiums and major sporting infrastructure.

The sports campus is a marvellous development. We have worked hard on it in difficult times and we got the necessary funding to develop it. It is great that our athletes do not have to go abroad and are able to train and participate in their own country. They can then go abroad to win medals for their country. Sport is not all about winning medals, as it is about participation, representing the country and wearing the green jersey, with people doing what they can for sport. I am delighted to bring the Bill before the Dáil and I look forward to hearing the

contributions on Second Stage.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Minister for his explanation of the Bill and general outline of the Government's position on sport. We will support the Bill, although there is nothing particularly exciting or new in it. It is bringing together two organisations that one could argue have the capacity to work closely together. It seems that much of this amalgamation has grown from a promise by Fine Gael and Labour to reduce the number of what the Minister of State referred to as quangos, although I do not like the use of that word. I know the good work done by many of these organisations, and it was a retrograde step in an effort to win the votes of the public that certain elements of both parties seemed to suggest that a myriad of agencies and organisations existed purely for their own propagation.

Notwithstanding this, it is very clear that there is an exceptional amount of good work done, and I recognise that the Minister of State has paid tribute to the people in both of these organisations. Although the organisations will no longer exist, their work should be recognised. There is no real saving to be made as a result of the decision to amalgamate. It allows the Government to show later that it has reduced the so-called burden on the taxpayer by reducing the number of agencies. The Minister of State has yet to outline the costs associated with this Bill. The cost of this merger could be better utilised in investment in community and high-performance sports provision, but we will accept it.

My party opposes section 9 allowing for the appointment of consultants and advisers. The Government should have learnt from its escapade in the establishment of Irish Water when it led everybody to believe that by establishing Irish Water through An Bord Gáis very significant savings could be made from a transfer of information, knowledge and system techniques that would allow Irish Water get off the ground quickly and efficiently, which has not happened. The Government's commitment to begin a bonfire of quangos is ironic in light of the debacle surrounding the establishment of Irish Water. It emerged at the beginning of 2014 that almost half the €180 million start-up cost for Irish Water, €86 million, was spent on outside consultants. The expenditure included €32 million on information technology, IT, €13 million on economic advice, €12 million on billing and registration and €8 million on support services. We were led to believe that these components were readily available in An Bord Gáis.

Fine Gael's policy paper, *Reinventing Government*, promised the abolition of more than 145 State bodies and companies, including the dismantling of the HSE, and FÁS, yet the programme for Government proposes the creation of 36 new agencies, including Irish Water and NewERA. The then Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Varadkar, conceded in November 2011 that the Government would not in its term abolish 50 quangos. Today and for the next couple of days when this Bill passes through the House, we will be helping Fine Gael meet those targets. To do that just to tick the box is a poor use of the time of this House. We will not achieve anything by that.

The Minister of State rightly identified sport as a vital and intrinsic part of society, from the local clubs that give so much to communities throughout Ireland to the national and international success of our elite sportsmen and women, and their teams. He is right to say it is not just a question of winning medals but it is a matter of creating role models for young people, encouraging greater participation in activity-led pursuits and contributing to a healthier society. Some go on to be at the top of their game and they focus on success and achievement. For many others the emphasis is on participation. We need the elite layer of super athletes who encourage young people at an impressionable age to live healthy lives. This involves a significant saving

for the State, which is often lost in the debate. The Department of Finance, too, will consider this only in terms of expenditure for this year. Making people more active in sport and encouraging them to live healthier lives achieves a great saving in the health budget. Within the health budget there is a health education programme, a component of which is spent on encouraging people to live healthier lives. Much of that should go into the sports capital programme or to the development of sporting activity because that is the way to divert people onto a more progressive path which helps them care better for themselves.

Sport in the community is the largest source of volunteering in Ireland, with more than 500,000 adults volunteering every year. The economic value of their work is estimated to be in excess of €350 million. A total of 38% of Irish people are members of an estimated 12,000 sports clubs, while 2.1 million participate regularly in sporting activities, a figure that includes approximately 800,000 people under the age of 18. I would prefer if we were to discuss a national sports policy, which the Minister of State has spoken about. We are four years into this Administration and he has said he will bring it forward in the next couple of months. I welcome that and will assist him in every way I can in that endeavour. The effort needs to go into setting out a policy position and a strategy around its implementation. Increasing the number of those under 18 participating in sport to 1 million or 1.2 million and encouraging people to continue to live healthier and better lives after the age of 18 will reduce the cost to the State of essential health care. If people lead healthier lives, they become less of a burden on the State but also on private health insurance, the cost of which is escalating. The Government should put more of its efforts into that policy framework.

I welcome the decision to bring sporting activity to Ireland. The Minister of State has done very well in that respect. It increases tourism and the more games are held here, the more participation in sport increases. When a county progresses to the All-Ireland final - unfortunately, neither Mayo nor Clare made it this year - one can see the impact on the children and young people in that county. They want to participate. I want to see the Minister of State bring forward proposals that have the capacity to increase participation. That will be a success.

There is an element of parish pump politics in this work and it is great to be the one dishing out the money. The Minister of State would probably have relished the prospect of the job until he had it and realised that he has to say “no” more often than he says “yes”.

Deputy Michael Ring: One satisfies 100 people and dissatisfies 1,500.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It is harder for the 100 that he cannot facilitate. For someone of the Minister of State’s calibre, who works so assiduously in his constituency, that is probably one of the more difficult aspects of his job. We need to continue the investment.

I have been critical of how the Government has over-politicised the distribution of that money when it changed its policy. In the past, Department officials validated and scored the applications and assigned people money. The current Administration has decided to remove the independence associated with the assignment of the money and has brought it under political control.

Deputy Michael Ring: We were elected.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Government is entitled to do that but it was a retrograde step. The Government has to deal with the disappointment associated with it.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Deputy might give me credit for the *per capita* grant.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It is not a great measure but it gets the Government out of a corner in one way.

Deputy Michael Ring: Even Professor Considine approved of it.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: When a fellow like the Minister of State reaches for academia to back up what he is doing, I would be very worried. In the long term, the local authorities must have a greater involvement in the identification and roll-out of appropriate infrastructure. In some parts of the country, there are two or three well-developed pitches, with all the bells and whistles associated with such developments, that are idle for certain parts of the week. I know where such infrastructure emerged from. There is an over-supply in some areas where good and progressive clubs got their act together. On the other hand, some large centres of population have nothing because they do not have a club structure to act as a nucleus around which services could be provided and infrastructure could be built. While those who look at this from a national perspective might say “that is tough, but we could not do it because there were no applications”, we have to be more broadly based when we look at the provision of infrastructure. I suggest this is where the local authorities should come into the equation.

I will give an example from the county and constituency I know best. Quite some time ago, the town council and the county council took an initiative to buy a tract of land in the county town of Ennis for the purpose of the development of communal facilities. This infrastructure, which is known as the Lees Road project, has not taken from the clubs that have their own facilities. It has provided facilities to clubs that do not have them. It has done so on a communal basis. The existence of a critical mass allows better facilities to be developed. I think that is where we need to go with the sports capital programme in the long term if we are to ensure we get a much better return on our investment. We cannot continue to confine our efforts to providing for existing clubs. They will always be looking for money. They deserve some money to allow them to continue to advance. We need to look to the areas in which there is no super-structure around which these services can be built.

The 2012 Indecon report on sport found that there is a return to the Government of approximately €149 from every €100 it invests in Irish sport. In economic terms, sport contributes in three main ways. The Minister of State knows about the employment element of the sports industry.

Deputy Michael Ring: That is right.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It accounted for approximately 2% of total Irish employment in 2011. It contributed over €1.8 billion to GDP in both 2011 and 2012, despite a 6.9% cut in Government funding. I will not bash on about the cuts. We recognised that moderation was needed in various areas. In 2011, spending on sporting activity amounted to €1.9 billion of total household expenditure. It accounts for a considerable component of household spending. While we support investment in sporting infrastructure in local communities across the country, we are not in favour of the creation of some kind of superquango that would have recourse to consultants that would utilise money in a manner that means we would not see the best benefit from that money. If the role of this organisation is to support the work of the Government in developing the strategy about which the Minister of State has spoken, and if the central tenet of that strategy is an attempt to secure the greater participation of young people and adults in sport,

I will be very supportive of it.

It is fair to say that this Bill will pass without too much difficulty, even if nothing of any great note will have been achieved. I hope the Minister of State will move quickly towards the establishment of a policy, and a strategy around the implementation of that policy, in the shortest time possible.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: Sinn Féin broadly welcomes the Sport Ireland Bill 2014. When two or more organisations are being amalgamated, it is important that no jobs are lost in the process. Therefore, we are happy to see the guarantee in this Bill that no jobs will be lost in this case. We cannot envision many downfalls with the merger of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority under the one umbrella. The same thing was done in the case of the Child and Family Agency. We hope that all functions currently fulfilled by both bodies will continue to be carried out efficiently and that the pooling of resources benefits positively on the new body. In saying that, it is important for the development of sport in Ireland that the Minister of State uses this opportunity to encourage a number of initiatives within the new body that seek the betterment of our approach to sport in this State.

The value of sport in any society cannot be underestimated. It is of great benefit to the mental and physical health of those who partake in it and it can be an extremely important factor in the context of social inclusion and integration. Sporting activities give the marginalised and the underprivileged, including migrants and those at increased risk of discrimination, opportunities to integrate with other social groups. According to the UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace, sport can play an important role in reducing social tensions and conflicts at community and national levels by addressing the sources of exclusion and providing those on the fringes of our society with an alternative entry point into the social and economic lives of the communities in which they live.

Sports participation can make a profound difference in the lives of excluded populations, including indigenous people, members of minority ethno-cultural groups, asylum seekers and refugees, girls and women, people with disabilities, homeless people and young school leavers who are unemployed. Everyone who lives in extreme poverty suffers from exclusion. Initiatives such as Soccer Against Racism Ireland and the midnight leagues clearly demonstrate the positive impact of using sport to tackle discrimination and racism. In this regard, I applaud the partnership approach between the Garda, local authorities and the FAI in areas like Ballymun and Ballyfermot. An achievable strategy to combat social exclusion must be a priority for sport Ireland and the Minister of State.

As a result of the economic collapse, many people have suffered financially, emotionally and mentally. Sporting initiatives at community level can open an entire new avenue of social capital to those who have suffered and continue to suffer most in our society. Sport and physical activity is an important tool if we are to combat the rising levels of obesity in this State. A focus should be put on tackling the issue of childhood and youth obesity through various sport initiatives being rolled out in communities and schools. Not only does sport allow children and young people to meet new people, learn new skills and learn the importance of self-responsibility, but it also facilitates a healthier lifestyle and general well-being. All Government agencies, State bodies and organisations should work together on this issue.

Women in sport are consistently under-appreciated, under-represented and under-rated in this State. This year's success of the Irish women's rugby and soccer teams is a testament to

the skill and talent of our female players. However, their participation seems to be at the bottom of the priority list. Earlier this year, matchday expenses were cut for the women's international soccer team, yet retained for the men's team players. Katie Taylor, who is a world, European and Olympic champion, is a fantastic role model to young women across this island. I had the great pleasure of seeing Katie Taylor box on a number of occasions prior to her Olympic success. Even though she was a world and European champion, the lack of media presence at her fights was noteworthy. There were no television cameras and there was hardly a photographer in sight. I think this is an absolute disgrace, especially when compared to what would happen if we had a men's champion. I intend to go to see Katie Taylor fight in Fermoy on 11 October next. I will watch with interest to see if anything has changed. A strategy to tackle the chronic under-funding and under-representation of women across many State bodies, from sport Ireland to RTE, is needed along with a grassroots investment in female participation in sport. Sport is empowering. It must be used as a tool to close the gender equality gap that exists in society.

Given that I have raised the administration of the sports capital programme in the Dáil previously, I must give credit where credit is due. Consecutive sports capital programmes have been a lifeline for many clubs and organisations. Sports clubs and communities can benefit through the extra funding that is provided for important projects through this positive mechanism. I commend the Government on this initiative. I hope it will continue year on year because it is vitally important for all communities across the island. It is unfortunate that large sums of money remain buried under red tape while previous successful applications have yet to draw down funding. I understand this accounts for €53 million. I ask the Minister of State to review whether any of this could be released for future applications. Could sport Ireland be given responsibility for undertaking this duty? I also believe that the criteria for the grant could be improved to ensure that disadvantaged communities that are most in need are continually prioritised. In my constituency there is a boxing club that met the criteria for the grant but which was unsuccessful in its application. It is in a small rural community just outside of a RAPID area. Many of the members of this boxing club come from a RAPID town because the town itself has no a boxing club. This would not necessarily have been known by the person assessing the application, however, and improvements in the application process could be made to reflect such situations. Dublin City Council made two applications for funding for all-weather pitches in an area of huge disadvantage, both of which were refused. We urge the Minister of State to have further discussions with Dublin City Council to enable it to overcome any barriers preventing it from meeting the criteria. The grants must be front-loaded for areas of social and economic disadvantage. Communities with drugs task forces and those which are designated RAPID areas must always be given top priority because sport is an integral part of tackling anti-social behaviour and encouraging positive interactions.

Sinn Féin believes that all Government bodies, institutions and initiatives should operate on an all-Ireland basis. We would like to see sport Ireland prioritise and firmly implement a cross-Border approach when it comes to sport on this island. In a nation that recently came out of conflict, sporting programmes can be used to help build and foster positive community relations and interactions. This must be practical and achievable. Community-based events should be rolled out between players or participants from differing backgrounds in the North and South. If given the proper resources, this could be carried out by the local authorities. Many sporting codes operate on an all-Ireland basis such as rugby union, Gaelic games, basketball, rugby league, hockey and cricket. Nothing can encourage a sense of community, pride and common identity like playing in and winning a tournament together. Children from differing religious, political and socio-economic backgrounds would benefit greatly from playing on teams with

their counterparts in different counties throughout this island. A sense of understanding and a bond can be developed between teammates and players that would otherwise have never existed. This would be a key element of cross-community relationship building and conflict resolution. We would encourage the Minister of State and sport Ireland to work closely with their counterparts in the North to develop, implement and maintain all-Ireland sports-based initiatives.

Once again, on behalf of Sinn Féin, I welcome this Bill. We hope that the combination of the resources of both bodies will benefit efforts to combat doping in sport, something that eradicates the genuine competitive nature of sporting games and competition. I would like to wish everyone tasked with the transition from two sporting bodies to one the best of luck, and I hope that the Minister of State and sport Ireland take on board our recommendations for the future.

Deputy Mick Wallace: First, I wish to raise the issue of the national lottery grants because I was away at the time of the announcement of this year's allocations. I was actually in Brazil, at a sporting occasion, trying to keep up to date with football and making sure that I did not fall behind. I was delighted that members of the media missed me while I was away. That was appreciated.

On the question of the national lottery grants, I am not pointing the finger at the Minister of State because I know that he divided up the money in an even fashion between the various counties. None the less, there are two organisations in Wexford which were very disappointed with the end result. After last year's grants disbursement, I spoke to the Minister of State about the fact that I was led to believe that the computer system would inform applicants if they did not complete their applications correctly. I understood that applicants would be told automatically that their applications were not completed properly. Obviously I misunderstood the Minister of State at the time because that is not what happened. The Minister of State is probably familiar with the two cases to which I refer. The Wexford Football League did not send a letter with its application stating that it did not need planning permission to develop playing surfaces. We all know that planning permission is not required for playing surfaces so that organisation could be forgiven for thinking that a letter stating same was not required. Members of that organisation would have taken for granted that the State body would have known that planning permission was not required, but the league's application was turned down on that basis. A different sporting organisation was successful in its funding application but it has since transpired that it does not own its pitch. That organisation has now run into problems in that regard. That is a different issue, however, and I believe that every sporting organisation in this country deserves more help than it gets from the State. I am not going to differentiate between sports because every sport has value and every single sporting organisation adds massive value to society. All I am looking for here is a level playing field in terms of the competition for funding.

The other grant applicant I wish to refer to is the North End United Football Club, a very progressive football club in Wexford town. The club caters for kids from the less well-off areas of Wexford town and does so very well. Its application was turned down because the folio number was missing. As I said last year, it is probably possible to find a fault in almost every application. Those in the North End United Football Club feel very hard done by because the system seems to be a bit unfair. I was not here at the time of the announcement of the successful grant applications and wished to make those points to the Minister of State on behalf of the Wexford Football League and the North End United Football Club.

As I have said before in the House, I do not understand the logic of the State spending more

than €3 billion every year dealing with alcohol abuse. I am not sure exactly how much money the State spends on sport on an annual basis but I believe it is somewhere in the region of €40 million.

Deputy Michael Ring: We are spending €95 million this year.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Given the value that sport brings to communities across the island, any further investment by the State in sport is money well invested, especially in the context of the cost of alcohol abuse exceeding €3 billion per annum. It is hardly rocket science to suggest that sport at its best helps to reduce abuse of alcohol because those playing sport at a high level cannot abuse alcohol and continue at that level. We need a bit more joined-up thinking in this regard because we can certainly cut our alcohol abuse bill by investing more in all sports.

I recently read an article by Dr. Kerry O'Brien who is based at the department of behavioural studies at Monash University in Australia. In the article he asks what sport is good for and whether it should be the primary vehicle for marketing alcohol to the general population. He argues that one could be forgiven for thinking that "sport is a subsidiary of the alcohol, fast food and gambling industries". Dr. O'Brien asks why the alcohol industry sponsors sporting events and concludes that in Australia such sponsorship often allows the industry to bypass regulations prohibiting alcohol advertising during times when large populations of children may be watching television. We do not have the same restrictions in Ireland but perhaps we should do. The author goes on to discuss the ability of sports to evoke strong emotions and social identification and argues that this is worth a fortune to the alcohol industry. He writes that, "Pairing a healthy activity such as sport with an otherwise unhealthy product such as alcohol or fast food makes that product seem less unhealthy and more acceptable and normal." Reviews of research on the association between exposure to alcohol advertising and subsequent drinking intentions and behaviours shows that exposure to, and recall of, alcohol advertising and sponsorship by children and adolescents predicts their future drinking expectancies, norms, drinking intentions and hazardous drinking behaviours. A study from the United States also found that ownership of alcohol-branded merchandise, such as football shirts and sports caps, by children and adolescents was associated with their early initiation of drinking. Dr. O'Brien went on to state:

Alcohol industry advertising and sponsorship in sport and other settings, creates a culture where children perceive alcohol consumption as a normal everyday part of life. And they see it as something associated with sporting success [or even with just being Irish]. ...

Most of us didn't grow up in a culture void of alcohol advertising and sponsorship, which makes it difficult for us to imagine sport without them. But given the high rates of hazardous drinking and associated problems in young people (violence, suicide, motor accidents), we probably don't need to be giving them more encouragement to drink. ...

France has had a complete ban on alcohol advertising and sponsorship since 1991. Sport has not suffered and alcohol consumption has decreased in the past 20-odd years. Indeed, France even hosted the 1998 FIFA World Cup with this ban in place and enforced.

Brazil also has a ban but FIFA put increased pressure on it to lift the ban for the World Cup last summer. Sadly, Brazil lifted it. Given FIFA is such a corrupt organisation, it does much that amounts to being sad. I love soccer, but how corrupt is that organisation?

Dr. O'Brien continued: "Similarly, Norway and Turkey have strong restrictions on alcohol advertising in sport, and South Africa is currently drafting a bill to ban all alcohol advertising

and sponsorship in sport'. We could do the same in Ireland.

I refer to a good article in *The Irish Times*, and give the newspaper credit for it. It states:

As part of its 2009 investigation into the conduct of the UK alcohol industry, the House of Commons Health Select Committee obtained access to internal marketing documents from both producers and their advertising agencies. The documents were analysed by Prof Gerard Hastings.

His report's title, "They'll Drink Bucketloads Of The Stuff", says it all about the alcohol industry's aims. For example, internal documents from the drinks company Carling show that the aim of sponsorship was to "Build the image of the brand and recruit young male drinkers". Carling summed it up thus: "They (young men) think about 4 things: we brew one, and sponsor two of them".

The internal documents were equally cynical about recruiting young women. A study of 6,600 adolescents in four European countries, published in December 2012 by Amphora, an initiative of the European Commission, found that "Alcohol-branded sport sponsorship influences alcohol consumption among adolescents. Exposure to sport sponsoring can predict future drinking". As DIT marketing lecturer Mr. Patrick Kenny said, sponsorship is important to the alcohol companies because consumers generally have a more benign interpretation of it than they have of advertising. Sponsorship is perceived to be generous and supportive, whereas advertising is seen as motivated by selfish reasons. Consumers' defence mechanisms are low when it comes to sponsorship and high when it comes to advertising.

A study of 462 Irish teenagers, by Dr. Deirdre Palmer and Dr Gary O'Reilly, found that the average age of starting to drink was 13.4 years. Many young people have an established drinking habit by 15. The younger people are when they start to drink, the more likely they are to experience harm.

On alcohol abuse, Dr. Bobby Smyth, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, states alcohol kills 1,200 people per year in Ireland, adding:

There are 2,000 Irish people in hospital beds today due to alcohol use ... 10% of Irish children say their lives have been adversely affected by their parents drinking. More starkly, it is estimated that parental drinking accounts for one sixth of all cases of child abuse and neglect.

Former Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Shortall, made a submission to the Oireachtas committee. She proposed an alternative source of funding by revealing a little known VAT loophole. Given that I am in the industry, this was a revelation to me. She stated that if a supermarket sells alcohol at below cost in order to attract customers, it can apply for a VAT refund from the Revenue Commissioners. They are entitled to this refund because they have made a loss even though this loss is planned. In effect, the State subsidises the below-cost selling of alcohol in supermarkets. If there were a complete ban on below-cost selling of alcohol, industry sources say, it could generate as much as €20 million in increased VAT takings which could be diverted towards sport.

Alcohol Action Ireland estimates that a levy of 1 cent on a standard drink would generate €30 million annually. A levy of 5 cent would bring in €180 million. We must work towards a position where sport does not need alcohol to fund itself. That can be done with some rational

thinking on the part of the State. The State should do more than replace it. Given that there is nothing with such a healthy tag as sport, a lot more funding needs to go to all organisations involved sport. Sport is a winner all round. That is why the alcohol industry is so fond of it and will pay a great deal to get its hands on it. I believe this has to change.

I am as fond of a drink as anybody else. I like a glass of red wine and a good beer. We are not talking about the use of alcohol but about the misuse and abuse of it. The abuse of alcohol is too widespread in this country for our own health. Given we have such a challenge with the Department of Health and it is so difficult to find the funding required to have a good health service, it would be sensible to apply positive thinking in this area and introduce proactive measures that will cut down on the bill of the State for alcohol abuse by dramatically increasing the funding for sport.

Deputy Joan Collins: I have no major difficulty with the Bill. It is mainly a technical Bill to pull organisations together and merge them into one. I have a few questions. Will there be a cap on the new CEO's wages? The point was made here, quite correctly, that new jobs would be lost and wages would be at the level they should be. I hope there will be no JobBridge jobs in this area and that these will be full jobs, permanent and with decent conditions.

I would be interested to know whether there is a cut in the funding between the two organisations now being merged into one. I am also a little concerned about section 9, which was raised already and which relates to consultants and advisers. Can the new body pay for consultants and advisers only with funding it raises? Could it use State funding to employ consultant and advisers or would the body itself have to raise the funding for it?

I will make a few general points. Deputy Wallace made a number of profound points on the role of the drinks industry in sport. On sports allocations, particularly for younger people who are picked to play for Ireland, for instance, in European championships or world championships, I recently had two cases. First, a young lad in Tallaght was seeking support to raise money to send him to the Taekwondo championships in Japan and there was no funding available to help him travel there. Then a young girl from Drimnagh who was going to the European Basketball Championship that was held on 29 July last informed me that she had to pay for the new kit to represent her country, and she also had to raise €3,500 to get herself there. If we want to encourage our young people into the national campus and develop them into good athletes for both themselves and to represent their country and their community, we need to look at that level of promotion. They should be eager and enthusiastic rather than have to come with a begging bowl to the public and conduct fund-raisers such as a quiz. I put down a parliamentary question on this matter and was informed the various sporting governing bodies and organisations receive funding which they pass down to the athletes. We need to use that money properly to support young athletes representing our country. It is fine for those who can afford to support their children through a sport but it is difficult for those parents who cannot. The reply to my parliamentary question stated taekwondo was part of the higher performance plan but basketball was not. We need to re-examine the range of sports that are included in this support and how their governing bodies are transparent in showing where the funding goes.

Will the Minister examine how lottery funds are distributed for supporting sport in the UK? While I accept it has a much larger fund, the sporting organisations there are able to encourage young people to partake in national sporting events and provide funding for community-based sporting facilities. It is phenomenal. It appears, however, that the same effort is not put into allocating supports here in our communities. The UK lottery funding gets to sporting organisa-

tions on the ground in communities, not at the top to golf clubs, for example, and encourages young people to participate.

A local football club in my constituency has tried three times to get an AstroTurf pitch put into Brickfields Park. It has come up against brick walls, red tape and the local authority not being forthcoming in explaining how the club should apply for a capital sports grant. A timely notice should be sent to all clubs applying for capital sports grants by local authorities, as well as information as to what viability plans they need to put in their applications. Many areas are losing out because they do not have the right personnel such as accountants to assist them in putting through their applications.

There are 800,000 young people involved in sports. I have played basketball, camogie, volleyball, as well as partaking in swimming and running. This is a great environment to grow up in and the friendships one makes in playing sports are bound for life. I am still close to people I played sports with when I was 12 and 13. Ties made when playing sport are crucial to young people's development. We need to examine how we nurture young people getting involved in sport, particularly on the national stage. We must also encourage sporting organisations such as the Homeless Street Leagues, as well as those that support cross-community and racial integration and closing the gender equality gap, as Deputy McLellan mentioned.

I will be supporting this Bill.

Deputy John O'Mahony: I welcome the merging of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority, NSCDA, into sport Ireland. I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Ring, on securing cross-party support for this Bill, which is in keeping with what sport does every day of the week.

The governance of sport has made much progress over recent times and this is a further step on that journey. Governance needs to be efficient with sport professionally run in a transparent and effective manner where all ages, abilities and genders are catered for, encouraged and coached to the highest standard in a positive and ethical manner. The high-performance athlete needs to be supported, as well as the recreational athlete who is making an effort to improve his or her health and fitness.

Sport at high-performance level, whether individual or team, can lift the spirit of a nation, community, county or parish. We have seen a multitude of examples in athletics, boxing, golf, Gaelic football and hurling, rugby and soccer over the years which have unified people with a positivity that no other activity can match. They know all about that in Kerry this week and next week it will be the same in either Kilkenny or Tipperary. We knew that feeling nationwide following grand slams in rugby, success in the soccer world cup or when rejoicing with the world championship and Olympic successes of the likes of Sonia O'Sullivan, Eamonn Coghlan, Katie Taylor, Derval O'Rourke and Michael Carruth. However, all of this end-product needs proper structures, the highest standards of governance and transparency, the targeted funding that gets the maximum output at the front line and the best facilities possible to deliver training and coaching programmes for our athletes.

The development of the sports campus at Abbotstown, including the National Aquatic Centre, has been a long time in the making since it was first mooted back at the beginning of the millennium. This campus has made enormous strides in the past three years with the transfer of the ownership of lands to the NSCDA and the lease agreements with the Football Association of

Ireland, the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Irish Rugby Football Union, and the Irish Hockey Association to develop facilities at the campus. This was followed by up to 20 sporting governing bodies moving their headquarters to the site and the development of pitches, facilities including national modern pentathlon centre, the national horse sport arena, the national diving centre and a new indoor training centre.

The various developments means there can be the delivery of most modern application of sports science to our top athletes, as well as catering for minority sports which do not have the ability to generate their own funding. While all these developments are to be welcomed, there is also the need for a regional dimension to our sport facilities which complement our national sport campus. Some facilities have been developed over the years in Limerick, for example, as well as the magnificent new track and facilities in collaboration with Athlone Institute of Technology. Recently, I attended the national féile under-14 football finals at the Connacht GAA Centre of Excellence in Began, County Mayo. Thousands of participants and their parents were actively involved over several days in the event which demonstrates the many benefits of such regional centres of excellence. The Connacht centre has also developed a partnership with the Health Service Executive, HSE, and the Irish Blood Transfusion Service that will allow research to be conducted to establish intervention programmes that will be beneficial to the entire population. This ties in with the Minister of State's criteria for the sports capital grants getting maximum use of facilities. As a teacher and a coach over the years, I saw facilities close down at 4 o'clock in the afternoon due to insurance problems and so forth. I am glad many of these obstacles have been overcome. For me, these developments demonstrate how sport facilities can be used to the maximum and, at the same time, cater and support our elite athletes, as well as improving the fitness and health of the nation.

It is important that the outcome of this Bill and the establishment of sport Ireland will increase efficiencies around duplication while bringing the required transparency and accountability at all levels in administration and management of all involved in sport Ireland, the various governing bodies and individually funded athletes.

5 o'clock

In the past there have been some horror stories of examples of governance that was not up to the highest standard in some organisations, but I do not wish to get involved with them today. Much money has been spent on legal matters. In such situations sport does not benefit. In some cases top coaches, for example, in boxing in particular did not get contracts from certain governing bodies. I refer to people who would be snapped up in other countries. In some cases, high performance plans were submitted after the money was spent. I hope the steps that are now being taken will ensure such occurrences are firmly in the past.

I welcome the provision in the Bill relating to Sport Ireland's responsibility on doping in sport. New provisions will assist in combating how doping in sport has developed and continue the good work done by the Irish Sports Council under Sport Ireland. Doping and cheating in sport must be eliminated once and for all. Sometimes one only realises the impact of it years later. Top Irish athletes such as Sonia O'Sullivan, Senator Eamon Coughlan and Derval O'Rourke missed out on medals at various times but the reality is they were denied medals by other athletes who were not clean. It makes one realise how important it is to eliminate cheats and have an even playing field.

As Chairman of the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications, I will conclude

my contribution by listing the recommendations of the committee based on presentations by stakeholders, submissions, committee hearings and analysis of secondary sources. Many of the points have been covered previously in the debate. The first recommendation is that the possibility of Sport Ireland finding alternative forms of funding for both high-profile national and grassroots level sport would be given greater priority in the legislation. Taking account of best practice and recent developments at EU level it might also be necessary to consider whether tax revenue for betting could be ring-fenced as additional funding for sport. Deputy Wallace raised alcohol sponsorship of sport. I agree that by all means we should phase out such sponsorship but when an alternative funding source is found.

Discussions were held with representatives of the Federation of Irish Sports. Reference was made to tax breaks for capital investment in sport. I am not sure people are aware of them, as they are not used to the maximum. It might be necessary to do some tweaking in conjunction with the Department of Finance to incentivise development programmes for minority sports in particular, which cannot raise their own revenue. I urge that such a change would be facilitated. I accept the Bill has a specific technical purpose but I urge the Minister of State to consider advancing the recommendation in conjunction with the Department of Finance.

It is proposed to expand the remit of Sport Ireland in terms of its scope of activities, in particular in the provision of education and information programmes and the development of strategies to increase participation in sport at all levels. The Minister of State has outlined the target he set for increased participation.

The third recommendation is in the context of the current co-operation in the area of coaching between the Irish Sports Council, which will become Sport Ireland, and Sport Northern Ireland. It may be worth considering whether the benefits of broader cross-Border synergies could best be advanced by being specifically addressed in the Bill or in future legislation. A loophole exists to the effect that some elite athletes from Northern Ireland are double funded. I am not sure how that can be achieved but the intention is to achieve an even playing field.

The Minister of State referred to the fact that research will be carried out in collaboration with Sport Ireland. One of the stakeholders expressed concern about how that would be rolled out.

Recommendation 5 called for greater specificity in the legislation on the use of facilities by institutions fully or partly funded by the public purse, other than sports clubs. Recommendation 6 relates to the lack of regulation in adventure activities. The Minister of State addressed the matter in his contribution. In particular, more specificity may be necessary on the powers of Sport Ireland to “facilitate, through the promulgation of guidelines and codes of practice, standards of good conduct, fair play and doping-free sport in either or both competitive sport and recreational sport”. That should include non-traditional extreme sports such as iron man competitions.

I welcome the Bill as a progressive step. The Minister of State referred to the contribution of the sports capital programme. I very much support what he said in that regard. One never has enough money to give out; it is similar to the miracle of the loaves and fishes. The Minister of State said he hopes to have a third round of funding. I hope some of those who were disappointed in the previous two years will be able to avail of that. The work of the sports partnerships around the country is magnificent. I wish the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, luck, along with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe. I thank the previous Minister, Deputy Varadkar, for his

efforts in attracting sports events and sports tourism to this country. The Rugby World Cup is a significant target. When looking at “Six One News” last week I thought Martin O’Neill had picked the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, in the squad for the forthcoming European championships.

Deputy Michael Ring: He could do worse.

Deputy John O’Mahony: I say well done to the Minister of State for his role in attracting sporting events to this country.

Sport is a huge part of this nation and it is important that it is well run. The Bill will help to achieve that aim.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister of State for introducing the Bill. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

I acknowledge the role of sport in local communities. Every single community across the country has sporting organisations, be they GAA, soccer or, for example, in my town there is a very successful cricket team, which was recently promoted to the top flight. We have a proud sporting tradition across the nation.

As Deputy O’Mahony indicated, sport is of critical importance to Irish people. When an athlete is participating in a competition people around the country become interested and excited about their prospects. Recently, our success in soccer has not been wonderful but we are beginning to improve again. Irish people are very proud of their sporting traditions. It encourages us to be more positive about our outlook on life. In the height of the recession the soccer team had a couple of successful outings at European level. Such support lifts people and gets others interested.

Sporting organisations are the backbone of many communities throughout the country and are largely financed by fund-raising in the local area. The fact that volunteering is so high in sport in Ireland shows the importance with which it is held by people from all backgrounds and all areas. This ensures the development and implementation of sports policy is as effective as possible and it is of the utmost importance that we support volunteers in local communities in their actions to promote sports. I believe the Sport Ireland Bill 2014 will assist in this.

The Bill will provide for the establishment of Sport Ireland, which will replace the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Development Authority. The merging of these bodies follows the core commitment made by the Government to do away with quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations, quangos. I am not fond of the word “quango”. The aim is to do away with replicating boards and the amalgamation of these sporting bodies makes sense in terms of the development and implementation of policy. Bringing the responsibilities for the development and implementation of sports policy under one organisation is also a matter of common sense. I believe that having one organisation responsible for both aspects of sports policy will allow for a more integrated approach to these matters, which can only be beneficial for the future of sport in Ireland.

Section 7 outlines the functions of Sport Ireland and it is encouraging to note that among the organisation’s functions is a focus on developing strategies for increasing participation in sport. It is of fundamental importance that we make sport more appealing, particularly to children and young people as a means of tackling the obesity crisis which is currently gripping a large

proportion of the youth of Ireland.

On the issue of participation, I am particularly interested in the Football Association of Ireland, FAI, cricket and the two successful programmes spearheaded by the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, relating to sports capital. I congratulate the Minister of State on this success. Last Monday there was an interesting debate on Ireland's successful bid relating to Euro 2020 that will see the Aviva Stadium host four matches in the competition. It is great news for Dublin and presents a huge opportunity for tourism but it is also a chance to showcase the facilities at the Aviva Stadium, which are second to none. The successful bid allows us to focus on other aspects of the FAI, such as League of Ireland soccer, which is a personal interest of mine. I was involved with a League of Ireland club as a schoolboy and I volunteered with another club for a number of years when I was a councillor in Malahide. It was an exhilarating experience but, on the policy aspects facing Sport Ireland, the model currently in use is not sustainable. Many clubs have inferior facilities and there are only three or four proper stadia among 20-odd League of Ireland teams - the rest are starved of funds. Contributions to the league and prize money are insufficient to support the continued growth of clubs and they are being crippled. A club might qualify for European competition one year and find itself in the second tier of the domestic league the following year because it peaked and could not maintain the funding level.

I have an interest in the development of policy on cricket. Cricket is prominent in the north county of Dublin for a number of reasons and Ireland's participation in the world cup put cricket on the map here as a sport in which we might achieve success. Many Irish players play county cricket across the water in what is the equivalent of the soccer premier league. They are terrific ambassadors for the sport but most international matches in Ireland are held at Stormont because until recently there was no facility in the Republic to host such events. This changed due to development at Malahide Cricket Club but that only went halfway because a stadium must be set up at the club for each match of significance. England played there last summer, as the Minister knows, and some 11,000 or 12,000 people attended. It was a great event and a wonderful showcase for cricket and the policy of encouraging such games. England will return next year to give another opportunity to showcase the sport. I hope a core policy of Sport Ireland's cricket remit will be the development of the facility at Malahide to create the home of Irish cricket. Significant sums have already been invested there through the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Regarding sports capital, clubs in Swords and my community have benefitted from a 1,506% increase in sports capital grants between 2012 and 2014. I double-checked that figure. The clubs will be delighted with that funding as it creates the opportunity for more children to become involved in sport and tackle the obesity issue that is prevalent. Unfortunately, computer games, television and phones tend to be the preferred sources of amusement for young people and it is important that we take the opportunity to develop policy that will get them off the sofa and out onto a football pitch or playing any other sport.

I hope that Sport Ireland will work to find an effective strategy that engages with young children, their parents and their teachers because schools present a great opportunity to focus the minds of young people on the activities they enjoy. A child need not be good at a sport to participate. We cannot tackle this without input from a wide section of society. It may involve promotion days at sports clubs or schools spearheading activities. Doing this will encourage children to become more active in terms of recreation and provide the next generation of elite athletes a chance to hone their skills. It will also give coaches an opportunity to find talented individuals at a young age and promote the development of particular skill-sets.

While we must place a large focus on ensuring we increase the number of children and young people involved in sport, we must also place a great deal of focus on engaging all other sectors of society. As we are inevitably going to start seeing the impact of an aging population in the coming years, we must take action now to ensure that our population has both the means and the information to live healthily and actively throughout life, not just during school and college. This is an issue on which Sport Ireland and the Minister could engage with the Department of Health in future, following the establishment of the organisation. Increasing the participation of all sections of society in sport as a means to keep active and healthy must be one of the core tenets of Sport Ireland.

The role of Sport Ireland in facilitating fair conduct and the elimination of doping in all sports is important. Any doping in sport is too much - not only does it give an unfair advantage but it is a health risk that must be tackled. I am encouraged to see the provisions in the Bill that ensure the statutory basis of an existing national anti-doping programme and the Irish anti-doping rules. It must be made clear that doping in sport is unacceptable, whether at a recreational or elite level. For this reason I hope that Sport Ireland mounts an education campaign on the dangers of doping, the negative health impacts and the risks of performance enhancing substances. This education programme must start at school because it is the ideal time and place to inform young people who participate in sport of these dangers. School is a place where a local club or a local sporting hero can talk to young people about the importance of staying healthy and staying clean, in terms of performance enhancing substances. I am a regular gym user and my gym does not have many weights but I have been in gyms where some individuals spend an hour or two working on heavy weights. Some people purchase nutritional supplements over the counter and online, some of which I am sure have very questionable ingredients. There are massive side effects and it is not known what effect they may have on a person later in life. In certain gyms it is accepted that this occurs but it should not be accepted in our modern society and these supplements should be tested. I refer specifically to those one can buy online. One receives spam in one's Gmail or Eircom account for a performance enhancing supplement, whether for sport or other reasons, and unfortunately people buy them. Some of my local schools took the opportunity to bring in the Leinster rugby team when it was successful in the Heineken Cup a number of years ago. Schools also bring in local GAA clubs which have won a league to impress the youngsters.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Watch Connacht this year. They are making a comeback.

Deputy Alan Farrell: They impress upon the youngsters how important it is to participate in sport and to do so through natural means rather than using supplements.

Section 41 provides that Sport Ireland will have the power to implement the measures it deems appropriate to deliver a comprehensive, co-ordinated and effective response to doping in sport. Such measures can include testing. As I have stated, it is my opinion that we must continue to crack down on doping in elite sport events. On this note with regard to sporting heroes, it is extremely demoralising for followers of a sport to find an individual has cheated and has been stripped of a medal. It does not set a good example for younger participants. Elite athletes are often powerful role models in the eyes of young people, and for them to betray this trust and support can have a profound effect. The fact that the Bill provides for information sharing between Sport Ireland and other bodies for the purpose of combating doping in sport is very welcome as it is essential in implementing an effective approach to tackling the issue.

Section 14 requires Sport Ireland to prepare and submit a strategy statement to the Minis-

ter every five years. The first strategy statement will be required within six months of Sport Ireland's first meeting. This is vital to ensure that Sport Ireland gets off to a running start in co-ordination with the work of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

I commend the Minister of State on the inclusion of section 22, which obliges the chief executive to appear before the Committee of Public Accounts and other Oireachtas committees, such as that chaired by Deputy O'Mahony. This clearly shows the commitment of the Minister of State to ensure transparency and accountability, which are pivotal for the governance of bodies such as Sport Ireland.

I also welcome section 28, which provides that Sport Ireland will continue with the development of the national sports campus in accordance with the plan which was prepared by the National Sports Campus Development Authority. It is essential we have consistency in the development of this sporting infrastructure, which this provision gives us. I have been to Abbotstown on a number of occasions and it is a terrific facility. I look forward to seeing it developed and opened up to multiple sports where young people from throughout the country will be allowed to use the facilities available. Buildings on the campus have been refurbished to become home to the headquarters of the Football Association of Ireland, the Irish Institute of Sport and the Irish Sport headquarters, and it will be the governing headquarters of 19 national sporting bodies. The accommodation of so many important and influential sporting bodies on one campus can only be positive in terms of encouraging greater levels of cross-sport initiatives focusing on a wide range of areas. It was not that long ago when a soccer match could never take place in a GAA ground or a rugby ground but this is no longer the case in most instances, which is testament to the co-operation between sporting codes. I hope this will be furthered by the amalgamation of these two agencies under one roof. A key factor in ensuring the future of the sports campus will be success in promoting use of the campus, particularly the National Aquatic Centre which is a key resource on the campus. This will be one key function of Sport Ireland and the maintenance, equipment and future development of the campus will be key in doing this and in further establishing the campus as a foremost sporting venue in the country.

I commend the Minister of State on bringing the Bill before the House and I have enjoyed this opportunity to contribute and air some of my views, particularly with regard to the FAI. I hope the Bill will be passed smoothly.

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 debate because it is important when one has responsibility for a key area to be hands on and listen to some of the criticism, positive comments and constructive proposals from the Opposition.

I warmly welcome the legislation. As an Independent Deputy, it is important to state this, as I judge and value legislation on what it stands for and this is my independent view. The Bill gives us a great opportunity to look in depth at all of the great sports in Ireland and their massive contribution to the country, community and economy. It is also important to put forward proposals and new and radical ideas to develop sport further in this country and make it more inclusive. This is essential if we are to create a better and healthier society. This is what we all want so we must also deal with the elephant in the room, which is doping and drug taking to win. We must deal very strongly with this as it must be rooted out, and I will speak about it again when discussing Part 4 of the legislation, in particular sections 40 and 41.

The purpose of the Bill is to provide for the establishment of Sport Ireland and the dis-

solution of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority. Sport Ireland will assume responsibility for the relevant functions performed by the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority, and essentially this is what the legislation is about. Will this lead to any job losses? We all want rationalisation and common-sense proposals, and on the surface this Bill looks like common-sense legislation, but we cannot speak about prioritising jobs if anybody's job is at risk because of the Bill.

I strongly support section 14 which obliges Sport Ireland to prepare and submit for the approval of the Minister a strategy statement for each five-year period. The first strategy statement is to be submitted within six months of Sport Ireland's first meeting. This is very important because one needs to set out the plans and strategy over the five years because one can plan for many things.

I know the Minister of State is very disappointed with Mayo's result in the football, but in recent weeks we have seen fantastic football and hurling matches put on by the GAA to which thousands came to enjoy. These matches make a contribution not only from a sports point of view but also with regard to community involvement and an economic point of view. People forget these big occasions generate revenue in small areas. Whether these events are held in Limerick, Croke Park or any part of the country, it is important that we acknowledge this and use it as a tool and resource, particularly when we are trying to get out of an economic mess. I commend the GAA in this regard.

I was extremely disappointed when the famous Garth Brooks concerts were cancelled and it was badly mishandled by many people, but it is gone now. We should not forget the Munster finals, Connacht finals and all-Ireland semi-finals not only generate a sense of goodwill and a sporting occasion but also make a massive contribution to the economy.

When talking about that it is important to acknowledge the massive work that goes on in and the contribution of smaller clubs throughout the country. When the Minister of State is throwing big bucks at the big organisations, it is essential not to forget the little clubs. A couple of thousand euro can be very helpful and when they get it, it is often appreciated more than it is by some of the big organisations that get a couple of million euro here and there. I have witnessed that at first hand with the recent announcements in Craobh Chiaráin in Donnycarney in my constituency and a number of other local clubs that got this few extra bob, which was a great help to them. If one has limited resources, one targets the resources at the people who deliver.

As well as getting a younger generation into a sport, whether it is hurling, football, rugby or soccer, one needs to support them on the front line. I say that as a former coach of an under-13 team for 26 years in the north inner city of Dublin through my involvement with Cumann na mBunscoil. I saw the fantastic reaction, sometimes in very disadvantaged areas, where if a young under-13 team got to the final in Cumann na mBunscoil, the flags were out on the flats in Hardwicke Street and Dorset Street. It was big in the community for two or three weeks. That was for their under-13 team getting to a final in Croke Park. That is important in developing a disadvantaged community, but also developing the self-esteem of the pupils. Sport should never be underestimated in dealing with those issues.

However, sport must be inclusive. It cannot be all about the big stars. We have to ensure that every single child in this country is playing a sport at a level they can enjoy and succeed in. That is being done in many places. There are examples of clubs that do it brilliantly, but there are also clubs that just pick the cream and dump the other kids, which is not good enough.

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There should always be a place for a child, particularly up to the age of 13 or 14. One just does not dump them between seven and 13 or 14. That is a mistake that some clubs make and it is very disadvantaging. That relates to the GAA.

We have to look at the League of Ireland as well. There is a question for us here. In my constituency, Shelbourne Football Club on Richmond Road is our local club. We need to encourage more Irish people to get off their couches, take a break from Sky Sports and get down to support their local clubs. In recent weeks some of the entertainment in these matches has been brilliant. Fair play to clubs such as Dundalk and Cork City, which have brought people out watching matches, which is great. I know Deputy O'Brien is very involved in Cork. I keep an eye on those matches and one regularly sees thousands of people. Would it not be great to see that going around the country? The Minister of State should keep an eye on the League of Ireland and should not leave it marginalised. It needs a bit of investment. I know we are in tough times, but if there is anything going in that regard, the clubs should get help and some of the grounds need a bit of investment. I say to the supporters to get off their couches, get out there and support their local clubs because they can do a lot of good work as well.

On the national scale what I have to say may be controversial to some people. It saddens me every time I see Martin O'Neill with the Irish national team down here and then there is a separate team in the North. My dream would be to have one all-Ireland football team. They can do it in rugby and hockey, so why not do it in football as well? A number of my colleagues talk about building bridges. That could be part of that as well, but it has to be done in a very inclusive and respectful way. From a national point of view we would do much better if we had an all-Ireland team going off to the World Cup and European Championships rather than having two smaller teams.

I mentioned some of the projects with some of the clubs with which I have been involved. I mentioned Shelbourne earlier and that club was very supportive of a project about nine or ten years ago with what would be seen as a Unionist football club, Linfield. I remember one night in Tolka Park all the Linfield people came down and the Shelbourne people went up to their place. This is all part of mixing different clubs and different cultures. There was great respect for both cultures that night. That night I was very proud of the members of the Shelbourne supporters club. The supporters of Linfield, which would be recognised as a strong Unionist club, came to Dublin, there was no trouble or rows and we had a great sing-song in the bar afterwards. I commend the Shelbourne supporters club on doing that kind of work and dealing with sectarianism. Racism and sectarianism in sport can never be tolerated.

I mentioned the value of sport in the local community. That can be compared with some of the stuff going on in the English Premiership and the excessive wages of players. What person kicking a ball is worth €200,000 a week? I just do not get it. I do not think they are good role models for people. I love football and I love sport. In certain countries and in certain competitions, some of the wages are excessive. It would be better if some of the money for those wages was invested in their clubs to develop youth sections and centres of excellence, and also to get people more involved.

I mentioned earlier the issue of drugs. Those who take drugs in sport let their sport down, they let themselves down, they let their families down and they also let their local community down.

Section 21 sets out the provisions regarding the chief executive, including the appointment,

term of office, and functions of the chief executive. Section 22 obliges the chief executive to appear before the Committee of Public Accounts and other Oireachtas committees. It is very important that the person in the role of chief executive would be accountable. I particularly welcome that he or she can go before the Committee of Public Accounts.

Section 23 provides that Sport Ireland may appoint and remove staff, determine the grades and number of staff in each grade, and determine the terms and conditions of service, with the approval of the Minister and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. I raise that issue regarding the issues I will raise later on. I just hope there is no particular problem there with job losses.

I return to some of the controversial sections. Section 40 designates Sport Ireland as the national anti-doping organisation for the State and provides that it shall perform the functions and obligations of such an organisation referred to in the world anti-doping code, UNESCO anti-doping convention and Irish anti-doping rules. This is very important because we have to nip this in the bud and we have to root it out. Generally our record in Ireland is pretty good. I know that internationally and in other countries there have been huge scandals and a huge number of people in different sports have been involved in doping. Some of those sports have been too lenient, however, in letting athletes back after a 12-month suspension or something like that. I think we should take a stronger line.

When we dig deeper into the Bill we find that section 41 provides that Sport Ireland shall implement such measures as it considers appropriate for the delivery of a comprehensive, co-ordinated and effective response to doping in sport and may provide services, including testing and education, to organisations which comply with the world anti-doping code. It obliges Sport Ireland to promulgate and amend as necessary the Irish anti-doping rules. Provision is also included for the sharing of information between Sport Ireland and relevant bodies and organisations. That is something that can be used to protect sport against exploitation.

Section 43 provides that any person who is a member of, or participates in activities and events organised by, a national governing body of sport which is in receipt of funding from Sport Ireland or who represents the State in sport is subject to the Irish anti-doping rules and any person who fails to comply with those rules shall not be eligible for funding from Sport Ireland or to represent the State in sport. That represents my view. We must take a tough line. It is an honour for anyone to be selected to represent his or her country in any sport and it is an honour to go out there on the international stage, including in European competitions, the World Cup, international athletic competitions or the Olympic Games. Anybody in breach of the doping rules should be absolutely hammered in this regard and should be given no support whatsoever. This is of great importance when one is dealing with the issue of doping.

Overall, this is good quality legislation. The establishment of Sport Ireland will result in a more streamlined organisation for the development of sport and for the implementation of sports policy by bringing together responsibility for sports matters under a single agency. I again emphasise that rationalisation and streamlining of organisations are the way forward. Members are trying to deal with issues like quangos and are trying to seek value for money. Sport Ireland will also take on relevant functions currently performed by the council and by the authority. The Bill also combines and updates the main provisions of the Irish Sports Council Act 1999 and the National Sports Campus Development Authority Act 2006, which also is important. I hope the Minister of State has listened to some of the views I have presented. In the first instance, it is necessary to take a strong and tough line on doping in sport. In addition, the

structures in the League of Ireland must be examined and there must be some investment and support. People must be encouraged to get off their armchairs and couches and get out there to support their local clubs. In addition, the role models of sportspeople must always held to a high standard because they have a major influence in respect of young people starting off in sports. We must also ensure that the number of sports played in this country is broadened. Although we have a great number of them, new sports constantly are coming onto the pitch and they should be considered.

Earlier, I left out one further important point, namely, the role of the Special Olympics for people with disabilities, both physical and intellectual. These games also have had a major impact and I have seen at first hand both the interaction and the great lift it gives to people with both intellectual and physical disabilities. It gives them a lift and provides them with value as well as a great break for their self-esteem. While I have the Minister of State in the Chamber, I urge him to keep an eye on the Special Olympics as well because it also requires support. It is a fantastic organisation that has great community support but the bottom line is that it gets many people with disabilities off the couches and out playing football or basketball or swimming. Incidentally, some of the participants have reached a very high standard and I have been greatly impressed by some of the basketball kids and swimmers I have seen. Their standards have improved markedly since they started over the past five or six years. While they are developing, the main point is there is in place an entire fitness programme for people. In particular, people with a physical disability need to have such an opportunity because it is easy to be weighed down by the seriousness of one's disability. Consequently, it is very important to give them a break and to support them.

Overall, I welcome this legislation and reiterate my hope that the Minister of State will take on board my views.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Nolan is next, or is it Deputy Spring?

Deputy Derek Nolan: Deputy Spring is in a hurry.

Deputy Arthur Spring: I want to go home and celebrate a little more.

Deputy Finian McGrath: It is the Kerry team again. Kerry won and robbed Donegal again.

Deputy Arthur Spring: Yes. It is not true that it is five years since we last won an all-Ireland; it is actually only three days but I thank the Deputy kindly anyway.

I welcome the Bill on a couple of fronts and I am delighted the Minister of State is present. I also wish to make a couple of recommendations because I am glad to see there is a united front in respect of sport, which plays an important role in society. It also brings a multifaceted approach to what it can bring to health and education and what it can build for rural communities. In the week that is in it and being a Kerryman, one need only look at what probably is the best amateur sporting organisation and the best county within an amateur sporting organisation. I am sure the Minister of State is delighted to see a Kerry team doing it again.

On a serious note, one should consider schools and the role they have to play. A statistic was released recently that on average, toddlers are consuming 16 kg of junk food per annum, which is the equivalent of just under 1 lb of sweets and confectionery per week. Ireland has an obesity problem and there are two ways of tackling it, namely, through healthy eating and

through the activity of sport. I believe that sport is not just about participation and winning but is also about healthy living and providing the fundamentals to children. One has the ability within schools in particular to instil a lifestyle around sports, whether it is running, ball sports or anything to do with cardiovascular or hand-eye co-ordination and so on. Unfortunately, one now finds far too often that when kids say they play sports, they actually mean they play sport on a PlayStation or some other electronic device and this is at epidemic proportions at present. The Government is trying to tackle this issue through a multidepartmental approach. For example, on the health side, the Departments of Health and Social Protection are providing the schools meals programme in which each child within a school gets to go on the Internet the night before to pick his or her meal, be it pasta or a healthy sandwich, and the cost per student is approximately €1.27.

I will ask the Minister of State to consider something in respect of sport. Disability and participation in sport is increasing all the time. I am trying to promote Tralee as a destination for people with disabilities and as the most disability-friendly town in the country. People there are examining a couple of projects at present, one being the Liam's Lodge project for people who are suffering from illnesses and who need to be protected and looked after. Doctors can come there to train and participate, while the patients can participate in activities in the town and in sporting activities. I am a major fan of the Scandinavian model in most respects and I note they maintain an enormous involvement of people with disabilities in sports, whether through wheelchair participation or through swimming-pool activities. This is to be promoted and developed.

It is good that the issue of fine-tuned athletes and the development thereof is also under consideration because we have had sports authorities paddling their own canoes for too long. The nation as a whole takes great pride when its soccer or rugby teams or its athletes or golfers - given the week that is in it - get to the highest levels in sport. The fundamentals of all key sports revolve around strength, power and endurance and these can be developed through schooling and through clubs. I welcome the capacity of the Minister of State to give out sporting capital grants. I also welcome that the weighting system provides that participation and inclusion between clubs and schools, which leads to more people using the facilities, will lead to more preferential treatment.

The community side of what is being developed is extremely important. As an anecdotal piece of information, the gathering in Tralee on Monday night, when the victorious Kerry senior and minor teams came home, was the biggest to have been seen for donkeys' years. This was not because the teams had won a double for the first time since 1980 but because there are more communities involved as there were people from parishes all over the place. These clubs are on a voluntary capacity but I suggest giving them expertise. The current Australian model is to have a centre of excellence for all things sporting. Thereafter, the information is filtered out into rugby, cricket, golf and everything else but there is a single centre of excellence for the core necessities of sporting participation. I would like this to be done in Ireland as well. I also note the Minister of State has the capacity to do something in respect of doping and drug testing. I hope he might take a little time to talk to the greyhounds and horses while he is at it, as Members know the athletes, for the most part, are under wraps.

In the few minutes remaining to me, I will return to the health front. The Minister of State has spoken of efforts to develop greater participation in more activities. From time spent in Scandinavia, I recall that all children going to school were monitored as to the length of time it took them to cycle, run and walk a distance. It is not that one is trying to develop an Aryan

race or anything ridiculous like that but one is telling the children that health matters. It is not just about the fundamentals of education but one is also giving people the capacity to give themselves an advantage in later life. I have made a recommendation to the Department of Education and Skills, as well as to both the previous and new Ministers. The new junior cycle programme will have five elective subjects and I seek the inclusion of physical education as one of them.

An important aspect of that educational effort should be raising awareness regarding health and well-being, so that when people have physical or mental health issues, they will know where to get help. Serotonin is the hormone we are all seeking out, and sport is the great driver of it. It is about promoting a better lifestyle. We have had a good summer this year and one could see many people enjoying being on a health buzz. That is clear, too, from the massive take-up of the cycle to work scheme. I urge the Minister of State and his colleagues to ensure that scheme, which is one of the best legacies of the Green Party's time in government, is retained. Participation in free activities, such as running, swimming, cycling and football is on the rise. Such activities are open to everybody and can encourage inclusiveness by bringing together people from all spectrums of society.

I welcome the Bill, but funding is a key issue. The provision of a centre of excellence would help to make information available to everybody, to the betterment of our society. When one thinks of great and memorable summers past in this country, sporting events play a massive role in that remembrance. For Kerry people, the summer of 2014 will be remembered for the replay against Mayo and, although it is difficult to know what words to use to describe last Sunday's game against Donegal, another all-Ireland championship victory. The Irish soccer team, meanwhile, looks like it has the potential to qualify for the European Championship in 2016. With the improvement in the economy, it would be good to see more funding and resources, particularly in the regions where there is a greater level of disadvantage. I hope we will see enhanced sporting success on the back of the measures in this Bill.

Deputy Derek Nolan: There is nothing worse than a self-satisfied Kerryman standing next to one in the Chamber and gloating. However, I offer my congratulations to the Kerry team and all involved in its success.

I was speaking to somebody on the telephone before coming into the Chamber for this debate who, when I indicated the subject of the debate, observed that the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Ring, must have the best job in the country. I responded that one got a different perspective after hearing him talk about the sports capital grant applications he has had to reject. There is a flip side to every job. Having said that, his success in recent years in getting two rounds of sports capital grant funding through has been significant. One cannot please everybody all the time, but the Minister of State has done his best to distribute limited resources across the country as best he can, to clubs and organisations that have used the money wisely and prudently for the benefit of their members.

This is a purposeful Bill whose origins are not very sport-orientated, it being part of the programme of agency rationalisation. Such rationalisation is not always a bad thing. It is not just about penny pinching but also seeing how we might organise ourselves better. Sometimes, by initiating these types of mergers, we can create a more effective and targeted organisation. The purpose of the Bill is to create a new body, Sport Ireland, out of the merger of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority. The combined resources, know-how and experience of those two organisations will now be united in a single entity.

While this certainly will have a benefit to the Exchequer in terms of savings, it will also represent a better usage of resources and free up funds for other sporting objectives.

In my research for this debate, I was impressed by the pre-legislative consultation carried out by the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications. While the Department concluded that some of its recommendations are not feasible at this time, they are all worthwhile. One of these is that Sport Ireland should be empowered to explore alternative forms of funding, which would see it functioning more like a company, with a balance sheet and the capacity to leverage itself and raise funds externally. In other words, it would be more like a corporate entity as opposed to a State agency. This would be a good way of creating a dynamic which might see a greater level of private sponsorship of sports in this country. While that issue might not be a matter for this legislation, it is something on which the Department might engage with the new body once it is up and running. The National Sports Campus is a magnificent complex, whose facilities a range of organisations might want to use and be willing to pay for. There is scope to make better use of our assets for the benefit of society at large.

The Oireachtas committee also made a recommendation, which was deemed not particularly relevant to this Bill, that there be scope for Sport Ireland to work on an all-island basis, creating a North-South interconnection or liaison via sports. We have so many connections with Northern Ireland - one might say it is a “national” connection, although it should technically be “international”, if one is being legalistic about it - and our sporting counterparts across the Border. It should be a primary objective of the new body to engage with relevant bodies in the North, particularly those organisations such as the GAA which operate on an all-island basis.

Sport can be said to impact every facet of people’s lives. The dismal atmosphere that has pervaded in recent years is, finally and fortunately, lifting as we start to see a return to hope and prosperity, fragile and all as that recovery is. In those dark times it was sport which managed to keep communities together and gave people something to do. While clubs and athletes worked hard raising money for their organisations, the average child and adult who partook of a particular sport was able to do so for free. It does not cost anything for a few people to get together with a football or some tennis racquets. One does not have to be a millionaire to partake of the unique unifying force of sport.

Sport also impacts greatly on people’s health and helps to create a healthy society. The objective is that people would see exercise not as a chore, but as something they want to do. That will impact on the health budget in future years in terms of moneys spent on health procedures, diabetes treatment and so on. Galway city has the highest percentage of residents who were not born in Ireland. It is a very diverse and multicultural city and it has handled that diversity very well, with new communities from all over the world integrating with longer established communities. One of the ways it has done this so successfully, without the need for any type of forced integration, is through sport. This is particularly evident in some of the clubs in the east of the city - in Doughiska, for instance - where the new population is well settled. Such engagement strengthens community bonds and has a broader impact in helping to reduce crime, anti-social behaviour and so on.

Sport is a multifaceted issue and there is a role for the Department of Education and Skills in examining how physical education is delivered in schools. I recall being one of those students who was terrified in PE class. I was the fellow who could never quite manage the hurley and was humiliated every Friday morning between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. There should be a way of targeting the education system to ensure we do not put people off exercise but instead encour-

age pupils to find a sport they enjoy.

Putting the anti-doping guidelines and so forth on a statutory level shows we are serious about the issue and prepared to implement laws that are justiciable. It sends a signal that while we admire success in sport, we do not admire it at any cost. We value those who take the hard road rather than the easy road. I will not use the privilege of the House to say anything untoward, but there have been many instances where the achievements of individual athletes were tainted by the alleged use of drugs. Such practices undermine people's faith in the fairness of the system and creates the impression that those who take short cuts to get ahead may prosper.

6 o'clock

As I said, the genesis of the Bill lies in administrative considerations. It possesses the ability to make an organisation that will actually contribute better to sport in Ireland and it will give the campus an opportunity to flourish, grow, be used not only by the people in the immediate hinterland and in the Pale but by all the people involved in sport in Ireland, and become a kind of centre or a hub for sport, which is a very good thing. The doping provisions in the Bill are very good.

Our interpretation of what sport is ever-evolving. If, 15, 20 or 30 years ago, a Member of this House spoke about sport in the context of education and health policy, he or she would have been laughed out of it, but we have reached a new plateau of awareness of sport and its benefit. This Bill will go some way towards continuing that work. I commend the Bill and the Minister of State's work, his openness and his willingness to engage.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I am delighted to say a few words on this Bill. I am not an expert on any area of sport and I am probably one of the biggest offenders in regard to many of the issues I will raise. I have only felt sorry for the Minister of State on one occasion since he took up the job and that was on the night of the World Cup final when I saw the cup being presented in Rio de Janeiro. I regretted that he could not make it from Castlebar to Brazil within the time-frame required. I had a vision of the Minister of State and the Taoiseach being three quarters of the way across the Atlantic Ocean in the Learjet. However, I expect he got there for the celebrations later on in the Copacabana beach hotel.

I acknowledge the fact the Minister of State has been the only one with responsibility for sport who has allocated the capital grants in an equitable and fair manner. I hope there will be a third round of them in the next 12 months or so. There will be a temptation to allocate them in a certain manner but I hope he continues in the same manner and tradition. It is important to acknowledge that he has been equitable in an area in which equity has not existed heretofore.

Sport should be a subject in the leaving certificate. It is an issue which has been touched on several times in the past. Many people put in a huge amount of time training and preparing to represent their schools in all areas of sport. I appreciate the difficulty trying to measure it but it could be an optional subject. One can do music and art in the leaving certificate so I do not see why one cannot do sport because it is such an important subject which touches on everybody's life. That idea is not an original one and it has been floating around for a long time. I would like to think that some Government some day will take it seriously.

The second idea is one of my own but I will give it to the Minister of State. I hope he will be in a position to run with it. He will be familiar with the concept of freshers' week in the universities where there is the Fine Gael table, the Labour Party table, the Reform Alliance table,

the handball table, the tennis table and so on. There are difficulties in communities nowadays, in particular when people move to an area and do not know other people. When one is out and about during an election or a by-election, in particular, people will say there is nothing for young people to do in the area. If one examines an area in this country, no matter how big or small, there will be a multiplicity of clubs in the area. For whatever reason, the perception to the outsider is that they are closed shops, which they are not.

I suggest we designate a day per year - early in September is probably preferable with the schools starting but it could be in the first or second week of January - as a community day where the local hall in every town and village is set up with every club in the area. I suggested this to the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, but he did not take it up. Perhaps the Minister of State might do so. People could come along from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. to see what clubs and organisations in the community they could join because clubs are looking for additional members. This applies to historical societies, archaeological societies, bridge clubs, GAA clubs, etc. They are all crying out for volunteers. Many people in the community do not have the wherewithal to break into these clubs. If we could designate a day per year for this to be done, it would prove hugely successful and it would get people to make a contribution and avail of facilities. One of the difficulties in communities is that there are very strong clubs but there is no overall umbrella group to bring them together and to let the public know what is available. That is something the Minister of State could look at with his staff.

I refer to the allocation of capital grants, in particular when given to GAA, rugby or soccer clubs. I would like to see a requirement on clubs to put walkways around the grounds. Some 20 or 30 years ago, very few mothers and young children went to games but now, given the way things are, parents are always there. They should be able to walk around the pitch when there is training or a match going on. Some clubs have done this very successfully. Ballymore Eustace in Kildare and Tullaroan in Kilkenny have excellent facilities. In the winter when the facilities open for training for the local club, the walkway is floodlit. People usually cannot walk in a rural area due to lack of lighting. The allocation of grants could include a provision that clubs be required to make an effort in this regard. In particular if a club is putting in a new facility, there should be a requirement on it to put in a walkway for spectators and others so that they may use the facility for walking during training.

The legislation concerns the amalgamation of quangos. We all detest the concept of quangos and yet no organisation sees itself as a quango. It is important to amalgamate them. In the area of health, all the organisations probably do good work but it is impossible to stand over the number of organisations we have. The difficulty in regard to funding by the HSE was in the headlines a few months ago. I am sure it is still there, except it is not in the headlines anymore. Approximately, 2,000 organisations were allocated funding by the Department, totalling €1 billion. It is virtually impossible to keep track of these. Almost all of them were set up with good intentions and they all carry out good work but a proliferation of them are using a greater amount of administrative time and funding than is necessary.

A classic example is our aid agencies, including Trócaire, GOAL and so on. I do not understand why one cannot say to each aid agency to cover a certain area, whether the South Pacific, North Africa or elsewhere. Rather than have three or four of them in every country, we should have one in each country. It would make it much easier to operate. One would have greater economies of scale and one would get much better value for money.

I am a strong advocate of Ireland giving money to Irish Aid. In a household with an income

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of €100,000, somewhere in the region of €350 to €400 goes to Irish Aid while if a household has an income of €50,000, somewhere in the region of €200 goes to it. We have water charges and property tax but if we said to people that there would be a new tax for Irish Aid and if people had to make out a cheque for €200, they would be much more concerned about how the money was actually spent. When dealing with public money, we must ensure we are getting value for money and that the money is going to the correct project.

I refer to the membership of the board, which is really important. The Government has faced controversy in recent days in regard to membership of boards. It is certainly something that does not instil confidence in the public. For the life of me, I cannot understand how successive Governments can be so foolish in doing what they do. They have no regard for public opinion. The composition of this board is really important. A good friend of mine, Mick O'Dwyer, used to be on the board of the Sports Council of Ireland but he was taken off it or replaced for whatever reason. He was someone who had probably more knowledge than most to offer in the area. He gave freely of his time and made a huge difference to the sporting public in Wicklow in the four or five years he was there. Most of it was done in a voluntary capacity and it gave a great lift to the county.

I know the Minister of State must give out the funding fairly but the GAA in Wicklow probably has one of the most poorly developed county grounds in the country in Aughrim. Perhaps when the Minister of State is on his weekend break or over Christmas he might head down that way to take a look. I accept that funding has to be allocated in a balanced and fair way but there was an application last year and development is needed. We do not expect the €30 million that Cork received but we would be happy if we could get a fraction of that figure.

I will use this opportunity to speak about sports that are probably outside the remit of this Bill but it is important for me to get certain matters off my chest. The organisation with which I am most familiar is the GAA, which has many positive aspects. We do not generally concentrate on the positives but the volunteer ethos is a positive element of the GAA. One only needs to go to any town or village on a Saturday to see children being coached by parents, friends and relatives, and people coming around with sandwiches and tea. A couple of GAA men are in the Chamber, namely, Deputies Harrington and Fitzpatrick. It is a marvellous organisation and the passion associated with it will never cease to make me wonder. When I was in Croke Park on Sunday for the game, I saw a Kerryman in the stands who could have been in the middle of a battle scene on the series "Vikings", such was his animation. Given that Kerry has 36 or 37 all-Irelands, I could not understand his animation. The last occasion on which Wicklow was in a Leinster final was 1897 and we never won a final. In 1902, Bray Emmets won an all-Ireland but it did so under the banner of Dublin. We are one of two counties, the other being Fermanagh, which have never won a provincial title. I ask the Minister of State to remember that when he is allocating funding and to give us a lift. However, we make a vital contribution to the economy and to other sports. I do not know if Dublin ever won an all-Ireland without a Wicklow man on board.

There are also downsides to the GAA, one of which is the acceptance of verbal abuse. I have been no angel in the past because we can get very emotive but we cannot tolerate verbal abuse, whether from spectators, referees, players or mentors. The GAA has taken great strides in seeking to create a safer environment for children but the emphasis on winning at juvenile level has a detrimental effect on players and is causing dropouts. The GAA has a problem with the lack of support for club games. This problem is disguised by all-Ireland semi-finals and the rush for tickets, but most of the county grounds, with the exception of a few high-profile

counties, attract tiny crowds relative to the numbers attending 15 or 20 years ago. I realise there are other competitions, as well as Sky Sports and the Premiership, that did not exist in the past, but we have to consider ways of restructuring the intercounty championship along champions league lines, with club games on alternate Sundays. I recognise there are difficulties with dual players but this has to be done. The club scene stops in many counties between June and the end of August, which means they cram their matches into a short period. This is unfair to the majority of players. I would love to see a home and away champions league. I attended the match between Donegal and Laois in Carrick-on-Shannon last year. It was great to see the crowds of Donegal and Laois supporters coming into Carrick-on-Shannon. If, for example, Wicklow travelled to Mayo or *vice versa* on a summer weekend, it would attract a great crowd and benefit the Minister of State's dual responsibilities of tourism and sport. People would earmark three or four weekends away during the summer.

We are often wedded to concepts of tradition in the GAA. A fellow Wicklow man, Jack Boothman, was one of the drivers behind the new Croke Park, which is a fantastic stadium. I have often thought that it might not be a bad idea to build stadiums on greenfield sites with access to public transport and extensive parking and which do not impinge on residents. This is something we should not rule out. While we are wedded to the old concepts of locations, I am sure that if we had built Croke Park at Baldonnell or somewhere on the northside of Dublin ten or 15 years ago, we would have established a tradition.

Earlier speakers welcomed the involvement of everyone in sport, including people with disabilities. In my home area, individuals from the Lalor Centre have participated in the Special Olympics with great success. The advent of women's football is also welcome. When I was a teenager only one woman played football in our local club, and she played on the boys' team. Women in our area are now more dedicated than the men and there is greater camaraderie between them. That has to be encouraged.

The overemphasis on winning at the under-age level can result in a failure to give all panel members a game. Sometimes there are 20 or 30 players on a panel but only 15 or 16 get a game. It should be obligatory to allow everyone to participate. I take my hat off to rugby for its efforts in regard to player development and participation. Those who are not wonderful at the age of 12 or 13 years may be disheartened and give up if they do not get a game, whereas they might otherwise develop into fine players. There are a considerable number of late developers. I do not think the young player who was awarded man of the match last Sunday played at minor level for Kerry. Derek Lyng, who won several all-Ireland medals for Kilkenny, did not play at minor level and was not on the St. Kieran's team in his final year. Players can develop late.

Rugby shows me that money works. I recall attending provincial matches 20 or 30 years ago when Munster beat the All-Blacks and were surprisingly beaten by Connacht a few weeks later in the Sportsground. The crowd of spectators barely filled the old stand. Now, however, the Aviva is packed for Munster-Leinster matches. This is in large part due to sponsorship and the way in which the money has been spent on looking after players, coaching and development. We speak about the threat that soccer poses to Gaelic football. I am an advocate of all sports. I do not care if someone plays tennis, hockey or whatever else once he or she is participating. I have associated with the GAA but I have no preference for any particular sport. The GAA has a lot to learn, however. My concern is for players who are dropping out of the GAA and will never play soccer or rugby. We can learn from rugby, which is eating into the GAA in many areas.

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With respect to soccer, Deputy Finian McGrath lamented the fact that we do not have an all-island team. It would be nice to have an all-island team but it is nonetheless good that the European Championship will be here in 2020. I do not know if the Minister of State will still be in the hot seat but perhaps he will book some tickets. He might be managing the Irish team at that stage, the way things are going, although I do not think either of us will be playing. It will be a welcome opportunity to showcase the country. I do not know whether it is proposed to hold matches in the Aviva or Croke Park. Nothing should be ruled in or out. It is important that facilities are shared.

With regard to swimming and track and field, when the Olympics or the European championships take place, questions always arise about whether the money is being utilised correctly. I do not have enough expertise to answer those questions but I am sure it is something the Minister of State has investigated. It is important that we have centres of excellence and excellent athletes. When Stephen Roche and Sean Kelly were on the go, there was huge interest in cycling. Interest in cycling is increasing again, albeit for health reasons rather than because of the existence of national icons.

I mentioned walks around pitches but we should also consider how to amalgamate facilities. Johnny Giles played on the street and when we were growing up we played in yards and back gardens. These options are no longer available for most children because there is insufficient space in their gardens. We have to allocate areas in addition to the main facilities, be they green spaces, walls against which one can hit a hurling ball or redeveloped handball alleys. Handball is a fantastic sport that has died away in this country. I would love to see the Minister of State working with the GAA to find a way of resurrecting handball because it costs little to participate in it and there are derelict handball alleys throughout the country. A scheme could be developed to revive the sport. There are the bones of a facility and with a little input and creative thinking, there could be a place - generally in the centre of towns and villages - which people would be able to access for little or no money. As facilities are developed it is important that if demand for a sport changes or there are other issues, they can be integrated with another sport. There is no point building a hospice or crèche in the middle of nowhere. A crèche, for example, should be attached to a school so that if demand decreases, the facility can be tied in with schools.

I do not know the story with water charges for GAA and other sporting clubs. I may have to follow up the issue with Irish Water as I do not expect the Minister to know about this because there is much uncertainty. I would not like to see sporting facilities being under-utilised because of water charges.

A survey was carried out by the college in Maynooth a few years ago on the newly developed areas around Lucan, Ratoath, etc. The evidence indicated that what gelled the community most was sport, including GAA, rugby and tennis. Any bit of money put into sporting facilities by the Government, as we have said time and again, will keep people out of prisons and hospitals. I have heard the Minister for Health banging his fist on the table, seeking €500 million or €600 million, with others having a go at him and calling him disloyal, as such discussions should occur behind closed doors. The Minister of State would have my support and that of anybody I could muster if he banged his fist on the table to seek as much money as we can spare to go into sport. Every euro spent on sport is worth its weight in gold. I wish the best to the Minister of State and ask him to keep up his work.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies Noel Harrington and Peter Fitzpatrick are sharing time.

Deputy Noel Harrington: It is a pleasure for me to get the opportunity to speak to this Bill. I am pleased the Minister of State is here and I compliment him on the administration of the sports capital grants, including its financing and the manner in which it was distributed to many clubs, even if the benefit was a relatively modest amount. That was the right approach and it got great value for money for the Exchequer, which is welcome. The Bill's purpose is to amalgamate the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority. To use a sporting term, this will make the new body - Sport Ireland - leaner, meaner and more efficient and competitive in administering and supervising our sports.

I will deal first with the elite sporting men and women in our country. Some of us remember the feel-good factor way back in 1988 when our soccer team participated and did so well in the European Championship in West Germany. Many people believe the resurgence of the Irish football team at those championships was the beginning of the Celtic tiger. It may well have been a coincidence but there is no doubt that the country got a major boost from it in all areas. The investment in sport benefits elite sporting people to begin with. We have seen success in our Olympians, including our boxers and other international athletes, and this brings well-being and a good feeling to the nation. For that alone, sports investment is very important. Through the sports campus we have seen the development of centres of excellence, and there is investment in elite sportsmen and sportswomen, which is money well spent. It should be ratcheted up, if possible, in future.

As a member of the committee dealing with sports, I know from time to time representatives of the Irish Sports Council would come before it to justify its expense. I would like to see more emphasis placed on the reporting of the achievement of personal bests from our athletes rather than the constant drive for medals. Perhaps this is media-driven but such a process does not reflect the true nature of the improvement of our athletes. It is disappointing if we see athletes going to major European or world events but not achieving personal bests. It is at those showcases that such milestones should be reached, and we would get far greater feel for how the public investment in our elite sports stars is paying off if they reached such targets. That idea should be taken on board much more than it is. I note that some athletes, such as Rob Heffernan in Cork, are overnight sensations who are approximately 15 years on the go. If they win medals, they get justified coverage, but athletes like Mr. Heffernan may be on the go for years, getting there slowly and by degrees, beating their previous personal bests. That is the way to go.

I commend the Irish Sports Council on its coaching and anti-doping efforts, as well as its work to attract more women, older people and people with disabilities into more active participation in sports and keeping well. I would like to see, for example, greater engagement with service delivery agents like CoAction in west Cork and the Irish Sports Council. It does tremendous work with clients with mental and physical disabilities or challenges, and there is much payback in such efforts. I hope to see a greater initiative and investment in such work.

Sport is a huge business and it is estimated that almost \$700 billion is spent on sport globally. In Ireland, it is estimated that 38,000 people are employed in the sports sector, with 270,000 volunteers contributing approximately €500 million to our economy. It goes further, as active participation, exercise, team and individual sports mean people become less sedentary in their activities, with a major payback in the overall health of people in this country. It has been estimated that total State investment in 2008 of €618 million saw an Exchequer return of approximately €922 million. This State investment in sports achieves a greater return for the Exchequer in investment terms, and it provides a major return in the physical and mental health of our people, tackling the likes of obesity, isolation and general malaise in many people. If a

person is involved in team or individual sports, it means he or she has excellent prospects.

The Economic and Social Research Institute and the Irish Sports Council did some work, taking in people in my county of Cork. Some of the figures are quite interesting. For example, 61% of adults took a recreational walk the previous week, which is a higher proportion than the national average. Team games seem to appeal little to women and those aged over 30 but there is no gender gap, for example, in individual sports. Perhaps we could deliver some policy objectives in this regard through the new Sport Ireland. People of high socio-economic status are very much more likely to be active participants in sport, and perhaps the council should consider that closely. Likelihood of active participation falls with age, with the sharpest reductions occurring in young adulthood and old age. People living in Cork city and towns are more likely to play sport than those living in more rural locations. Complete inactivity is most common among older people and middle-aged men.

The study also refers to some policy implications, with which I fully agree. Perhaps the Minister of State will relay them to the new Sport Ireland body. People in lower socio-economic groups must be the primary target for sports promotion, and such promotion must extend beyond team games in order to be more attractive to women and adults over 30. There is a need to target promotion of sport and exercise among people in more isolated rural locations, perhaps by exploiting pre-existing social networks. That is very important and I fully agree with that. I recall once calling to a friend's house when his exasperated parents were asking the lad why he did not get involved in sports like Johnny up the road, who was out day and night, bringing home medals and not going to the pub. They asked their son what he was good at and he replied "I am good at pool and darts". We need to be more proactive in adapting policies, networks and initiatives to make sure the people attracted to that kind of lifestyle find an alternative. Those who spend hours in front of screens, whether television screens or gaming consoles, day in day out, have little activity and no social interaction. This is becoming a major problem. It leads to social isolation. One could end up as the loneliest person in the biggest city in the world. It is a challenge for sport Ireland to address that type of behaviour. It is not new but it will get much worse before it gets better. Sport Ireland, with the help of the sports campus in Blanchardstown, and a reinvigorated sports network will help to alleviate much of that problem. Sports offer the best opportunity to deliver the well-being of our citizens and communities and of the country. I commend the Minister of State's work in this area. I am pleased that this merger is going ahead, as are the Sports Council and the National Sports Campus in Blanchardstown. It will create one body out of two, a leaner, more competitive body for the better development of our country.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: The purpose of this Bill is to provide for the establishment of a new body which will replace the Irish Sports Council, ISC, and the National Sports Campus Development Authority, NSCDA, and the merger of their functions into a single identity to be established as sport Éireann or sport Ireland.

The establishment of sport Ireland will result in a more streamlined organisation for the development of sport and the implementation of sports policy. This Bill also designates sport Ireland as the national anti-doping organisation and details its competencies and responsibilities with regard to its functions, particularly in respect of data protection.

The Irish Sports Council was established on 1 July 1999 as a statutory agency by the Irish Sports Council Act 1999. In particular, the functions of the council are encouraging the promotion, development and co-ordination of competitive sport; developing strategies for increasing participation in recreational sport; facilitating good standards of conduct and fair play in

both competitive and recreational sport; combatting doping in sport, including testing, through a dedicated committee of the ISC; initiating and encouraging research concerning competitive or recreational sport and facilitating research and disseminating information concerning competitive or recreational sport. “Competitive sport” means all forms of physical activity which, through organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and at obtaining improved results in competition at all levels; “recreational sport” means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or regular participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being and at forming social relationships.

The NSCDA was established on 1 January 2007. The principal functions of the authority are to develop a sports campus at Abbotstown, County Dublin; furnish and equip the sports campus; manage, operate and maintain the sports campus and encourage and promote the use of the sports campus by professional and amateur sports people and members of the public. The day-to-day operations of the approximately 500-acre sports campus and Morton Stadium, Santry and related facilities are managed by NSCDA (Operations) Limited, a wholly owned subsidiary of the NSCDA. Several sporting organisations are located on the campus, including the National Aquatic Centre, the Football Association of Ireland, FAI, the Irish Institute of Sport and 20 other national governing bodies.

The merger of the ISC and the NSCDA is part of the Government’s programme for the rationalisation of State agencies and is based on five central themes: placing customer services at the core of everything we do; maximising new and innovative service-delivery channels; radically reducing our costs to drive better value for money; leading, organising and working in new ways; and a strong focus on implementation and delivery.

Sport Ireland will appoint a chief executive officer with the approval of the Minister. The chief executive must, along with carrying out necessary functions of the position provide information as requested by the Minister regarding his or her performance of these functions and the implementation of the Minister’s policies and priorities. The chief executive cannot be a member of the board of sport Ireland but may attend and speak at and advise board and committee meetings.

As rapporteur to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children on childhood obesity, I believe that sport in schools can play its part. Schools should ensure that all children participate in a minimum of 30 minutes moderate to vigorous physical activity during the school day. This includes time spent being active in physical education, PE, classes. Schools should ensure that PE is taught by certified and highly qualified PE teachers at all levels. Montessori schools and crèches should provide children with at least 30 minutes’ break time during each school day to run about and play, free from restriction.

Although sports provide a portion of the student population with a significant amount of physical activity, the remainder of the students may be very sedentary and represent those who most need greater amounts of physical activity. In large schools, access to sports facilities may be limited to a small percentage of the student body. Most athletic teams are of similar size and although large schools may offer more sports than small ones, the total number of students who can be served does not increase in proportion to enrolment. If, for example, a secondary school with 200 or more 14 or 15-year olds focuses on one type of sport, only the elite of perhaps 20 students will make the panel for the team in that age category. The other 180 children who are rejected by the elitist and competitive nature of the performance-centred system will be left behind. Not every child can excel at, or even wants to participate in, sports such as football,

rugby or basketball. Greater effort should be put into introducing new sports in schools, such as badminton, squash, handball, indoor climbing or gymnastics. The emphasis should be on participation rather than competition. Every one of these sports has the potential to stimulate physical activity and increase social activity centred on sport and introduce impressionable minds to valuable life skills such as team work, comradeship and dealing with the successes and disappointments of competitions. No child should be left behind through lack of opportunity or ability. There is a sport for everyone and we should do more to ensure that young people can find their niche when it comes to developing an interest in sport.

It makes sense that the development of Irish sport would be overseen by one central organisation. I am pleased that this Bill will take into account the substantial developments in the area of doping. Ireland has an extensive national anti-doping programme which, along with anti-doping rules, will underpin sport Ireland.

As an avid sports fan and fitness enthusiast, I believe wholeheartedly that positioning sport at the centre of Irish life is the key to making a Ireland a healthier place. We need to focus on fitness levels rather than the number of weighing scales as an indicator of healthy living, and organisations such as sport Ireland are important in promoting this ideal.

Research published recently by the Irish Society for Rheumatology, ISR, has shown that inter-county Gaelic Athletic Association, GAA, players with a higher lean muscle mass are less likely to sustain injuries. We may not all play sport at the higher levels of the GAA or the organisations under sport Ireland but the message remains the same that if one exercises and increases one's muscle mass, one is less likely to suffer from aches and pains.

I thank the Minister of State for the allocation of the capital sports grants in County Louth. I have no complaints at all. Every organisation, including those involved in GAA, rugby and soccer, got something from the Minister of State. The people of the county would like to say "thanks very much". The only big problem they have now is trying to find a Gaelic football manager. I hope the Louth county board gets the right man over the next few weeks. It is very important that the GAA and all other sports in County Louth are going well. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this Bill. I wish the Minister of State the very best. As he knows, all the people in Louth are fully behind him.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I would like to share time with Deputies Bannon and Conlan.

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

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak on this legislation. I congratulate the Minister of State with responsibility for sport, Deputy Ring, on staying in this portfolio. I reminded of a Shakespearean quote, "rumours of my demise have been greatly exaggerated". Unfortunately, I was not available this time. I am sure the Taoiseach acknowledges the work being done by the Minister of State in County Mayo. I know the pipeline into the west is open. It is constantly delivering all the good news from the Minister of State. I acknowledge the work he has been doing in this area over the last three years.

Until recently, the promotion of sport might have been regarded as a Cinderella area of public administration. That was certainly the case in the tourism sector, for which the Minister of State is also responsible. The employment levels that can be generated from tourism and sport have become clear in recent years. The Ballyhoura Mountains in my own county of Limerick are the home of one of the finest mountain bike tracks in the world. I know the Minister of State

was in County Limerick recently in connection with the series of greenways in the county. I wonder whether it might be possible to bring the network of greenways into a single consolidated greenway. Something similar was done in the case of the Wild Atlantic Way, which was another initiative of the Minister of State. Perhaps the disused railway lines around the west, from west Cork to Donegal, could form a greenway network.

I am sure the Minister of State has been filled with platitudes all evening. Lads are conscious of the fact that sports capital grants are due in 2015, as well as 2014. I have to say that many of his ministerial colleagues could learn much from how he deals with political representations. He certainly runs a very good office. His officials always get back to us. We do not have to chase him around the Dáil when votes are being held. Some Ministers try to dodge us in such circumstances. I know Opposition Deputies who feel the very same.

I want to thank the Minister of State sincerely for the allocations that have been made in County Limerick over the three years since the formation of this Government. Almost €3 million has been provided to a variety of codes under the sports capital programme. That is a stimulus. One often hears Opposition spokespersons and people in the media talking about the need for a stimulus. In my part of the world, a small parish of fewer than 1,000 people would benefit from a stimulus like an investment of €30,000, €40,000, €50,000 or €60,000 in the local GAA or soccer club or some other sporting organisation. This kind of Government cash injection is based on fair criteria and can be audited and verified. We would all love to see more money being spent in our local areas. I am glad the Government has given a commitment to reopen the sports capital programme next year. I hope this will happen again in 2016 and on an annualised basis. I think the formula introduced by the Minister, whereby counties get money based on the proportion of the national population in that county, is working. Its fairness is in stark contrast to the cronyism that existed until recently.

I compliment the Minister of State on some of his recent achievements. I know he is a big soccer fan. Some positive opportunities will result from the soccer matches that will be held in Dublin in 2020. Similarly, the IRFU hopes to host the Rugby World Cup in the next decade. The GAA has had a fantastic year. In that context, these debates give us an opportunity to take stock of the status of sport in Ireland. Previous speakers have alluded to the fact that certain types of sports are not for everybody. There is only one thing worse than two bad eyes, and that is two bad lungs, but I was fortunate to be blessed at being fairly good at swimming. Some people do not realise until they are in their late 30s that they suffer from exercise-induced asthma. That might explain why they are useless at team sports. There is a niche for every individual. As others have said, not everybody is in a position to enjoy team sports in the same way that others enjoy them. Perhaps they are not physically able to do so.

Deputy Harrington spoke about a friend of his who was asked why he did not get involved in sports like Johnny up the road. His parents wanted to know why he was not bringing home the cup. As a teacher, I know that such comments can be soul-destroying for young people. We need to reflect on how we articulate our desire for people to get involved in sport, especially at a young age. Teachers are conscious that language is hugely important in this context, but others also need to be aware of its importance. Policymakers need to be conscious that not everybody is physically able to engage in sport. Some people are unable to participate in team sports because their social skills are not properly developed. They might be able to participate in something like archery, draughts, swimming or pole vaulting. In recent years, there has been a massive growth in individual sporting pursuits like running and cycling. The Government's welcome initiative in relation to those two codes should be encouraged.

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I will not repeat what others have said about the health benefits of the approach to sport that is being taken by the Government and the Minister of State. However, I emphasise that if we do not deal properly and comprehensively with obesity related illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes, stroke, hypertension and obesity related cancers, a generation of people will be wiped out by such illnesses, just as previous generations were wiped out by TB. As a State and as a country, we need to say how much money we expect to spend each year to reduce the prevalence of such illnesses and the collective weight of the country.

I know from my work as a teacher and from talking to my colleagues and to parents that this is a huge problem. Sport has to play a part in restructuring our approach to it. The work being done by the Minister of State in the context of this Bill, for example, by engaging with his colleagues in the Departments of Education and Skills, Health, Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Environment, Community and Local Government and Finance, is absolutely essential. We need to focus on where we build houses and how we tax certain products. I do not think we can overstate the huge implications that this Bill will have for the health of the nation. I do not think this debate should be used as an opportunity to clap ourselves on the back for the good work we are doing.

The Minister of State will probably be on the same page as me when I say that events this summer have demonstrated the dire need for proper legislation to be introduced to facilitate sporting organisations that make their facilities available as the GAA did when the Garth Brooks concerts were being organised. We should not have an international Ballymagash like we had this summer, when we were plastered all over every media outlet in the world for all the wrong reasons. I encourage the Minister of State with responsibility for sport to deliver a message to the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government reminding it that this really needs to be dealt with. The events to which I refer reflected badly on Ireland, our sporting organisations and our sporting venues.

I have no problem saying, as I did at the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications, that the GAA was very badly treated during the Garth Brooks fiasco. As a member of the committee in question, I took fairly serious offence when I received a letter from the Dublin city manager asking me to set out the position regarding my support for and membership of the GAA before I could ask him any questions. My support for and membership of the GAA have nothing whatsoever to do with my ability to carry out my job as a public representative. I made that very clear to the city manager when he came to the committee meeting. He was left under no illusion that he was on the wrong side of the debate as the whole fiasco unwound and, as a result, this country was perceived badly across the world. I am sure the Minister of State knows about the latter aspect of the matter from his work in the tourism area of the Department.

This Bill is important because it consolidates a number of agencies and represents a further commitment by the Government to the de-quangoisation, as it were, of the country. We have an awful lot of bodies competing with one another while essentially doing the same thing. I compliment the Minister of State on the work he is doing and on his delivery of real results for constituencies and communities like my own. I hope the Government's commitment to developing facilities in small locations that do not have the population base to sustain lotteries and fund-raising drives will be realised so that the people in those areas can rely on the Minister of State and his Department to give them a gee up. He will not be short of support from the backbenches at parliamentary party meetings and elsewhere in terms of ensuring his budget is enhanced. I am sure the Minister of State will reciprocate that support with support for our constituencies.

Deputy James Bannon: I am pleased to contribute to this debate on the Sport Ireland Bill and welcome the Minister of State to the House. I was responsible for getting his name on the link road between the M4 and the M5 some time ago and I hope to be able to get his name on a number of sporting developments in my constituency of Longford-Westmeath following the next round of funding. As a member of Legan Sarsfields GAA club and many other sporting organisations in County Longford, I know all too well the benefits of sport for young people. Sport is the bedrock of every community in the country. Play and physical activity are important to one's development, improving health and reducing the likelihood of disease, as was outlined by many Members today. In addition to this, sport and games teach young people about the importance of co-operation and inclusion. Sport binds local groups together and provides an outlet for young people who might otherwise be drawn into drugs and crime.

Deputy Timmins referred to the promotion of handball in the 1930s when a huge number of handball alleys were built at great expense to communities not long after we won our independence. I am sorry to say that many of those alleys are now in a state of dilapidation. I agree with Deputy Timmins that we must do something to promote handball because it is a great sport which keeps participants very fit and active. Every muscle and limb in the body is active during a game of handball.

I commend the GAA, the FAI and the governing bodies for rugby which do great work. So many people voluntarily give a huge amount of their time to those organisations. There are more than 280,000 volunteers involved in sporting organisations, day in and day out. They bring large numbers of young people to and from games and so forth, as was very evident last Sunday in Croke Park. One sees the huge involvement of young people at all levels in sporting organisations, which is great for sport. It is great to get people involved at a young age.

One area that has been neglected over the years is that of access to our rivers and lakes. Something must be done to promote access to our waterways. We have some of the finest waterways in the world. We have come a long way in terms of the development of the Royal Canal which starts in Dublin and runs to Clondra in Longford. There are walkways along certain parts of the route but we must develop the entire channel, provide more footpaths and make it more accessible for those who want to engage in canoeing, fishing and other sporting activities. Many people would love to participate in water sports on our waterways. I spoke to a number of German visitors over the summer who said that we have some of the finest waterways in Europe but that accessibility was a huge problem.

I was particularly pleased to read in section 7 that sport Ireland will be developing a long-term strategy for increasing participation in sport at local level. The merger of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority is important. It is a smart decision as it streamlines sporting policy under a single agency. To put it simply, we are placing the responsibility for sport in the hands of one agency rather than having it divided between two. It is also an important part of our proposals in the programme for Government regarding the duplication of agencies and boards. Nothing represents Government waste more than the plethora of agencies set up by Fianna Fáil during the so-called boom years. We are now streamlining Government, making it smaller and cheaper to run and giving better value for money to the public from our scarce resources.

Part 4 details sport Ireland's proposed responsibilities for addressing doping in sport. Aside from threatening the integrity and reputation of sport, doping puts athletes' health at risk. It is cheating and is fundamentally contrary to the spirit and principle of sport. One of the most

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important provisions in the Bill will be the sharing of information between sport Ireland, the Garda Síochána and the Irish Medicines Board. It is my belief that co-operation between these organisations will play a major part in reducing the presence of doping in sport.

I also note that sport Ireland is preparing and submitting a plan for the development of a national sports campus. The proposed site will see a whole range of amenities, including a national indoor athletics training centre and a national field sports training centre catering for rugby, soccer, Gaelic games and hockey as well as a multi-sport national training centre which will provide world-class training facilities for more than 20 sports. I welcome this prospect because it will provide our athletes with a state-of-the-art training base and the supports needed to compete with the best athletes in the world.

I acknowledge the wonderful regional sports centre in Athlone Institute of Technology. I and my former colleague, the late Deputy Nicky McFadden, kept pressure on the Government to deliver funding for that facility. It has been the headquarters for our national community games in recent years and has acted as a training ground for many of our present and future Olympians.

I have always believed that sport builds communities and establishes a sense of pride in one's parish, county and country. It drives tourism and contributes millions to the economy each year. It is imperative that the Government prioritises sport as a valuable social tool and the introduction of this Bill will go a long way towards preparing, training and enhancing the skills of future Irish athletes while at the same time ensuring that sport gets the recognition from Government that it requires and deserves. I compliment the Minister of State on bringing this Bill before the House today.

Deputy Seán Conlan: This Bill will lead to the merging of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority into one sporting organisation, sport Ireland. Sport Ireland's stated purpose is to develop strategies for increasing participation in recreational sport at national and local levels. The merger will reduce costs by cutting out repetitive functions and is welcome from that perspective. It designates sport Ireland as the national anti-doping organisation which was previously the responsibility of the Irish Sports Council. Sport Ireland will be responsible for testing athletes for prohibited substances and for regulations on the consequences of the violation of anti-doping laws. It is very important to have strong anti-doping laws in Ireland.

The Bill also details specifics regarding data protection, which is welcome. It also maintains the course in the context of the continued development of the national sports campus. The most recent addition to that campus was the opening of several pitches for Gaelic games, soccer and rugby. The national indoor arena will be developed next, with facilities for indoor athletics and gymnastics.

7 o'clock

The central point and purpose of this Bill is to merge two organisations into one. One hopes that will yield benefits in terms of greater efficiency and lower running costs. That was all part of the drive by Fine Gael and the Government prior to the election to make the State and its agencies run in a more efficient fashion, giving greater benefit to the taxpayer. That is always to be welcomed and this is one example of where it is happening. More needs to happen in this area across all Departments. The public demands it. One of the lessons of the recession

is that we cannot go back to the days of top-heavy administration in various Departments and organisations. It is a welcome move by the Minister of State to address this issue. I hope to see more happen in the future, in this Department and in other Departments, because the public is four-square behind these moves. It can only be to the benefit of all of us that measures such as this continue to happen.

Deputy Seán Kyne: First, like others, I commend the Minister of State on his work with the FAI in securing the Euro 2020 games for Dublin. That is a considerable boost to the economy. As others stated, hopefully, we will see progress as well on the rugby world cup in 2023.

Each commitment to review and restructure State agencies and bodies to ensure that public money is spent efficiently requires legislation. This Bill is one such legislative measure which will merge the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority to create sport Ireland.

Leaving aside the aforementioned organisations, I have concerns about the sheer number and volume of State bodies, committees, working groups and others. Last Sunday, *The Sunday Business Post* ran the first in a series of articles examining State agencies which named the organisations, outlined their functions and listed the salaries of the CEOs, along with expenses and the number of staff employed earning in excess of €80,000. I do not wish to diminish or be disingenuous about the important work that many public sector staff do, but I must voice concerns at the duplication of tasks and the unnecessary existence of some agencies. The list of agencies is almost endless and leads one to question what exactly some Departments are doing if agencies exist to carry out the same functions.

In 2010, the Dublin-based IT consultant and entrepreneur, Mr. William Campbell, wrote a book, entitled *Here's How - Creative Solutions for Ireland's Economic and Social Problems*, and sent a copy to each Deputy. The book received recommendations from a number of journalists, academics and economists and contains an array of suggestions on how to solve some of the problems facing the country. Thankfully, some of those problems have been addressed, with the growth of the economy and the work that has been done by the Government. The chapter on quangos is illuminating. It takes over three pages, in a font that steadily reduces in size, to list almost all of Ireland's State agencies. At the best of times, it is not appropriate to have such a plethora of State agencies and organisations. When, however, State finances remain in such a constrained position, as they have been for several years, it is ludicrous and must be challenged.

It must be acknowledged that the Government has made a start on reviewing and restructuring with a programme for the public service, including corresponding progress reports. The establishment of a Department with responsibility for reform is evidence of the commitment to address the issue, which is being overseen by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin. Another Minister addressing the issue is the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, who has spoken about the issue before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation of which I am a member. That Department has maximised efficiency and effectiveness by subsuming the functions of some State agencies, such as Forfás, within dedicated units of the Department. This removes the sometimes significant administration costs while preserving the core functions. Some of the good economic news and the job creation figures can be assigned to the reforms taking place.

At times, measures like this are portrayed as ways of minimising transparency or concealing work, but the opposite is the case. By bringing agencies back within their respective Depart-

ments, their functions and tasks become much more examinable and accountable to the public because they are more easily questioned through parliamentary questions. We have a duty to ensure that each euro of taxpayers' funding is spent as efficiently as possible. That involves maximising the duties and tasks carried out by Departments and ensuring that every State agency has a clearly defined, identifiable and compelling reason to exist.

The other aspect of the Bill I want to touch on is the importance of funding for sports and recreation and the knock-on benefits that accrue from such spending. These include health, financial and community benefits. Like others, I commend the Minister of State on the sports capital programme that he initiated when he came into office and its continued positive effects in terms of local economies and the health of communities regarding participation and combating obesity and health problems.

One initiative worth considering, on which there may be plans I do not know about, is a national sports museum. Those of us who are lucky enough to go abroad at times will have visited sporting museums, whether in Sydney or elsewhere, which encompass every sport and highlight the achievements and traditions in the country concerned. We have a proud sports tradition here in Ireland. We have a rich history of sport, both national and international, and such a museum would allow visitors to get a feel for our national identity and uniqueness. It is a feel-good factor to share our sporting history and successes. While the announcement of Sky Sports broadcasting GAA games might not have been too popular, the international reaction of those viewing games, particularly hurling, for the first time provides a considerable boost to one of the native games. I ask the Minister of State to examine that and consider it for future capital investment.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I welcome the Bill and commend the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, on bringing it forward. I thank and pay tribute to all those who were involved over the years in both organisations that are being merged.

It would be remiss of me not to reference the great victory in Croke Park on Sunday last by the Kerry team. As a Deputy for Kerry, I am proud of their achievements. The return of the 37th all-Ireland senior football title to the county is just as special as the first and every one in between. I congratulate the team. I wish all of the other teams which came close this year the best in the future - their day will come as well.

On a more serious note, what we saw in Croke Park, with 82,000 spectators there watching two fantastic teams battling it out to win the Sam Maguire, epitomises the strength and importance of sport, through the GAA, in every community in this country and anything that we, as public representatives, can do to help strengthen sport in our communities must be encouraged. We are a nation of sports people. We need to ensure that the tradition of sport is continued in the future and that our communities have every opportunity to engage in sport, whether at professional, amateur or pastime fun levels. That needs to start at an early age.

There is a saying in Kerry that one is born with a football in one's hand, but it is the approach we need to take as a society to start educating our youngest children about the importance of physical exercise, nutrition, diet and minding one's body, and that the greatest instruments one will ever have is one's own body. To that end, we need to look at primary education and to see how we can provide better facilities for children in schools. Many schools do not have indoor facilities for recreation and physical education. Unfortunately, we live in quite a wet country. Thankfully, it has not been so for the past four months but it usually rains much of the time here

and children need to exercise for a long time every day. It helps in academic performance as well if physical exercise is involved and we need to see what can be done in that regard.

I thank the Minister of State for the latest round of sports capital funding that has gone to every county and thank him for the funding that has come to Kerry this year. On top of the 2012 funding, it is much appreciated. It makes a significant difference to clubs. It gives them a helping hand to improve their facilities and make themselves accessible to more people. Such involvement is what it is all about. Will the Minister examine if the sports capital grants could be awarded on an annual basis? When the programme was re-introduced in 2012, there was a huge clamour to apply. Some clubs may not have been ready to apply but did so because they did not know if there would be another round of funding. Thankfully, there was this year but it would be excellent if there could be an annual round of funding and every club knew where it stood. The programme helps clubs which otherwise might not be able to raise funds, particularly with the overall economic climate over the past few years which has made it all the more difficult. This extra help from the State is welcome.

More walking and cycling greenways, a facility with which the Minister of State is aware of in his county, are coming onstream across the country. Not only are greenways an excellent way to provide an amenity for people to improve their health and maintain it, they also have a tourism and economic spin-off. I was taken aback by the success of the Westport-Achill greenway when I visited it in 2013, having been on the Newport-Mulranny section in 2010 just after it opened. Its economic spin-off and the vibrancy it has brought back to parts of west Mayo is impressive. The number of people and families, across all age groups, using this facility is also impressive. The fact that it is on an old rail line means the gradient is also amenable to cycling. We need to develop greenways further. Accordingly, I am delighted the old Glenbeigh to Renard section of the Farranfore to Valentia railway line has been given significant funding of €4 million to be developed as a greenway by Kerry County Council and South Kerry Development Partnership Limited. We can link more networks across the country to allow more tourists and local people avail of these excellent facilities.

I commend the Minister on the recent good news about the future staging of three group games and a last-16 game in the 2020 European football championship in Dublin. This is a fantastic news story for Ireland which will give us an enormous boost. I was fortunate enough to be able to go to the championships in Poland in 2012. While the results were not great for our time, it was a good trip. Hopefully, we will be able to build on this announcement and look at hosting a future rugby world cup and other major international sporting events. Hosting such events will inspire younger generations to take up sport and become active. In the 1980s when our cyclists were at the very top of the international scene, many young people took it up as a sport. The successes of the Irish soccer team in 1988, 1990 and 1994 inspired a new generation of young Irish people to take up the sport. It is the same with golfers and successful football and hurling counties.

I commend this Bill to the House. They say sport and politics should never mix. However, all parties are agreed on getting the best for people in sport. I hope the various suggestions made by all parties will be considered and, where possible, implemented.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call on Deputy Frank Feighan who is sharing time with Deputy David Stanton. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Frank Feighan: I congratulate and thank the Minister of State, Deputy Michael

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Ring, for introducing the Sport Ireland Bill 2014. It will give effect to the Government's decision to merge the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority, NSCDA, into sport Ireland. This was one of the measures contained in the Government's programme for the rationalisation of State agencies. I am delighted 44 sporting bodies have so far been merged. This, however, seems to have gone below the radar of both the national and local press. At one stage, there was a love affair with quangos. They do not just cause extra red tape but cost much money to run. Sometimes I felt some quangos were set up with chief executives and directors of services but were not providing front-line services or expertise. This year, the Government hopes to save €20 million by merging another 63 State bodies. Yesterday, I, along with the Minister, went into the brand new government offices in Roscommon where our by-election candidate, Maura Hopkins, was lodging her nomination papers. It was great to see four departmental agencies using the same building.

The Minister is bringing change to sporting governance and ensuring sporting governing bodies have competence and responsibilities in their functions. It was mentioned earlier that change has come to the GAA too. Bringing in Sky Sports to broadcast GAA games was very innovative. Some people complained this would undermine the association but it has actually brought in a new audience. I was amused by some of the tweets from Sky Sports viewers in the UK when they watched some of the hurling games. I am still laughing at one tweeter who asked if there were actually any rules to the game or was it a mixture of hockey and murder. Hurling is now being spoken about abroad which brings more revenue to the GAA. I congratulate it on this change.

The hosting of some of the European football championship games in Dublin in 2020 is wonderful news. Some people do not fully realise how significant this will be. I was at my first European soccer championship in 1988 when I ran a double-decker bus to Germany for two weeks. Up to 20 of us slept upstairs and cooked downstairs. To beat England then was the start of having confidence in our sporting teams as well as ourselves. When 2020 comes along, I hope we will be 32 years undefeated in a game to England, our near neighbours and friends.

Sport plays a significant part in our lives, bringing mostly enjoyment. The reason for that is that if we lose at soccer, we will move on to rugby, Gaelic football, hurling or whatever else. I thank the Minister of State for bringing the Bill to the House. The legislation is innovative and long sought and I am delighted to support it.

Deputy David Stanton: I am delighted to speak on the Bill, which I began to research yesterday in preparation for the debate. The Minister of State, Deputy Ring, has probably one of the most important Ministries in the country.

Sport is a broad subject. I asked myself what sport is and looked for a definition of it. In the course of the debate, colleagues have discussed competitive sport, walking, cycling and running. The Irish Sports Council has a very good definition of it, namely, that sport means all forms of physical activity, which through casual or organised participation aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels. That covers everything, whether one is in the Olympics or one just goes for a walk down the road.

I listened to the debate during the day. All forms of sport have been mentioned, from the really intense sports played at intense levels to the slightly more than casual exercise everyone should undertake. The primary purpose of the Bill is to provide for the dissolution of the Irish

Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority and the merger of their functions into a single entity. There are also proposals to enhance provisions on anti-doping in Irish sport. Both of the organisations to which I referred have done amazing work. The authority is responsible for the operation of the National Aquatic Centre at Blanchardstown. It accommodates the headquarters of the FAI and the Irish Institute of Sport, which is an amazing body. The headquarters of Irish Sport will be located in Blanchardstown. The authority also administers the headquarters of 19 national governing bodies.

At one level, sport is big business and there is a considerable economic benefit to it. Figures are available that indicate the value of sport to the economy. Reference has been made to sports grants and the programme in which the Minister of State was involved in the previous two years. I congratulate him on his work and that of his staff. The programme appeared to work well and to be fair.

One area I would like the Minister of State to examine is the local authority swimming pool programme as nothing has been done in that regard for some time. We must look again at the programme if finances permit. A value for money review was carried out on the programme a number of years ago, which was mainly positive. It suggested that no other piece of sports recreational infrastructure can provide the same level of access and ability in terms of catering for all age groups and fitness levels in all weathers for up to 18 hours a day, seven days a week. We are an island nation and I contend that every child should have an opportunity to learn how to swim as part of the curriculum and that no child should leave primary school without being able to swim. That should be a national aim. Like the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, I come from a constituency which is, in part, bounded by the sea. He has been in my constituency and has seen some of the activities that are ongoing. Coastal rowing is a growing sport. The Whitegate rowing club was extremely successful this year. So many sports can evolve and develop when people learn how to swim and get involved with water-based activities.

Mention has been made on a few occasions of alcohol and the power of sport to act as a deterrent to anti-social behaviour. Much work and studies have been carried out in the area. A study was carried out in 2011 as part of a criminology master's degree thesis on youth involvement in sport with anti-social delinquent behaviour. I am involved in the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality and Defence and we have an interest in diverting people from anti-social behaviour. The results of the study identified loitering, alcohol consumption and shoplifting as the top three anti-social behaviours in which participants engaged. The pattern remained constant throughout the findings, even when variables such as gender and involvement in certain activities were isolated. The results found that participants who were involved in organised sports in school or outside it were less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour compared to participants who were not involved in organised sport. Straight away, there is a positive advantage in having young people involved in sport.

Colleagues previously referred to obesity. Again, we all know there are two reasons for obesity; one is eating too much of the wrong food and the second is not being involved in physical activity. Sport comes into view in that regard. I agree with what Deputy Spring said about panels involved in organised sport whereby children who are not good at the sport are left on the side-line. I urge clubs and organisations to ensure all children get to play and are not left sitting on the bench. There is nothing worse for a child than to be left sitting on the bench and to become disillusioned. There is an element of winning at all costs at under-age level, which can be damaging. Some organisations do not seem to be aware of the situation. I will not mention any names but all organisations should consider the issue and how the situation could be changed.

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To return to alcohol, Alcohol Action maintains that 97% of public order offences and 76% of all rapes involve alcohol. It would be so much the better if we could divert people from excessive abuse of alcohol. I was in a store recently and came across all kinds of promotions for alcohol. One in particular caught my eye. A bottle of own-brand vodka containing approximately 700 ml cost €13. That is highly irresponsible. There are all kinds of alcohol promotions in the multiples, for example, promoting two for one. When I was young, one could buy a six-pack of beer but now it is a slab of cans and they are available at ridiculously low prices. We must do something about that. I accept the groceries order was abolished in 2005 but such pricing is of concern. Another related issue that we must examine is the resulting closure of pubs, which at least provides some kind of controlled environment for the consumption of alcohol.

Much of the alcohol in supermarkets is imported. One student told me that the ridiculously cheap alcohol is causing terrible damage. If one mixes it with any other substance, it can be fatal. The reason I mention alcohol in this context is that sport has a role to play in diverting people from excessive alcohol consumption. A colleague previously indicated that if a young person is involved in sport, he or she will respect himself or herself more and will very often not get involved in such behaviour.

Reference was previously made to walkways, cycle-ways and footpaths. We must identify roads and other pathways around towns and villages and make them safe and attractive for people to walk and cycle. It is very important to get people out. There is nothing worse than walking along a road close to a town or village without a footpath or proper facilities. I approve of the rejuvenation of disused railway lines as greenways and walkways. There is a disused railway line between Midleton and Youghal. Deputy McLellan will agree with my wish to see it opened as a greenway and walkway.

I note from my former job that when students reach leaving certificate year, they take on or are put under pressure to study and many of them give up sport and other such activities. Perhaps we could examine the inclusion of some form of credit for involvement in physical activity at leaving certificate level so that if a student is involved in sport, he or she should be encouraged to keep it up. Girls at this age are inclined to give up sport completely and this is very unhealthy. Perhaps the authorities can examine ways to encourage youngsters in this respect. We give extra credit for honours maths in the leaving certificate and perhaps we should also do so for involvement in sport and physical activity.

Debate adjourned.

Housing Provision: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Dessie Ellis on Tuesday, 23 September 2014:

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:

— 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 Gael-

tacht;

— 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.

Debate resumed on 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 Na-

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tional 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 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.”

- (Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government).

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The members of the technical group are sharing time. Deputies Catherine Murphy, Richard Boyd Barrett, Clare Daly, Mick Wallace and Thomas Pringle have two minutes each.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this debate and thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion. We are in the middle of the worst housing crisis we have ever experienced. As Fr. Peter McVerry said, the social welfare system is one of the major causes of homelessness. I have seen working families forced into homelessness and I have also seen homelessness masked when family members take in other family members and families are divided. Some 90,000 families and individuals are on the housing waiting list and over 6,000 of them are in Kildare - this makes Kildare one of the worst affected counties in the country. There must be short, medium and long-term solutions to this problem. In the short term, coun-

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cils will have to buy houses as, in future, children will pay the price for the difficulties we are creating. Children are living in houses where stress is rife as the occupants spend their waking hours searching for alternative accommodation rather than employment. This is unacceptable. Schools do not know whether some children will continue to attend as their families seek alternative accommodation. The situation is intolerable and is getting worse by the week in my constituency - I do not doubt that the same applies to other parts of the country. The Government must stop sitting on its hands and do something that will make a difference for people. There must be a short-term response, as well as medium and long-term responses.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This crisis is dire and is getting worse. The most frustrating thing is that the Minister has been warned for over three years that the crisis was coming. I have reviewed comments I have made in the Dáil since 2011 and I gave dozens of warnings on this. I am sure others can say the same. In July 2012 I said “it is not an exaggeration to say that the Government’s new housing policy and cuts to rent allowance will lead to a new era of homelessness and a return to slum landlord and tenement conditions”. The Government denied there was a problem at the time and only now admits that one exists. The Government said reliance on rental accommodation schemes, RAS, and the private rental sector would solve the problem. This approach has failed catastrophically and the Government has shown contempt for the warnings given. The Government’s approach exhibits catastrophic errors of judgment and now that it has finally acknowledged the issue the problem continues to worsen.

In the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown area in the past six months some 99 houses have been allocated and 600 people have joined the waiting list. In other words, six times more people have joined the list than have been allocated houses. We are digging a hole from which we will not be able to emerge if we do not face reality and build social housing and take emergency measures in the interim.

Deputy Clare Daly: Anyone with an ear to the ground knows that Fr. Peter McVerry’s statements were correct. Far from addressing the crisis in homelessness, this Government is the biggest contributor to the problem through paltry rent allowance. The system that sees people become paupers while trying to make up the difference between the rent supplement and the rent cannot be allowed to continue, given the backdrop of rising rents. If the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Paudie Coffey, is serious about tackling homelessness he must answer the call of Fr. Peter McVerry and move immediately to increase rent supplements. This is the most immediate and effective way to stop the rise in homelessness in the short term - it is not enough but it is a necessary immediate response. If the Minister of State does not do this we will face hundreds of thousands more people in similar difficulties in the coming months.

The Minister of State must address the issue of empty State properties and dwellings as it is a crime that otherwise decent dwellings are idle. Properties that come to mind include the Curragh Camp, where families are being driven from houses that are fit for purpose and could be improved with a little work. This is occurring while Kildare County Council has 8,000 people on the housing waiting list. The only way to deal with this problem is by building houses.

This is not the first housing crisis the State has faced as one occurred previously in the late 1940s. At that time the State had the vision and commitment to build houses in places like Finglas, Ballyfermot, Cork and Limerick and housed thousands of families. It was not a case of fighting for crumbs but a real house building programme. There were radio advertisements in Britain appealing to workers to come home to help build these houses, thus addressing emi-

gration, unemployment and social need. The Department of Local Government linked up with the Department of Health under Noel Browne to engage in a programme of hospital building and succeeded in the eradication of TB. Building a social housing stock is an investment for the future - it protects communities against homelessness and it creates good, stable family environments. We can do this but we have not yet done so because the Government has chosen to rely on a failed model of privatisation. This must stop and houses must be built.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I have been involved in the construction industry for most of my life and for most of that time there has been no housing strategy. I am not sure that one will be introduced in the near future. I can think of four important elements to a housing strategy: quantity, location, quality and affordability. There have been huge housing problems in this country for some time because there was insufficient control over where houses were built - houses were built in the wrong places and too few were built where they were needed. In the history of the State there have been times when too many houses were built and times when too few were built in the right locations. Quality has often left much to be desired because of a lack of supervision and oversight to ensure building regulations were applied. In other words, the regulations are fine but the level of State oversight is not. In terms of affordability, a right to a house is a social right so a person who cannot afford to buy a house must be housed by the State. Almost 100,000 people are waiting on houses at the moment. Houses are too expensive in the private sector because of a lack of regulation - things are left to the markets. A new tax must be introduced on zoned development land that is banked. Some developers buy land, get it zoned for development and then hold it as a land bank, sitting on it and controlling the price of land. This is a massive problem and contributes more to the overpricing of houses than anything else. It is usually in the hands of very few people. We will see this over the coming years because much development land and idle sites were sold by NAMA and the banks in big parcels to very small numbers of people and too few people will control it and there will be a cartel once again.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the housing crisis we have in the State. There is no doubt there is a crisis and we see the levels of homelessness increasing throughout the State, not only in our cities but throughout the country. This crisis has been created by the Government because it has continuously slashed the capital budgets for housing delivery and continuously rejected any form of stimulus as part of a solution and reaction to the recession in which we have been gripped, and has pushed the direction of housing solution into the private sector. This is a catastrophic failure as 90,000 families are on housing lists throughout the country and there is a crisis in every county.

The Government should be rolling out a capital programme encouraging local authorities to establish housing associations so they can do the off-balance-sheet borrowing to deliver a housing programme because local authorities have the expertise, architects, engineers and ability to oversee and they are geared up to be able to deal with the crisis once and for all. It is startling when one sees figures such as that in 1954 the State built 7,000 houses when we were far poorer than we are now in a recession as deep as what we have now. The State lived up to its responsibilities and provided housing for our citizens. Over the past three years the State has built three houses in Donegal, which has a waiting list of more than 4,500 people. It is an absolute disgrace and the Government should roll out a capital building programme because the local authorities are the solution.

As Deputy Clare Daly outlined, the rent allowance caps must be increased because there is no way we should allow to continue what is in effect a black market for landlords whereby tenants dependent on rent allowance must hand over cash payments of which there is no record to

make up the rent because they cannot get a property unless they do so. The Minister of State is quite happy to stand over this system and see it continue.

Deputy Joe Costello: I am delighted to have an opportunity to contribute to the debate and I agree entirely with the previous speakers. Deputy Wallace stated a great surplus of more than 300,000 houses was built in the wrong place and as a result the construction industry collapsed and, as Deputy Wallace well knows, most of the developers went into debt and into NAMA. This was the situation the Labour Party inherited when it came into government. I agree entirely with Deputies Daly and Pringle that the State has an onus to provide social housing, and very often local authorities are the vehicle which should do so. For this reason I am delighted Sinn Féin has tabled the motion and I applaud Deputy Ellis for doing so. However, the most recent action by the Sinn Féin councillors on Dublin City Council was to reduce the property charge by 15% and remove €12.3 million from the budget which could well have been used as a stimulus to provide services, particularly housing services given the degree of homelessness and the housing need which exists. Effectively this will put money into the hands of wealthy homeowners, such as people in Dalkey in houses worth €700,000 who will have their bills reduced by €200, while somebody in my constituency, in Cabra or the inner-city where houses are worth €150,000, will see a reduction of less than €35. Perhaps this is the new meaning of a wealth tax, whereby money goes back to the wealthy rather than to the less well off and more vulnerable. Perhaps this could have been examined and a good example could have been set by the councillors to ensure the money was used to good advantage in providing local services. The democratic purpose of the local authority could have been enhanced.

I disagree with the policy articulated by Deputy Ellis on prefabs whereby he indicated Sinn Féin is in favour of constructing prefabs throughout the city.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Deputy should not believe the newspapers which tell complete and utter nonsense.

Deputy Joe Costello: This would move towards ghettoisation. At present those who are homeless and in a needy situation end up in hotels and bedsits. This has gone on for decades and it remains the situation. One can imagine what a prefab would be like, with shivering in the winter and sweating in the summer and the toilet conditions. It is certainly not the way to go.

Much of what is being asked for in the motion is being implemented. The Minister is putting together a local authority housing construction strategy which will be launched in the budget, as he indicated yesterday evening. It will be a substantial programme. We will have to wait to see the detail, but it will be announced in several weeks. It has been confirmed the recipients of the housing assistance payment will not be removed from housing waiting lists, despite rumours put out by Sinn Féin throughout the city. Legislation is on the way to create a tenancy deposit scheme and the rent allowance is being reformed whereby local authorities will take responsibility for it rather than the old system of it being left to the landlord and tenant, which was not working.

I will give an indication of what social housing has been delivered by the local authority in my constituency even in these difficult times. This includes a total of 53 housing units in Sean Tracey House, off Sean McDermott Street; 100 housing units in Peadar Kearney House on Railway Street; and 100 senior citizen units in Father Scully House on Gardiner Street. A number of other social and voluntary housing projects are planned, such as Croke Villas in Ballybough and the conversion of four derelict houses to nine apartments; a new senior citizen complex

at Dunmanus Court with between 40 and 50 units; the redevelopment of St. Bricken's senior citizen complex in Arbour Hill; 35 apartments on North King Street; and NAMA has indicated it will give 57 units for social housing in the area also. Dublin City Council has been given the necessary funding to deal with all of the voids and vacancies in the area.

A considerable amount of work is being done at present considering all that happened under the previous administration, as Deputy Wallace well knows, is public private partnerships were given under the aegis of a particular developer, who had everything on the north and south sides of the city, and they all collapsed. Not a single house was built on any of them. We are remedying this at present.

I welcome the social housing strategy being developed by the Minister and I look forward to its delivery in budget 2015. I recognise there is a housing need and a housing crisis, and that housing must be the priority for the Government as the recovery begins.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I congratulate Deputies Coffey and Kelly on their elevation to their new positions and I wish them all the best. They have a difficult task ahead. As Deputy Costello mentioned the housing situation is in dire crisis. When I considered what I would say on housing I looked at the figures thrown out by Deputy O'Brien of Sinn Féin yesterday evening. He mentioned that Sinn Féin can identify €1 billion which could be spent on building 6,600 social housing units. This is part of the fantasy budget Sinn Féin goes on with.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It is from the answers to parliamentary questions. It is from the Department of Finance.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: He never told us where exactly this money comes from. Is Deputy Ellis telling me it is coming from the Northern Bank again?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Ah here.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: If that is the case we cannot handle it all of the time.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: You should be ashamed of yourself. Cop yourself on.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I welcome the social housing strategy and I look forward to the report when it is published. We need an overarching strategy for all housing. I agree that Construction 2020 has some valid points, but we need to build houses across all sectors. That is the problem at the moment. The rental market is increasing because there is a lack of housing for younger couples to purchase at the moment.

When considering the report on the social housing strategy the first thing the Minister of State should consider is the removal of Part V. This was introduced by the then Minister, Mr. Dempsey. It was voted in by most local authorities. I opposed it totally on Kildare County Council; Deputy Catherine Murphy supported it. It provided for the handing over of construction of social houses to private property developers. Since the collapse of the construction industry no social houses have been built anywhere in the country. We need to remove that stipulation and get local authorities back to building houses again, as they should have been doing all the time.

The windfall tax was imposed by the Green Party when in government. It was initiated at 80% and there have been no returns on that at all. It needs to be scrapped because we need to move land from whatever source into building houses again.

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I spoke to the Minister, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, when she was Minister of State with responsibility for housing, with regard to getting local authorities to be more active in progressing the land banks they have. Local authorities usually wait for money to be allocated to them and then go through the planning process themselves. The Minister of State should encourage them to go through the planning process and have the land available for building so that when the money is allocated they can start straightaway. In my constituency, Kilcock was the only shovel-ready project available for money that was allocated previously. I encourage the Minister of State to write to local authorities to be more proactive in preparing their available land to be shovel-ready.

Under the land aggregation scheme the Housing Finance Agency purchased land from local authorities. There are 35 sites around the country in which the legal transfer has not occurred between the local authority and the Housing Finance Agency, including four in my county. Every council official looks out the window and sees a 14-acre site which the local authority in Naas has been paid for but the land transfer to the Housing Finance Agency has not legally happened. Those are land banks that are available but they are in a legal quandary meaning that social housing cannot be built. I encourage the Minister of State to be proactive with local authorities to get that moving as quickly as possible.

I wish the Minister of State the best of luck, but we have to look at this from an overall viewpoint. We do not just have a problem with social housing; there is a housing issue for all people as to whether to buy, rent or live in social housing.

Deputy Derek Nolan: There is no question that we are in the middle of a housing crisis - a private housing crisis, a rental crisis and a social housing crisis. Debating housing is a very good start to this new session because it needs to be one of our national priorities. As I am sure is the case with all Deputies, not a week goes by that I do not have people on housing waiting lists coming into my office, talking about their family situation, waiting eight, nine, ten and sometimes 12 years on housing waiting lists for a social house. Unfortunately we are picking up the pieces of a housing crash and a policy that existed under the previous Government of not building any social housing and just handing it over to the rental market, and unwinding that is proving very difficult.

I must agree with the concept that social housing is interlinked with the private house-building market. There is no problem in housing that does not have a knock-on consequence for another sector. So if people cannot buy a home, they have to rent a home which increases rental rates. If people cannot afford rent, they need social housing and that puts pressure on the social housing market. Every one of those facets feeds into the lack of supply and causes a problem. I agree we need to take a much more holistic and comprehensive approach.

I acknowledge that the Government has many policies and that the Ministers will be coming back with a social housing construction programme, which I welcome. The signal it sends that the Government believes in building social housing is important. I look forward to championing and seeking funding for my constituency in Galway West for that housing.

We need to take a broader look at the housing market. Treating it as a flexible market, as we do, open to market forces where supply and demand are always paramount will always leave us with problems in the housing market. If we hand over responsibility and say that housing is not a right and is not something that everybody requires but is something that the market will provide and we allow market forces dictate, we will repeat the problems we had in the boom with

an improved economy because speculators with money, developers with wealth and people with connections can control that vital housing market again.

Housing is something that everybody requires; there is not a citizen - a child, adult or old person - who does not need a roof over their head, irrespective of whether that is provided by themselves from their own endeavour and income or through a helping hand from the State. We cannot allow it to go back to a private market that will profiteer and take advantage of shortage of supply.

First we need to decide as a society how much an average working person should have to pay for their home. Should they have to borrow ten times their income as happened during the boom? Should a couple who have just had their first child have to mortgage themselves for 35 years and cripple themselves with debt? We have not resolved that question. We have not said what we want the ultimate outcome of a housing policy to be.

When we decide what is equitable and what a fair housing model is, then we can decide what the public sector should provide for those who cannot reach that average level. If cost is an issue and we are going to make sure that cost matters, we can then step in to prevent someone who has land on the outskirts of a city which he may have inherited from a parent who died 30 or 40 years ago suddenly becoming a millionaire overnight because the land is rezoned as it is required for residential purposes allowing him to sell it off to the highest bidder who then builds houses and charges young couples vast amounts for those houses.

Is that what we want to do or do we want to change it and say that housing is a right and we will control the price of building land and buy up land banks? Will we say that no more will we hand it over for speculators and people who can make a quick buck in order to ensure that everybody in this society who goes to work knows that they will be able to afford a home? We would then be able to step in and support those who are unfortunate not to be able to work or who are in low-paid sectors of society. However, until we make that decision as a society we will be chasing rather than leading and we will be catching up rather than providing a proper housing system.

Much of what the Government is doing is very good. We need a small change of mindset to take it even further and to reach the point where we can be absolutely certain that housing is no longer a variable issue, but something in which we can be concrete.

I am happy that Sinn Féin raised the issue because it is good to have it discussed in this House. However, just last week Galway City Council faced a motion from Sinn Féin councillors to reduce the local property tax. Sinn Féin cannot complain about local authorities not having funding to provide the important things we need, such as housing and refurbishing houses to look after extensions for people with disabilities, while at the same time appealing to the same gallery and promising to reduce the amount of money in our coffers. It does not make economic sense; it is just cheap populist politics.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I am delighted to be able to speak about this matter. I totally agree with Deputy Costello's earlier comments that what the council did was very shortsighted.

In 2014 more than €640 million has already been allocated for housing with €334 million being given in rent allowance. I do not think it is right that anybody should be blackmailed into handing out more money to cross the palms of greedy landlords. In March the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government announced the approval of 56 social

housing construction projects with an overall value of €68 million for the local authority.

I am delighted Deputy Ó Snodaigh has come into the Chamber because he will know of the good news in Dublin South Central. Last week a new 75-unit development was opened in Thornton Heights which was long awaited. There is an emphasis on new people coming to Inchicore to live, all of them very welcome. Another 36 units in one of the apartment blocks beside it are being given over. There are 19 new units in Bluebell being given over for local authority housing and they may be managed by the council, but we are not sure about that yet. In Heuston South Quarter 16 units have been acquired for people to be managed by the city council and Circle Voluntary Housing Association. In Herberton alone 40 units have been acquired for the de-tenanting of Dolphin House until development starts there.

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In Herberton, a further 24 units will be purchased and managed through funding itself. In Camac Crescent, Inchicore, 20 units have been acquired under leasing by the National Association of Building Co-operatives, NABCO. Moreover, on James's Street, 22 units have been acquired under leasing for Clúid Housing Association and Simon housing association. In St. Catherine's Gate, 22 units are being acquired by Clúid Housing Association. The council has purchased three second-hand houses, two of which are occupied while the other is being refurbished at present and there are more on the list. In addition, as Members are aware, the St. Teresa's Gardens complex is being de-tenanted and money has been allocated by the Government to build new units there. Three of the original flat blocks in the complex are being refurbished for accommodation for those who wish to stay in the area and who may wish to transfer into the new building when it happens. In further good news, the number of housing units refurbished in Dublin South Central from January 2014 to date is 158, of which 137 are currently occupied. While this is good news, all Members, including Deputy Ó Snodaigh and I, are aware that many people still are coming into their clinics on a daily basis to inquire about housing. They are now getting into a state of actually being desperate. Members must reconsider how they will quantify and make available proper housing units, by which I do not mean single rooms or bedsits, but proper housing for families.

Deputy Seán Kenny: First, I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Coffey, on his appointment and I wish him success in dealing with the housing brief. I believe the Government understands the problems people are facing in respect of housing, from those who are living with the threat and reality of homelessness to families who cannot find affordable properties to rent or to purchase. The housing challenge is significant and the Construction 2020 target of tripling annual housing output over the next six years, as well as the Housing Agency's estimate of approximately 35,000 additional residential properties being required over the next five years to meet social housing need, show the scale of the challenge before Members. While it is important to recognise these issues, it is just as important not to panic people with regard to the housing market. The price of property in Dublin fell by more than 50% from the peak of the boom and it remains significantly below those peak rates. As for immediate action, 6,000 households will have their social housing needs met this year. I believe that claims of another property boom are exaggerated. The recent story from Swords of people camping out overnight to place a deposit appears to have been a once-off event. Moreover, I understand that on the day on which sales of that development opened, the houses did not sell out on the first day and it may well have been something that was hyped up by the developer.

The social housing strategy under the stewardship of the Minister for the Environment,

Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly, is in preparation and will be finalised and published with budget 2015. While I do not intend to start pre-empting the final strategy, clearly it will need to address supply by coming up with solutions that must include a more ambitious building programme, as well as the facilitation of increased private sector construction. It must also examine funding solutions, including the best mix of State funding, private finance and European Union sources of funding. New social housing stock is being added, old stock that needed refurbishment is being reactivated and it will continue to add to the stock. Through a considerable refurbishment programme, almost 2,000 social housing units have been put back in use in 2014 and a further 1,200 social units will return to use in 2015, with more units to follow thereafter. The social housing strategy will provide the Government with a programme to continue this work. Significant development on new builds has started already and new social housing developments are starting all around the country. In Dublin, for example, 38 new units are being built in Glasnevin. Moreover, new public housing initiatives are being progressed by Dublin City Council with the voluntary sector and with the assistance of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. I refer, for example, to two large schemes of 50 and 130 units, respectively, in which a mix of private rented and socially rented units are being provided side-by-side in my own constituency on the Dublin north fringe. This is the kind of innovation that is needed and with which we must continue.

The Government's commitment to tackling homelessness is laid out in the homeless policy statement published last year, which outlines the Government's aim to end long-term homelessness by the end of 2016. This means a transition from a shelter-led to a more sustainable housing-led approach, which is about accessing permanent housing as the primary response to all forms of homelessness. In the past two years in Dublin, approximately 1,500 people have moved from homeless services to independent living with necessary supports. This shows what can be done. There is much more to be done and I fully recognise this is a challenge. This is why an oversight group was established to review the approach advocated in the homeless policy statement to identify obstacles and to propose solutions to them. These in turn led to the approval by the Government in May 2014 of a major implementation plan containing 80 actions that will contribute to the delivery of 2,700 units of accommodation by the end of 2016. These actions include ensuring that vacant properties are brought into productive use as quickly as possible and prioritising vulnerable groups, including homeless households, for housing, as well as bringing other suitable vacant residential properties in State ownership into use as quickly as possible.

In conclusion, I wish to raise the question of the repossession of buy-to-let properties by banks. People who are renting such units and who are being made homeless as a result of their repossession by banks should be allowed to remain *in situ* when the property is being purchased by another investor and I believe legislation to protect tenants in this position should be considered. I support the work of the Government and I will play my part in ensuring that the housing crisis is tackled and resolved.

Deputy Tom Barry: First, I wish to congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Coffey, on his appointment. I have no doubt but that he will do an outstanding job. On reading the motion before Members this evening, one would be forgiven for thinking it is a motion for Dublin, because "Dublin" appears four times within it. For those Members who are from Cork and other counties, it may be a little restricted in its viewpoint. Perhaps I am picking it up wrongly but it appears as though people are almost revelling in other people's despair. However, I refer to one really important point that is nowhere to be seen in this motion, namely, oversight. Is there suf-

ficient oversight in respect of those who have got houses and are such houses being taken and maintained in the true spirit of the scheme? The household benefits package, of which all Members are aware, provides various items such as electricity and gas to people. I have come across a case in which a person approached me seeking a cheque back in respect of their electricity. Basically, up to now, one would use one's electricity units from one's household package and if they were not used, one was away whereas if they were used, one paid for the balance. However, if one is not using them, one gets back a cheque. The aforementioned person obviously was not living in the house, yet was getting back a cheque, from taxpayers' money that is paid to the ESB with no oversight. Bad enough as that may be, what is worse is the person obviously was not living in the house. If this represents - as it could - 5% of the housing stock, why are Members not talking about oversight?

There is no point in building many more houses unless Members ensure those people living in them are living in the true spirit of the scheme and actually are the people dwelling in them. One could build up many scenarios on top of this, whereby somebody could be subletting a house they had been allocated because they are living with someone else. The nuclear family with which Members once were familiar has gone and there now are many different facets to families. Moreover, lest anyone has any doubts in this regard, I am talking from a factual position. Consequently, I believe this motion requires oversight. Members should not misunderstand me, as everyone wishes to cure the housing crisis. I certainly wish to ensure that the housing crisis is dealt with in the true spirit in which it is intended and that the solution serves those who it is intended to serve.

Finally, the motion mentions how people should be kept in warm environments. I note there is no mention of renewable energies, of district heating or all the fantastic things that can be done, particularly in Government schemes, to provide native fuels from indigenous industries and to boost farming. I have come from the ploughing championships where there are many people who would love to provide Irish forestry to provide heating. Members must consider this issue in a holistic fashion and not simply in a knee-jerk reaction. I also note that housing is relevant in Cork, Sligo and Mayo and not simply in Dublin.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: In March of this year, I stated in this Chamber that the Government's priority for the remainder of its term must be the resolution of the housing crisis. While many of the housing issues which hit us in 2008 like a tsunami, such as mortgage arrears and negative equity, are still with us, there can be no denying that the most serious aspect of the housing crisis at this time is homelessness. For nearly a year, I have chaired an internal Labour Party committee on housing which works to deliver proposals to our members at Cabinet. As a party that has social housing as a core value, we are striving to fix this crisis. However, as the Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, observed last night, there is no magic wand.

The motion put forward by Sinn Féin is laudable in its intent but deliberately unrealistic in respect of how its objectives can be achieved. It does a disservice to the seriousness of the issue and its only purpose is further to inflate Sinn Féin's populist credentials. Moreover, some of the measures called for in the motion have already been initiated by the Government. Deposit retention legislation, for example, is already in train. The call for new houses to meet the required building regulations and standards is already happening. In my own constituency, the first new homes built in Swords in more than seven years are in compliance with the new building regulations, including efficiency levels for warmth, energy efficiency and generous amount of space. I am also pleased that the local authority will receive units in this new Swords development for social housing, in compliance with the Part V regulations.

In our struggle to secure more units for social housing, it is good news when any new homes become available. The Part V provisions must continue to deliver housing units rather than cash in lieu to local authorities. We are also seeing the first local authority houses being built in Swords and Balbriggan since the early 2000s. While I accept that the numbers are insufficient, it is a start and a move in the right direction. The Labour Party in government always oversees the construction of new social houses. While I accept the context for this motion and acknowledge that there is indeed a crisis, I cannot accept a motion that is ultimately designed to fail, from a party that has no track record in delivering any housing in the history of the State.

I am incredulous that Sinn Féin is calling for a ring-fencing of funding for housing and homelessness services for the lifetime of this Government, when its own members on Dublin City Council and Fingal County Council voted against Labour Party proposals this week which would have contributed much needed emergency funding for homelessness in the Dublin area. When Sinn Féin's own councillors had the power within their grasp to help those in homeless situations, by just a little, they chose populism over action. My party colleagues and I will work with anybody to solve the housing crisis, but Sinn Féin members have proven they are more into playing politics with the problem than solving it.

I will be supporting the Government's amendment and am encouraged by its content. Particularly welcome is the indication that work is being done to prevent discrimination by landlords against recipients of rent supplement. This is an issue our internal committee has raised. I urge the Minister to encourage the Attorney General and all relevant Departments to report to him in a very short timeframe on this matter. The "No rent supplement need apply" advertisements are plain economic discrimination. There are people on rent supplement who would be able to meet an asking price for rent in the current market but are not even being entertained by landlords. That is not acceptable.

Tenants must have rent certainty in order to plan for their future. Rent control in the form of linking rents to the consumer price index must be given serious consideration. With the possibility of financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, legislation being phased out, it might now be time for social emergency measures in the public interest, SEMPI, proposals. One such measure could be a change in landlord-tenant legislation which would extend the rent review from one to two years, thereby giving greater certainty to tenants. Realistic funding for the rent supplement scheme for 2015 must be provided in next month's budget to take account of increasing rents. I look forward to the publication of the social housing strategy in the coming weeks, which will set out measures to be taken in the next five years to address the supply of social housing.

The Minister is aware of the recommendations of the Labour Party housing group. Those recommendations are multifaceted and cover the range of need across this crisis. I am confident they will form part of the strategy. Our core recommendation is that we need a greater and regular supply of social housing units. That aspect simply must be addressed. With the private housing market beginning to stir, we need to ensure maximum developer compliance with their Part V obligations. We cannot, however, return to the failed Fianna Fáil strategy of allowing private developers to deliver our social housing. The privatisation of social housing did not work in the past and will not work in the future. Social housing provision is best delivered from the State through local authorities. This is what I stand for and what the Labour Party stands for, and it must be delivered.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Deputies Sandra McLellan, Peadar

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Tóibín, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Brian Stanley, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin and Pearse Doherty are sharing time and have five minutes each.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: I take this opportunity to wish the Minister of State, Deputy Paudie Coffey, well in his new role. I begin by reminding Deputy Anthony Lawlor that what he described as fairy tale economics were costed by the Department of Finance. His constituents would be far better served if he used his time to address the housing crisis rather than trying to score cheap political points.

This Government has carried the mantle laid down by its Fianna Fáil and Green Party predecessors in government. The austerity-driven agenda that promotes privatisation over socially beneficial and progressive policy has led us to another crisis. It is a crisis that is detrimental to communities and families all across the State. We are talking about real people experiencing real hardship. We have heard of people living in their cars, families living in hotels with no cooking facilities, people moving from couch to couch and, in some cases, finding themselves on the streets, sleeping in dangerous alleyways with nowhere else to go. We have heard of people living in ill-suited and cramped temporary accommodation with no idea when or if they will find somewhere permanent to live. These are people in desperate circumstances, whose lives have changed because of the policies enacted by this and previous Governments. They are paying the cost of the financial crisis while those at the helm have escaped relatively unscathed.

The average rent across the State is a staggering €915 per month, which is nearly twice what the average worker is taking home per week. Coupled with a generally high cost of living, especially in urban areas, these rents are making life very hard for people and have left many with no choice but to seek emergency accommodation. A significant increase in the number of local authority homes and the imposition of rent controls are a must. There can be no delay with these measures as rent prices are spiralling out of control. A long-term housing plan is a necessity to help struggling families keep a roof over their head.

The Government's relative inaction on this issue is astounding and disgraceful. Consistent refurbishment and renewal of existing social housing and long-term investment in new building projects led by local authorities would go a long way toward curbing the crisis. We cannot, nor should we ever have, relied on private landlords to plug a hole in the housing shortage. Landlords in pursuit of profit are not the people in whose hands this issue should lie. The Government, elected by the people of this State, is best equipped to resolve the crisis and is mandated to do so. The private rented sector is not the solution to the current housing crisis. It has not delivered an adequate number of homes, has failed to offer protection to tenants and has only led to economic instability.

I will give some examples to show the extent to which people are suffering. A constituent in my area who had three children was housed by a voluntary housing body. Due to her growing family - now comprising six children - she requested a transfer to a more suitable home. Unfortunately, the voluntary housing body was not in a position to provide an alternative housing arrangement for her as its housing stock is very limited. When she wrote to the local authority whose list she had been on previously to request that she be transferred elsewhere, the response was that the responsibility to house her now lay with the voluntary body. This is a case of someone living in an unsustainable environment and whose housing needs are not being met. There should be provisions in place to ensure people like this are not left in limbo.

Another constituent who was availing of the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, was asked

if she wanted to remain within it. She had been living in her home for four years and her two children were attending school in the local village. When she expressed her intent to stay under the scheme, she could not secure a guarantee that she could continue living in the house, as the landlord wished to sell it. This person was told that she may not be able to stay in the village she had lived in for four years because of the difficulty in acquiring similar accommodation. Uprooting two children and being forced to move out of the community is not an acceptable or sustainable practice. Will the Government claim this is an acceptable way for this person to live her life, without stability and permanency? Constantly on the move from house to house, place to place, unable to set down roots and never having a home?

Unfortunately, these are not isolated cases. Many families find themselves in similar situations. The State is in the midst of the most severe housing crisis in its history, with 100,000 people languishing on housing lists. Local authorities must build an adequate supply of housing which is maintained by those councils and let out to members of the public at an affordable rent. I urge colleagues to support this motion.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I wish the new Minister good luck and sympathise with the Acting Chairman, Deputy Durkan, for having to listen to the last two Government speakers. I promise that I will not hurt his ears in such a manner. It sounds like Deputy Tom Barry took some bovine fertiliser home with him from the ploughing championships.

The housing situation in this country is in crisis - from mortgage distress to runaway rents to house purchases becoming ever more unaffordable to street homelessness. Hundreds of thousands of families are affected. Although the size of the problem is unprecedented, the ingredients are not. Since the 1980s, Governments have reduced the capital expenditure going into the housing stock and this has made a massive and long-term difference. Social housing was back on the agenda during the tiger years but, unfortunately, that was scuppered by the lobbying of the Government by private interests. One would think the idea of State provision of public housing was a radical one among those on the Government benches. It is not a radical idea. It is a sensible and long-term policy that has social, economic and commercial value. Many of our parents and grandparents would not have been able to access homes but for the provision of large-scale social housing in the early part of the previous century.

The size of the crisis is breathtaking. In my county of Meath, approximately 450 people presented themselves as homeless to the local authority last year. That figure will be approximately 700 people this year. There are approximately 4,000 people on the housing waiting list in the country. Last year, Meath County Council was in a position to provide three new properties in the county. This is an unbelievable situation. The majority of the people on the housing waiting lists and those who are homeless in Meath are so because of the votes of Fine Gael and Labour Party Deputies from the county over the past three years - the people who are meant to represent them.

The crisis has been exacerbated by a major rent supplement rate and rent mismatch. Right now, the upper rate for rent supplement in Meath is €650 per month. One will not get a three-bedroom house in much of the county for less than €1,000 per month. The emergency accommodation for the whole year in Meath is gone.

We should translate these numbers and statistics into human experience. Every morning people in Meath and elsewhere have no idea where they or their children will sleep that night. Every day parents get their kids ready to go to school but they have no idea if they will be able

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to bring their kids back to their home. I have heard of parents who are languishing in emergency accommodation try to convince their kids that they are on some kind of special holiday in order to keep some level of morale alive in the home.

A good home is the foundation of everything. If one does not have a good home, one does not have stability and good health and one will not be able to educate one's children properly. As a father, never mind as a public representative, I cannot get my head around this Government's inaction on this issue.

The idea of a stimulus has become intellectually unfashionable within the parties opposite, despite the fact it is a key component of recovery. The truth is that we have a severe humanitarian housing crisis in this country. When one hears of humanitarian crises, one tends to think of developing countries or, as they were known, Third World countries. It is the case that tens of thousands of skilled workers are languishing on the dole. It is also the case that we have the necessary capital in the Strategic Investment Fund. Put them all together and one has a stimulus plan which would develop the necessary housing to fulfil the needs of these families and one would have a jobs programme which would put people back to work and which would have a major impact on the development of the country. All that is missing is a Government that gives a damn about this issue.

What we have in the Sinn Féin policy is a way to repair the damage that has been done by this Government and previous Governments. It sets out a sensible way to achieve these policies which will effectively deal with the housing crisis in the long term.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Ba mhaith liom díriú isteach go háirithe orthu siúd atá gan dídean, nó nach bhfuil aon teacht acu ar tithe inar féidir leo cónaí go leanúnach. Those who are homeless or who are on the homeless list illustrate the chaos and the crisis we face in regard to housing. I heard a Deputy earlier bemoan the fact the motion mentioned Dublin. Dublin is an example of many other urban centres. The crisis in Dublin is at such an appalling scale that we do not want it replicated elsewhere.

I have met quite a number of young families living, if one could call it that, in homeless accommodation, accommodation provided by Dublin City Council's homeless agency. Many of these young families get up in the morning and must leave that accommodation, whether it is bed and breakfast accommodation, a hotel or a hostel. It is often a hotel room. I mention the level of distress of having to get all one's belongings together every morning and of having to go to reception to see if one is allowed to stay another night or whether one must go to the car park, if one is lucky enough to have a car, to telephone the homeless agency to ask it to telephone the hotel to find out if one can stay. Sometimes people are told they cannot stay at the weekend because there is a wedding and the hotel is booked out.

Often these hotels are not located where the family comes from, so their whole support network is missing. I dealt with a case in recent weeks of a family living in an airport hotel. The family is from the west of the city and the children go to school in Tallaght. This is absolutely crazy. The family is living on social welfare so how are they expected to get from the airport hotel to Tallaght every morning to deliver the children to school? How are they expected to feed those children because one is not allowed to have a microwave in the hotel bedroom? There are no cooking or washing facilities, so the family must depend on takeaways. These particular hotels have no takeaways or launderettes nearby, so they must make bus journeys if they are lucky enough to have the stability of staying in the hotel for one week.

I refer to other hotels which have been contracted to provide these services. One hotel is in such a dilapidated state, it should not be recognised as a hotel. Children are running around the corridors morning, noon and night because they have nowhere else to go. There is no playground or yard and they cannot go out to the front of the hotel because it is on a main road. That is how ridiculous the situation is because this Government and the previous one did not invest in social housing.

In the past, homeless services were mainly aimed at middle-aged single men or single women or at those who had problems with drug abuse, alcohol abuse or mental health illnesses or a combination of all three. What we are finding now, because social housing is not available, is that people who were previously in rented accommodation are ending up on the street because there are no properties in this city - I am talking about this city because it is the one about which I know - under the threshold for rent allowance. I am not an advocate of continuously increasing the rent allowance. I would much prefer, and I have argued for it for ten years, that the money that goes to rent allowance should be spent building social housing for the local authority. That needs to happen but what is happening now is that families cannot access houses or two or three-bedroom apartments on rent allowance. They cannot access it under the leasing arrangement which also subsidises private landlords and which is supposed to be available. They will not be able to access it when the much promised housing assistance payment scheme comes into being. In the Dublin City Council area the rental accommodation scheme has collapsed totally because landlords are so greedy that they are selling their properties from under their tenants or else refurbishing them and charging higher rents. This is a crisis and it needs to be addressed now rather than in one or two years' time.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. I will speak on the failure of the rental accommodation scheme and social leasing to provide safeguards for tenants threatened with eviction. The previous speaker referred to houses being sold and the tenants being forced to move out. The real beneficiaries have been the landlords. I have nothing against leasing and rent subsidies as short-term measures but they have been put at the centre of housing policy for this Government and its predecessor. The economics of RAS and social leasing are crazy, and it is clear that investing in social housing is a better option both for the public finances and for those in need of housing. After ten years of leasing schemes, local authorities have not added a single brick to their housing stock. Tenants have to find a new home if they manage to get ten years. In County Laois they are not even getting ten years. A considerable amount of the taxpayers' money has been wasted in paying rent to landlords and, most important, tenants have not enjoyed security of tenure. Waiting lists are too long. If the waiting list in County Laois included everyone who qualified, it would contain approximately 2,000 people but the number is currently in excess of 1,400. Housing provision in the county has collapsed. Two new houses were provided last year, which means County Meath beat us by one house. No new local authority scheme has been built in the past 11 or 12 years. Officials report that people are presenting to them every day as homeless.

There is a problem with vacant houses in local authority housing estates. Speculators and would-be landlords purchase houses which were built by the taxpayer in the first place to rent them out. They subsequently got into trouble, with the result that the houses are abandoned and, in some cases, sold at knock-down prices. Local authorities would like to purchase some of these houses because not only could they provide a home for somebody but also they could deal with dereliction and their use as places for anti-social activity. Renovating the houses would also create jobs.

Embarking on another private sector speculative boom is not the way to address the housing crisis. The private sector can play a key role where there is proven demand but a large part of the solution has to be a new local authority house building programme. In earlier recessions, Governments, including the coalition Government in the 1950s of which the party of the Minister of State, Deputy Coffey, was a member, embarked on major house building programmes. In the 1980s, during another recession, we saw further house building programmes. We need good quality local authority housing, the construction of which could create a stimulus at a time when the economy is, we hope, coming out of recession.

Deputy Lawlor put forward the segregationist view that we should abandon Part V. While Part V has its problems, it is irrelevant beyond the Pale and major cities because houses are not being built. When house construction restarts, we cannot allow developers to buy their way out of providing social housing within estates by offering money or land swaps to the local authority. Furthermore, social housing cannot be shoved into one corner of an estate. I could take the Minister of State to a couple of places in County Laois where developers got away with murder in terms of building lower quality houses for the local authority and shoving them beside each other. In one estate, the fronts of the houses are less than three metres away from the adjoining units and are separated only by a narrow walkway. The sun never shines on the fronts of those houses because they are too close together. That scandalous situation must never be allowed to happen again.

We still have to deal with ghost estates, many of which are where they are not needed. We will have to be imaginative in this regard. There are three ghost estates in the small village of Borris-in-Ossory, County Laois, at various stages of completion. Local authorities must be empowered to acquire such estates, irrespective of whether they are in NAMA or in receivership, through site resolution plans. The current situation constitutes a crisis. We need big initiatives, and the time for action is now.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún agus an díospóireacht seo ar an ngéarchéim tithíochta atá ar siúl faoi láthair. Ní fiú rún ná díospóireacht ná plé ar an gceist seo muna bhfuil an Rialtas chun polasaí nua a chur i bhfeidhm agus tithíocht shóisialta a bheith mar phriarachtaí acu.

I recall throughout the so-called Celtic tiger period, first as the sole Sinn Féin Deputy and later as the leader of our Dáil group of five, that I repeatedly pointed to the refusal of Fianna Fáil-led Governments to provide local authority homes for the growing numbers of people on the housing waiting lists of councils throughout the Twenty-six Counties. In that era the number of local authority homes constructed as a proportion of overall homes built was the smallest since the foundation of this State. We were not alone in our stand for social and affordable homes, and the Labour Party was very vocal in this regard. It was especially disappointing, therefore, to see the Labour Party in Government from 2011 continuing the very same policies that have now given us the worst housing crisis since the 1960s.

Addressing a conference on housing organised by the IMPACT trade union last Saturday, the Tánaiste spoke as if her party had only entered Government since her advent as leader. She referred correctly to the almost total reliance on the private housing rental and housing purchase sector by the previous Government but she omitted to say that the self-same policy was continued by the Labour Party in Government. In 2011 her colleague, the then Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government with responsibility for housing, Deputy Penrose, published a housing policy statement which again relied on

rent supplement, re-named and re-jigged as the housing assistance payment, and on the rental accommodation scheme to meet the massive need for social housing. What was absent, and what is still absent, is a comprehensive strategy and investment programme to construct local authority houses and apartments. The rent supplement scheme has poured millions of euro into the hands of private landlords. It is now in crisis, especially in Dublin, because rising rents are pricing those on rent supplement out of the housing market and into homelessness. Similarly, the rental assistance scheme has virtually collapsed.

This Government-made housing crisis is causing misery on a major scale. We have people living in overcrowded conditions, in run-down accommodation and in emergency accommodation in hotels, hostels and bed and breakfasts, sometimes with whole families in one room. Last week one of my colleagues on Dublin City Council described the plight of a family accommodated in a hotel room near the airport who have to cross the city five days a week to bring their children to school on the south side of the city. Another colleague has described the plight of tenants priced out of the market by landlords who are in NAMA. This is the same NAMA that is supposed to be releasing housing stock for social housing. Instead it is facilitating rack-renting landlords and selling off property in blocks to international speculators with no guarantee that the speculators will not sit on the property and allow prices to continue to soar before selling or renting at inflated prices.

There are reports that the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government will look for a further €250 million in the forthcoming budget. While this is a considerable sum, it is not nearly enough to plug the gap left by years of Government inaction on this issue. What ratio will be ring-fenced for new council builds? Sinn Féin has been accused of fantasy economics but this lazy accusation is just to hide the fact that while the Government might have a plan on housing, it is grossly inadequate. The most recent assessment of social housing need, published in 2013, indicated that 89,000 households were in need of housing, and of these, 44% were single person households, 30% were single persons with children and 72% of the total sourced their income solely from social welfare payments.

At the same time, the rate of house building has decreased. The most recent figures on house building from the Central Statistics Office in September of this year indicate the overall volume of residential building decreased by 8.8% between the second quarter of 2013 and the second quarter of 2014. The number of social housing completions for the year 2013 was 504, representing 6.1% of all housing completions that year. This can be compared to 2011, when there were 1,231 social housing completions, which represented 11.7% of all housing completions. Considering rented accommodation, we see that in 2013, 17,849 private rented dwellings were inspected by local authorities, of which 9,952, or 55.8%, were found not to meet the regulatory requirements, with 2,862 improvement notices being served on landlords. The statistics on the position facing us today are absolutely shocking.

In the short time I have to complete my contribution, I wish to address a related issue, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government's fixation with a phased approach to remedial works in local authority housing schemes. One such example of this is the years of delayed completion of the remedial works at the Mullaghmat housing estate in my home town of Monaghan. Sections of the 187-house development which dates from the early 1970s have been completed for a number of years now, while other sections are only under way after a lengthy time lapse. There still remains a body of houses to be addressed, which is only indicative of what is happening in other parts of the country; they all need proper address. The phased approach has turned this long-neglected scheme into a permanent building site, leaving

some homes completely transformed while many more residents look on in envy and wonder when will their section be reached.

I know all the arguments for a phased approach but I also know the arguments for not taking this piecemeal approach. Families have had to endure for years the failure of local authorities to address the deficiencies in their homes, including unsafe wiring, fractured chimney breasts, poor spoutings and draughty doors and windows. Many people complain of draughts, with colds and other ailments regularly presenting. Others, who some may say are lucky, have had their homes transformed, including outside painting and curtilage work. The contrast between the homes which have been done and those not yet seen to is considerable. There should be credit for what is done but there can be no credit for any system that allows so many languish in waiting. If we do not have a single run at such works, we need a joined up phase-after-phase approach, with all provisions in place to allow for a seamless transition from one phase to the next. The people of Mullaghmat and all such schemes across the State deserve no less.

Accordingly, with the already signalled phases four and five yet to be reached, I appeal to the Minister and the Minister of State to familiarise themselves immediately with the remedial scheme and ensure phases four and five can be approved and taken together. The families have had to wait far too long, and there should be no gap in time between the completion of phase three and the commencement of phases four and five. I appeal to the Minister of State, Deputy Coffey, in particular, as I did to his colleague, the former Minister of State with responsibility for housing, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan. She kindly visited the scheme in question and endeavoured to help resolve the outstanding issues. I hope these works will be stretched no more and that phases four and five will be approved as a single last push to completion. That would give the community of Mullaghmat the estate it deserves and wants, with the peace that will come with the departure of all the paraphernalia of a building site.

Our motion seeks to put in place a real strategy for housing with investment that will see people housed, increase the housing stock of our local authorities and provide a vital boost to our economy. It makes absolute sense. It is the least that is now required to address the crisis and we demand that this Government take action in this forthcoming budget. Iarraim ar Theachtaí Dála tacú linn sa mhéid seo. Ba chóir go mbeadh pobal na tíre seo in ann glacadh leis go mbeidh tithíocht chuí ar fáil dóibh. Cinnteodh ár bplean go mbeadh an tithíocht sin ar fáil dóibh.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Paudie Coffey): I thank the Members opposite and those on this side of the House for their contributions to this debate. Housing is clearly a subject that arouses great passion and interest in all of us, as it should, due to the seriousness of the issue. In the very limited time available, I will briefly pick up on some matters raised by Members during the debate. I assure Deputies that all the contributions have been noted, especially those which were realistic and constructive. Many constructive points were made, although many more were made just to score political points on this very sensitive issue.

A number of Members expressed satisfaction with the extent of NAMA's involvement in the provision of social housing. NAMA continues to engage proactively with my Department and the housing agency on the provision of social housing. Over the past three years it has made approximately one third of all housing units under its control available to local authorities for consideration for social housing. That is almost all of its unoccupied housing stock. It must be recognised that many of the properties concerned require, for legacy reasons, substantial work

or are located in estates that require substantial work before they can be occupied by individuals or families. There are no shortcuts in terms of undertaking and completing this work to the highest standard. In this regard, NAMA has funded approximately €20 million in capital expenditure in delivering social housing units to date. NAMA has also adopted measures to help streamline and expedite the social housing delivery process, including the establishment of a new subsidiary, the National Asset Residential Property Services Limited, to facilitate these transactions and standardise lease terms.

Of the current 1,971 available and confirmed demand properties, 736 had been delivered for social housing use at the end of June 2014. This figure included 531 complete and operational units and 205 units where contracts had been signed and final completion works were under way. A further 603 properties are considered as being active transactions, whereby terms are agreed or active negotiation is ongoing by all parties concerned, or where a detailed appraisal making a decision on the most likely delivery mechanism is being carried out.

I will respond to some of the issues raised by Deputies relating to the housing assistance payment, HAP, and transfer lists. Section 22 of the Housing Act 2009 provides that a housing authority can determine the order of priority in which it makes allocations to individual households in accordance with its allocation scheme. This includes reserving dwellings available for allocation in an area in respect of households transferring from other forms of social housing support, of which HAP will be one. In that regard, social housing regulations which commenced on 1 May 2011 set out the conditions that housing authorities must take into account when making allocation schemes. All housing authorities were required to make an allocation scheme under these regulations on or before 13 June 2011. The regulations require authorities to set out the manner in which they will allocate dwellings to households on the waiting list and households approved for transfers. Given the assertion of a number of Members that certain local authorities do not have transfer lists, our Department officials will contact each local authority again to ensure they are implementing regulations correctly.

The quality of private rented accommodation was raised by a number of speakers. This Government is committed to ensuring that rental accommodation is of good quality. Regulations are in place setting out the minimum standards for quality accommodation in terms of basic requirements regarding ventilation, heating, lighting, fire, fire safety and sanitary facilities. Minimum standards are necessary as a protection to all consumers and especially the most vulnerable. New standards were introduced in 2008 and for some of these, landlords were allowed a four-year phasing-in period to facilitate any improvement works required, including those relating to sanitary and heating facilities and food preparation and storage.

Responsibility for the enforcement of minimum standards rests with local authorities. With inspections carried out under the Dublin City Council inspection programme for the past four years, it is worth noting that although much is heard anecdotally about inspection failures on grounds such as inadequate sanitation, a recent inspection programme found that a property is six times as likely to fail an inspection on the grounds of fire safety than sanitation grounds. This serves only to emphasise the value of, and necessity for, these inspections. The majority of landlords have brought their properties into line with the minimum standards. Any remaining non-compliant bed-sits are failing on multiple grounds, including fire safety, and many are simply not fit for habitation.

Deputies were also concerned about the rights of private tenants. The Minister and I share these concerns. The programme for Government includes a commitment to establish a ten-

ancy deposit protection scheme. On foot of this commitment the Private Residential Tenancies Board, PRTB, commissioned research on such a scheme and reported to our Department with recommendations. All the options in the report were considered in order to determine how to offer the greatest protection to tenants at least cost to the Exchequer. Government approval was secured for the establishment of a tenancy deposit scheme based on a custodial model to be operated by the PRTB. It is my intention to introduce the legislative amendments relating to the scheme on Committee Stage of the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2012 in the Seanad.

The Residential Tenancies Act 2004 sets out the rights and obligations of landlords and tenants in the private residential rented sector covering security of tenure and the termination of tenancies. The provisions of the Act do not extend to the circumstances under which a landlord seeks a tenant for a property. Like many Members I have noticed the practice of including phrases such as “rent allowance not accepted” or “no rent supplement” in advertisements for rental properties. The practice of discriminating against a person on the grounds that he or she is in receipt of rent supplement but is otherwise a suitable tenant, while in my view indefensible, is not expressly prohibited under the Equal Status Act 2000. Quite apart from the discriminatory tone this a very real cause for concern given the difficulties being expressed by families seeking accommodation. There are complex issues of law involved in this but I can advise that options including that of legal remedy to address the practice of discrimination in such instances are being explored by the relevant Departments in consultation with the Attorney General.

The Minister and I agree that we need short, medium and long-term responses to the housing challenge. We went from one extreme in this country to another in terms of housing output from building too many to building too few. I can assure Deputies that housing is and will remain a priority for the Minister and me. We need to address housing supply to normalise the market and make it more sustainable. Prefabs are not the answer to this. They are not a sustainable solution. The social housing strategy will deliver a mix of housing investment options, including local authority direct build but also other investment mechanisms to deliver mixed housing models to meet the varied demands in modern society. The Construction 2020 strategy will also contribute significantly to the housing supply deficit. Deputies have mentioned vacant local authority houses. We need to turn these around far more quickly and re-let them. We also need to utilise and stimulate the use of vacant properties in town and city centres.

Deputy Seán Crowe: When a visitor to Russia asked Mikhail Gorbachev why he introduced perestroika he replied, “Look around you”. Perestroika was to involve the reconstruction of the Russian economy and society. We need to look around us, outside this Parliament building. If the Minister of State looks around he will see the problems. If we got an agreement that many of the Members who are absent now would walk around with open eyes to see what is going on we might have a perestroika-Coffey moment. It is important to do this. It is generally accepted that there is a crisis. What do we do about it? We are putting forward genuine proposals that we hope Government or someone will listen to. We are not the only ones putting forward solutions to the problem.

Figures have been given for the number of households with housing needs across the State. We know from our constituency offices about the extent of the problem. This week three homeless families came to my constituency office. There was a time when one could tell people to go here or there, or get rent allowance but there is nothing I can say or do now. My job is to be a problem solver for many of these people. I am trying to give them some direction but I can-

not direct them anywhere. I can direct them to homeless services but the services are not there. This is a huge problem.

One family is living in a tent in the Priory in Tallaght village. Other families are living in cars. Another family with a one-month old child is couch-hopping, staying with relatives or friends but they have nowhere to go. The stock answer is to get rental accommodation but there is no rental accommodation for that family in my constituency. I challenge anyone to get that funding through rent allowance or anything else.

The Minister of State may say we are foolish but we have identified a possible funding avenue. There is a housing crisis. How do we solve that problem? We need to build more housing. It is a matter for us all, if this House were to do nothing else, to come up with some solutions that will work. There are empty houses in Tallaght. They were built by Respond! Housing Association with the local council. There is an argument between the association and South Dublin County Council. There are units which have been vacant for over two years, maybe even three years. At the same time people are walking up and down the streets. If the Minister of State could do something about that it would be a positive and practical step. The houses are in Gleann na hEorna.

The rent supplement is not enough in my area. In one area the waiting time is four years for a family to be housed. In South Dublin the waiting time is eight years. Someone who comes to me with a child under four has not been long enough on the list and has no chance. There is a big problem for single men who have split up with their partners. They have nowhere to go. I can tell the Minister of State about any number of cases of people in these awful situations. One woman, aged 73, who is estranged from her husband, has nowhere to live. I know someone living in a converted garage paying €650 a month after losing the family home.

Perhaps we could have a perestroika-Coffey moment. The Minister of State should walk around the city to see what is wrong and maybe collectively we can come up with answers.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I notice in the Government amendment to the motion that the Minister and Minister of State commend themselves for the high priority they have afforded the housing crisis. If it has been a matter of priority in their own heads that has not been evident to the rest of us.

In the course of this debate people have set out, based on their constituencies and experiences, the grinding misery experienced by so many citizens. Some of them are rough sleepers, they are the most visible of our homeless population. The misery is also real for people without a roof over their head or a home to call their own, couch-hoppers, staying with family or friends, very often with large families of children in grossly over-crowded conditions. That is the case in my constituency.

9 o'clock

I have lost count of the number of people who have come to my clinic - I am sure other clinics are no different - with tales of sleeping in box rooms with young babies and one, two or three other children. The consequences of being crammed into such conditions can be very serious for families and small children. The Minister and the Minister of State have said they are attaching a high priority to meeting the housing needs of such people. I do not think they are. The Minister of State, Deputy Coffey, said there are "no shortcuts" in finding solutions.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: I said there are “no shortcuts” in standards.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Certainly, there is no urgency in the approach of this Government. The funding of social housing has been addressed many times by Deputy Ellis. The Minister, Deputy Kelly, was being disingenuous last night when he used the usual lazy refrain of “fantasy economics”. I suggest that for many families, his brand of economics is nightmare economics. We have made one proposal that involves the use of the strategic investment fund for housing. We have specifically and consistently identified that €1 billion needs to be invested as a matter of urgency if we are to begin addressing this crisis. We reckon that would fund approximately 6,600 housing units. If this issue had been seen as a real priority and as a matter of real urgency, that €1 billion would have produced many more housing units.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I made that point on the radio today.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The crisis in housing, like the crisis in homelessness, is not new. Local communities have often had to cobble together responses to these crises. The members of a voluntary group that has come together in my constituency - Inner City Helping Homeless - speak to, care for and feed rough sleepers in the north inner city every night. That is an example of the non-statutory response that is being led by people who have a real sense of the scale of the crisis and an urgent wish and desire to address it. I suggest that the Government might take a leaf out of its book.

I will conclude by speaking about the local property tax issue that was raised by Labour Party Deputies, in particular. They mentioned that Dublin City Council has agreed to implement a 15% reduction in the tax on the family home. I remind them that Sinn Féin’s manifesto in the recent local elections included a commitment to achieve the maximum possible reduction in this unfair tax in order to give some breathing room to struggling families and households. We kept our word. It might come as a shock to Labour Party Deputies that we set a premium on keeping our word. It might be worth remembering that the Labour Party made a similar commitment in its manifesto last May. It committed to “work with our local communities to implement the maximum possible reduction” in the unfair tax on the family home. True to form, the Labour Party then walked away from its commitments. We should not pretend for a moment that the housing and homelessness crises were created by councillors - democratically elected representatives - taking a democratic decision to ease the burden on struggling families. This crisis has been with us throughout the duration of this Government’s term in office, but it has singularly failed to address it.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Populism.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister mentioned yesterday that the number of people on the housing waiting list has decreased from 98,000 to 89,872 since 2011. He neglected to mention that since 2011, anyone coming into the rental accommodation scheme has been removed from the housing list. The number of people participating in that scheme now stands at 36,000, which represents an increase on the figure of 15,000 in 2011. That figure is quite revealing. While the numbers have moved around, they have risen overall. Despite the decision to remove rental accommodation scheme tenants from the waiting list, the overall figure has increased by approximately 29,000. Since 2011, the entire number of households that are not housed or inadequately housed by the State has increased by approximately 40,000 to approximately 125,000. Given that 1,500 adults and 640 dependent children are in emergency accommodation in Dublin, it is clear that the position is not improving at all. If this is not a crisis, I do not

know what is.

Contrary to what the Minister claimed last night, our proposal does not represent “fantasy economics”. It is a real proposal based on existing money that has been identified. We are not proposing that it should be spent on anything else. We have isolated €1 billion from the strategic investment fund for social housing investment. All we can do is make proposals - it is up to the Minister and the Minister of State to treat this issue with the seriousness it deserves, rather than resorting to the kind of constructive debate reserved for cranks in the comment section of *thejournal.ie*. The Minister said last night that significant new builds are absolutely required. It has been reported that he is asking for €250 million in the forthcoming budget.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Reported.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: While such a sum of money would be welcome, it would be too little, too late. The Minister said last night that the Government is pursuing a housing-led approach. To illustrate this, he outlined figures setting out the number of houses being provided. He later listed some of those figures again, either to confuse or to emphasise. The former Minister of State with responsibility for housing, Deputy Jan O’Sullivan, used to do the same thing. She repeatedly announced NAMA’s undelivered promises as if they were new and repackaged adaptation cuts and funding boosts, but they turned out to be a little less severe. The only people who have a roof over their heads as a result of spin and misinformation are spin doctors. They certainly are not going without while the Labour Party is in Government.

A housing-led approach requires new homes. The stable and secure homes that are required can only be provided in sufficient numbers by local authorities. That is why an investment of €1 billion is needed. It is why we need to establish local authority housing trusts. The Minister failed to address this point today and the other day. If these things are not done, all of the Government’s policies and approaches will be worth nothing. When the Simon Community launched its annual review, it made it clear that not enough housing is being delivered. Sam McGuinness of Dublin Simon told journalists that “the 2014 target of 1,100 tenancies for Dublin has been reduced by 30% because of the complete collapse in the private rented and social housing market, with additional housing extremely slow to come on stream” and that “temporary accommodation has become a long term solution as at least 50% of people are now stuck in emergency shelters for more than six months, with little or no hope for the future”. According to Simon, “the plan to end long term homelessness by 2016 is now clearly unachievable”. It is a fantasy, as a result of the failures of the Government that set the deadline in question.

Homelessness is not going away. It is worse than ever before. The Government should listen to all the agencies that are making it clear that there is a real crisis. It seems to be going around with its head in the sand. Peter McVerry has referred to this problem as a tsunami. While we have no real idea of the scale of the problem due to the hidden nature of much homelessness, we do know that 10,000 people contacted Focus Ireland last year for help. That is just one organisation, and those are just the people who asked for help. We know that 158 people slept rough in Dublin last week. We do not know how many people we missed on that count because they were lying in cold squats, closed parks, wastelands, abandoned buildings, containers, dumpsters and cars. I suggest that 158 is the bare minimum number of people who slept on the streets of our capital city that night and are doing so every night.

These figures are not distortions. They are not spin. They lay bare the truth of this crisis. The Government should be truthful and join us in looking for solutions. It should engage with

our proposals, even in a critical manner, but it should not be flippant. We need to be bold and ambitious. We do not want to be back here in six months' time, or a year from now, discussing the same problem again.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 71; Níl, 41.</i>	
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Bannon, James.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>
<i>Barry, Tom.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>
<i>Breen, Pat.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>
<i>Butler, Ray.</i>	<i>Colreavy, Michael.</i>
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Creighton, Lucinda.</i>
<i>Byrne, Eric.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Daly, Clare.</i>
<i>Coffey, Paudie.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>
<i>Conlan, Seán.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>
<i>Connaughton, Paul J.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>
<i>Coonan, Noel.</i>	<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>
<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	<i>Fleming, Tom.</i>
<i>Costello, Joe.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>
<i>Deenihan, Jimmy.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>
<i>Dowds, Robert.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>
<i>Feighan, Frank.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>
<i>Gilmore, Eamon.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>
<i>Hannigan, Dominic.</i>	<i>McGuinness, John.</i>
<i>Harrington, Noel.</i>	<i>McLellan, Sandra.</i>
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>
<i>Humphreys, Kevin.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>
<i>Keating, Derek.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>
<i>Kenny, Seán.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>

Dáil Éireann

<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>
<i>Lawlor, Anthony.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>
<i>Lynch, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>
<i>McCarthy, Michael.</i>	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>
<i>McFadden, Gabrielle.</i>	
<i>McGinley, Dinny.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Olivia.</i>	
<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	
<i>Mulherin, Michelle.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Neville, Dan.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Derek.</i>	
<i>Ó Riordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>O'Mahony, John.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Joe.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	
<i>Perry, John.</i>	
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	
<i>Reilly, James.</i>	
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Spring, Arthur.</i>	
<i>Stagg, Emmet.</i>	
<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>Tuffy, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>	
<i>Walsh, Brian.</i>	
<i>White, Alex.</i>	

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

Amendment declared carried.

24 September 2014

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 71; Níl, 40.</i>	
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Bannon, James.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>
<i>Barry, Tom.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>
<i>Breen, Pat.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>
<i>Butler, Ray.</i>	<i>Colreavy, Michael.</i>
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Creighton, Lucinda.</i>
<i>Byrne, Eric.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Daly, Clare.</i>
<i>Coffey, Paudie.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>
<i>Conlan, Seán.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>
<i>Connaughton, Paul J.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>
<i>Coonan, Noel.</i>	<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>
<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	<i>Fleming, Tom.</i>
<i>Costello, Joe.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>
<i>Deenihan, Jimmy.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>
<i>Dowds, Robert.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>
<i>Feighan, Frank.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>
<i>Gilmore, Eamon.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>
<i>Hannigan, Dominic.</i>	<i>McGuinness, John.</i>
<i>Harrington, Noel.</i>	<i>McLellan, Sandra.</i>
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Ó Feargháil, Seán.</i>
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>
<i>Humphreys, Kevin.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>
<i>Keating, Derek.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>
<i>Kenny, Seán.</i>	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>
<i>Lawlor, Anthony.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>
<i>Lynch, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>

<i>McCarthy, Michael.</i>	<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>McFadden, Gabrielle.</i>	
<i>McGinley, Dinny.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Olivia.</i>	
<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	
<i>Mulherin, Michelle.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Neville, Dan.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Derek.</i>	
<i>Ó Riordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>O'Mahony, John.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Joe.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	
<i>Perry, John.</i>	
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	
<i>Reilly, James.</i>	
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Spring, Arthur.</i>	
<i>Stagg, Emmet.</i>	
<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>Tuffy, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>	
<i>Walsh, Brian.</i>	
<i>White, Alex.</i>	

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

Question declared carried.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.30 p.m. until 9.30 a.m on Thursday, 25 September 2014.