



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 25 Meán Fómhair 2014

Thursday, 25 September 2014

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 9.30 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Child and Family Agency Funding

1. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will provide an update on the financial position of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency; if he will need to bring forward a Supplementary Estimate for the agency this year; the extent to which the budgetary position is impacting on the provision of services by the agency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36076/14]

Deputy Robert Troy: My question relates to the up-to-date financial position of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Does the Minister consider that he will need to bring forward a Supplementary Estimate for the agency this year? Can he give an update as to the extent to which the budgetary position is impacting on the services provided by the agency?

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy James Reilly): The financial allocation for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, in 2014 which was its first year of operation, was set at €609 million. This is comprised of €602 million in current funding and €7 million in capital funding. The overall level of funding available to the agency, which is significant by any measurement, is designed to ensure that the agency can provide a comprehensive and integrated service to children and families who require support. In budget 2014, an additional sum of €6.7 million was made available to support the agency's reform of the child welfare and protection services. The level of expenditure to date by the agency amounts to €428.2 million.

Notwithstanding the additional resources provided and the prioritisation of these services by the Government, it is acknowledged that delivering the range of service required of the agency within this budget is challenging as a result of demographic and social factors. This has been reflected most recently in a report prepared by the agency entitled "Measuring the Pressure"

which shows that during the first three months of the year, Tusla provided a social work service to 19,990 children and that 11,093 referrals of child welfare and protection were made to child protection social work teams. The report also shows that following preliminary inquiry, about half of these referrals were deemed to need an initial social work assessment.

These increases have given rise to strong demand for foster care and private residential care over the period. Operational reforms are ongoing to achieve the most effective utilisation of existing resources. In addition, the agency has been working to bring added controls in the area of legal services and continues to develop its approach to commissioning. My officials continue to review data on activity levels and performance on an ongoing basis as part of the performance management function of the Department. Specifically, my officials closely monitor the cash position of the agency and are working with the agency to determine an evidence-based full year cash requirement. No final determination has yet been reached in this regard. In the event that supplementary funding is required to meet the running costs of the agency in 2014, the matter will be discussed with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as part of the ongoing budgetary discussions.

Deputy Robert Troy: When he left the HSE behind, the Minister had hoped that he might be leaving behind Supplementary Estimates but it is clear that there is a major problem in this agency which has only been in operation for less than 12 months. Gordon Jeyes, who is chief executive of the agency, has spoken about how we need to have a realistic debate about the money provided and a need to spell out what services will be delivered for that money. Those comments were made a week before we learned that more than 9,000 cases of abuse, neglect or welfare concerns for children at risk are waiting to be allocated a social worker.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have a question for the Minister?

Deputy Robert Troy: There is a crisis in the provision of front-line services in an agency that is only in its infancy. This simply is not tenable and is not good enough. I want the Minister to tell us what level of additional supplementary budget will be brought forward to this agency this year because Mr. Jeyes has said that the agency will need a further €45 million simply to stand still next year.

Deputy James Reilly: The Deputy has raised the issue of the number of children who are waiting for further social work intervention. They have been categorised into different groups of low priority and high priority. There is no question or doubt that the agency is under pressure. However, we are employing more social workers. Over 100 social workers have been recruited and another 90 are in process. I share the Deputy's concern around the needs of children in this area but I would point out that major advances and progress have been made. This is an area that the Government has taken very seriously. It is the first Government to have a specific Department and Minister for children and a child and family agency with a very clearly defined role relating to the well-being of children.

Deputy Robert Troy: I am glad the Minister shares my concerns but he is the Minister at the helm of that Department and can act on those concerns. There are 160 vacant posts across the Child and Family Agency, which is operating at 70% of its staffing levels. This is in its first year so there is no point clapping ourselves on the back that we have formed a new agency if that agency will not do the job it is tasked with doing. What is being done about the €25 million that has been spent on legal fees by the agency? Can one imagine the difference that €25 million would make in the provision of front-line services? In terms of the budget provision

for the remainder of this year, will a Supplementary Estimate be brought forward to ensure that front-line services are not compromised? In terms of the 2015 budget, will the Minister be able to secure from his colleagues around the Cabinet table the additional resources that Mr. Jeyes, who is at the helm of this organisation, said he will need just to stand still next year?

Deputy James Reilly: To be clear around these figures, approximately one third of 9,473 cases awaiting a dedicated social worker are deemed to be high priority. They comprise the following: a child subject to care proceedings, where there is an ongoing child protection concern; a child with non-approved foster carers; a child in care for less than six months; and a child in a non-stable placement. All these children have been in contact with and have been contacted by social workers and the duty social worker is always available. All emergencies are dealt with so there is never a case of any child who is at serious risk and who needs to be removed from a home being left in that home or situation. I want to assure people of that. The legal fees are an issue that Deputy Troy's Government presided over and set.

Deputy Robert Troy: Come on. The Government has been in office for four years. This is a new agency that was established under this Administration.

Deputy James Reilly: I did not interrupt the Deputy. If the truth hurts so much, perhaps he would be as well to leave the Chamber.

Deputy Robert Troy: No, I will not leave the Chamber.

Deputy James Reilly: Deputy Troy's Government established the HSE and this legal process.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister was going to abolish it. That is why he is here now. Why is he in this Department?

Deputy James Reilly: It has left the inheritance for the people with which we are all very familiar. To come in here and demand that a new agency, that has inherited all these problems from his Government, should solve them all within a year of being established is preposterous, and Deputy Troy knows it.

Deputy Robert Troy: We were not given a proper budget to start with.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

2. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will advise Dáil Éireann of the terms of reference for the commission of investigation into the mother and baby homes and similar institutions that was to have been presented to the Members of Dáil Éireann by 30 June 2014, in advance of the summer recess; if he will explain the inordinate delay in the preparation and presentation of the said terms of reference; the reason he and his Department have not facilitated continued contact with opposing party spokespersons over the summer recess, as committed to by his predecessor and Department officials; the reason requests to resume these engagements have not been acceded to; if he will advise when the commission of investigation will get under way and the timeframe for completion of its work and reporting on its findings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35990/14]

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I seek to establish the current status of the terms of refer-

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ence for the commission of investigation into the mother and baby homes and similar institutions. What institutions will be included? What is the timeframe for the commission to present its report? I am anxious to ensure a number of specific areas of address are included in the terms of reference.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy James Reilly): I thank the Deputy for his question, and I have met with him on the issue. The Government is committed to establishing an effective commission of investigation into matters relating to mother and baby homes. Considerable progress has been achieved in this important task, including the publication of the interdepartmental group's report and the announcement that Judge Yvonne Murphy will chair the independent statutory investigation.

Discussions are ongoing with the Attorney General and colleagues across Government on the terms of reference with a view to finalising our deliberations in early course. In parallel with this work, my Department is advancing the legislative and logistical arrangements required to establish the commission.

Given the breadth and scale of the issues involved and our experience of previous statutory inquiries, the importance of providing the commission with precise terms of reference should not be underestimated. The tasks to be undertaken and the appropriate range of methodologies to be utilised must be defined to ensure the commission is set up on a sound footing. The Deputies across the House are also very concerned about this. It is a complex undertaking and, as I explained in some detail to the House on 16 July, it is right to take the necessary time for drafting to ensure the commission can deliver on public expectations in a realistic and timely manner. To do otherwise would not be in the best interests of the mothers and children who were in these institutions nor would it serve the wider public interest.

In light of the significant progress achieved since 11 June, when this House passed a motion to establish a statutory investigation, I cannot accept the Deputy's claim of an inordinate delay. Establishing an investigation which is capable of addressing these important matters effectively and in a sensitive and timely manner must be our primary concern. It is my intention to bring a memorandum to Government as quickly as possible setting out the proposed terms of reference and to return to the Houses with a draft order to establish the commission.

My predecessors and I have indicated the desire to achieve the widest possible consensus in this investigation. I acknowledge Deputy Ó Caoláin's constructive contributions to date in this regard. Given the complexity I referred to, my plan is for further engagement with Opposition spokespersons and other stakeholders as matters progress in the coming weeks to update them on the emerging issues and seek their further views. Such an inclusive approach will assist the Government in establishing an effective inquiry and I am confident that we can conclude this important process in a timely manner. My office will be in contact with the Deputy and others to make the necessary arrangements in order that we can all get the outcome we desire.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It is not timely and I do not underestimate the challenges involved. The Minister spoke of legislative and logistical challenges. Could he spell out exactly what these are in terms of the delay in the publication of the terms of reference? What years are to be covered from 1925 onwards? What institutions will be included? Will it include the Sisters of Bon Secours in Tuam and similar institutions, the Bethany Home and the Magdalen laundries? Will the Minister indicate clearly, in this first opportunity after the summer recess, exactly where this preparatory work is? Will it include address of the adoption practices, infant

mortality rates, medical experimentation on children, burial of children in unmarked graves and many other issues we have highlighted to the Minister and his predecessors? This was not only a failure of religious institutions but of the State. We must also recognise that because of the societal pressures it was also a failure of communities and families. Since we last met, before the recess, what efforts have been employed to secure and protect all records? Have they been gathered and placed in a safe repository?

Deputy James Reilly: The Deputy will be well aware, as we all are, of the cost and duration of previous tribunals. We do not intend to put people through a long process of years before they get the answers they require and resolution they seek. My officials are consulting the Office of the Attorney General on draft wording. The challenge is to draft terms of reference that are inclusive enough to provide an understanding of the relevant issues but also precise enough to allow the commission to complete its work in a timely and cost-effective way. Our approach must have regard to the experience gained in conducting similar investigations, including directions on appropriate methodology for specific strands of the investigation. As well as working closely with officials, my predecessor, Deputy Charles Flanagan, met representatives of a number of key advocacy groups and church leaders, including the Adoption Rights Alliance, First Mothers Group, Bethany Survivors Group, Cúnamh, Adoption Loss and Archbishop Diarmuid Martin. I have also recently met Archbishop Michael Jackson of the Church of Ireland.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The timeframe for these questions does not allow for the searching that needs to take place here. The Minister has not answered the questions I asked about the legislative and logistical challenges he outlined in his initial response. What are we talking about here in real terms? The records are very important and of great concern. Have efforts been made to gather these and place them in safe custody? What is the position on the terms of reference for the commission of inquiry? Will it include the address of the various mother and baby homes, not only the Tuam institution and others, but also the Bethany Home and the Magdalen laundries? What practices will be addressed regarding the years that are to be focused on? Will the Minister clarify exactly which years are to be addressed in the investigation? We had a direct engagement with his predecessors, Deputies Frances Fitzgerald and Charles Flanagan, on these matters. There was an agreement. We made it very clear that we were available, willing and eager to engage throughout the summer recess and I made a number of requests for an opportunity to secure updates from the Minister and his Secretary General over the period, which have yet to be accommodated. It is anything but satisfactory.

Deputy James Reilly: I hope, in the interests of all concerned, that we will continue to co-operate to expedite this as quickly as possible and also to ensure the terms of reference are as comprehensive as possible. Many groups which have an interest are involved, and their interests must be represented. The Deputy has asked me to give specifics, but that would be to pre-empt the Department's work, which will come to a conclusion in the coming weeks. I ask the Deputy to keep his mind open. We will meet him again to discuss it, as we will with other members of the Opposition and other groups which have made representations.

Youth Services Provision

3. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will provide the necessary number of social workers for services for children and youth. [36155/14]

Deputy Tom Fleming: I congratulate the Minister and wish him well in his new Ministry.

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There is a major task ahead, as illustrated by our questions today. I welcome the fact that 100 social workers are to be recruited.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy James Reilly): I thank the Deputy for his question and his wishes of goodwill. At the end of August 2014, there were 1,387.89 whole time equivalent social workers employed at the Child and Family Agency. Staffing vacancies arise for various reasons including retirements, resignations, career breaks, maternity leave and other unpaid leave. A system of risk analysis is in place in each area to ensure that staffing numbers do not fall to an unsafe level and gaps identified through this process are addressed with the additional resources of temporary staff as required. All identified vacancies are the subject of a recruitment process to ensure their filling at the earliest opportunity.

The latest figures available to my Department show 106 social workers have been recruited since the agency was established on 1 January 2014 with a further additional 148 posts currently on offer to candidates or at various stages of recruitment. The agency, as part of its workforce planning strategy, is progressing a number of targeted recruitment initiatives designed to alleviate service pressures. These include the development of a pilot maternity leave cover scheme for social workers, whereby maternity related vacancies can be filled by way of a 12 month temporary contract. Some 30 temporary posts have been put in place across the agency to date under this scheme.

The agency is also developing a one year induction programme which will be targeted at graduate social workers. It is my intention that the agency will progress and build on these recruitment initiatives over the remaining three months of 2014 and throughout 2015 in response to identified need.

Deputy Tom Fleming: Recent statistics from the Child and Family Agency are alarming. Some 3,250 high priority cases identified over the summer are awaiting a response. Some 4,700 cases were deemed to be of medium priority while 1,500 were listed as low priority. The number of children at risk received by social services increased by 98% over the past seven years, from 21,000 to 41,600 in 2013. This gives cause for great concern and needs to be addressed. Budget and staffing levels do not reflect the increased demand and services are coming under severe pressure on a weekly basis. Early intervention is essential to avoid problems escalating through neglect. If there is no intervention, children will naturally end up in care. I ask the Minister to use his office to intervene in this situation immediately, and to give direction and a working plan to address these matters at an early stage.

Deputy James Reilly: The figures mentioned by the Deputy are accurate. There are 3,000 cases which are considered high priority. It is important to note that each of these cases has been reviewed by a social worker and have been triaged. They await the allocation of a full-time social worker. We have issues with recruitment. The issue is not a lack of funding, but rather difficulties in filling some posts. Social work care is not unlike many other aspects of the health service with which the Deputy will be familiar. There are sometimes difficulties in getting doctors to work in particular hospitals or geographic locations. The same can be said of social workers. Some areas are very difficult and the work has an impact on people. That is why there is continuous staff turnover. The funding is in place. The recruitment process is ongoing and has been successful insofar as to date more than 100 social workers have been recruited and are in place. In my reply I referred to a figure of 90 but I understand more than 100 recruitments are currently in process. The matter is being dealt with aggressively.

Deputy Tom Fleming: Front-line services are struggling to deal with the heavy case loads. Resources are scarce. HIQA estimated that some social work teams are operating at 70% of their intended staffing levels and that was having a serious negative effect on the delivery of social services. The Ombudsman for Children, Emily Logan, recently pointed out that she had raised concerns about how continued resource shortages would affect the sector. She has reasons to have concerns as the Child and Family Agency has serious legacy debts and is likely to run more than €20 million over budget by the end of the year. Can the Minister make overtures to the Minister for Finance or obtain the necessary funding in the forthcoming budget? It is needed at an early stage.

Deputy James Reilly: There is no question that we face challenges from a financial point of view. There will always be demand and we need to ensure that the way we are delivering care and services is done in an efficient manner. As is the case in other areas, sometimes social workers are being tasked with other work of a more clerical nature from which they could be freed in order to address the area in which they are skilled. We are examining that and the appropriateness of the roles to try to improve the situation from the point of view of the child.

Areas such as the historic legacy of legal issues are now being addressed by Mr. Gordon Jeyes. The bill will reduce considerably. One firm had not submitted a bill of almost €1 million for nearly four years. It is very difficult to predict with certainty where one is going when such situations arise. I thank Deputy Fleming for the opportunity today to send a message out that we will have to consider, in consultation with the Attorney General, some other arrangement. We demand prompt payment by Government Departments, but there should equally be some onus on those presenting bills to do so in a reasonable and timely fashion. I do not consider the presentation of a bill four years late to be timely and reasonable.

Youth Services

4. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when funding will be provided to the Attic Youth Café in County Longford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36077/14]

Deputy Robert Troy: I do not usually raise individual constituency matters during Priority Questions but the Attic Youth Café in County Longford is a particularly serious issue. It has been repeatedly promised funding by previous Ministers, the Taoiseach and a local Deputy, yet this youth organisation, which works across the social divide, finds itself in extreme financial trouble. The Minister's officials met with the organisation in the past number of weeks and I ask him for an update on the situation.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy James Reilly): This is a very important service for the young people of Longford. It is an issue Deputy James Bannon has brought to my attention repeatedly since I became Minister. I raised the matter with my Department last week.

In 2013, €1.5 million in capital funding was made available to my Department for a youth café scheme. Pobal assisted my Department to administer this scheme. In all, 95 applications with proposals were received and some 30 proposals for new youth café facilities around the country were approved for funding. These projects are now working with Pobal to develop their projects to the next stage of development. An application for funding was received in

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respect of the Attic Youth Café, however the application was deemed ineligible for the scheme.

10 o'clock

Representations on behalf of the project have been received in my Department. Meetings with the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and officials were held in January and in May this year. Officials of my Department and Pobal met the project representatives on 11 September 2014. Officials are now undertaking a full examination of all aspects of this case, including information and documentation provided at the meeting. The outcome of this examination will be communicated to the project in the coming weeks. Pending the outcome of this examination my Department is not in a position to determine what steps, if any, may be available to the proposers to advance the project.

My Department does not have available to it a new capital fund for the development of youth cafés in 2014. It is acknowledged that youth cafés offer young people a safe, alcohol-free and drug-free space for recreation, non-formal learning and youth activities. I wish to record my support for these cafés because many younger people are not terribly interested in sport, even though we would encourage it and they need a safe outlet and a safe place in which to socialise.

Deputy Robert Troy: I had hoped the Minister might enlighten us further. I am aware that Deputy Bannon was involved and he led them to the mess in which they find themselves by promising them in March 2013 that they would get a grant of €100,000. He facilitated a meeting with the then Minister, Deputy Fitzgerald, who confirmed at the meeting that they were eligible in 2013. He brought the Taoiseach to visit the youth café. The Taoiseach is very good at making promises when he is in a constituency and he promised that funding would be available. What is happening in this case is indicative of how this Government treats rural Ireland, with the back of its hand. I refer to the level of funding per person for youth projects received by Longford, which is €29.14, whereas our near neighbours in Westmeath, another part of my constituency, have received €146.88.

Is there a mechanism in place? The youth café works across the social divide. The Minister has alluded to the work of youth cafés in the prevention of drug and alcohol use. The Attic Youth Café is working with the midlands drugs task force and with Foróige. It is involved in providing courses for those who have dropped out of school. What funding will be available from the youth guarantee scheme? What level of funding did the Minister's Department receive from the youth guarantee scheme to support children and youth who find themselves out of employment and who need some support? The Attic Youth Café is a flagship project that could give the people of Longford that much needed support.

Deputy James Reilly: My Department has supported the development of 100 youth cafés over the period 2011 to 2013. The development of youth café facilities will continue to be advanced should further capital funding become available in future years. Longford youth services receives annual funding from my Department under the special projects for youth scheme. Funding of €74,651 has been allocated to Longford youth services in 2014 to support the provision of services to young people in the locality. My Department spends nearly €50 million on youth services annually.

Deputy Robert Troy: I asked about Longford and the Attic Youth Café in particular. There is a very great disparity of funding between counties and it is not fair. What is noticeable is that

the disparity seems to penalise weaker, smaller counties, as in this case. I asked about the youth guarantee funding which comes from Europe. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs was established to deal with children and youth affairs. What is the Department's budget to support children who need support? Can funding can be made available to make this flagship project happen? As the Minister has rightly said, it is a magnificent project which works across the social divide. Based on the 2011 CSO figures, in excess of 50% of our youth population in Longford participate in the project.

Deputy James Reilly: Some of the Deputy's questions relate to specific information which I do not have to hand. I will obtain the information and revert to the Deputy.

Youth Services Provision

5. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will provide adequate funding to the Kerry Diocesan Youth Service to enable the organisation maintain and develop its extensive network of youth facilities in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35758/14]

Deputy Tom Fleming: I ask the Minister if he will provide adequate funding to the Kerry Diocesan Youth Service to enable the organisation to maintain and develop its extensive network of youth facilities in the county.

Deputy James Reilly: My Department administers a range of funding schemes and programmes to support the provision of youth services to young people throughout the country, including those from disadvantaged communities. The funding schemes support national and local youth work provision to 380,000 young people and involve approximately 1,400 youth work staff in 477 projects and 40,000 volunteers working in youth work services and communities throughout the country. In 2014, funding of €49.78 million has been provided to my Department for these schemes. I take this opportunity to thank and encourage the phenomenal volunteerism which exists in this country, which is essential to the success of projects and without which the funding would be less effective. I thank all the volunteers working in these agencies and in the sporting organisations.

Kerry Diocesan Youth Service provides a wide range of services for children, young people and their families throughout County Kerry. Kerry Diocesan Youth Service receives funding from a number of statutory bodies, including the Health Service Executive, for these services. My Department provides funding to Kerry Diocesan Youth Service for youth services under the special projects for youth scheme which supports projects targeting young people who are disadvantaged, including young Travellers and young people who are out of school and at risk of drug or substance abuse or homelessness. Funding is also provided for a youth information centre in Tralee. In 2014, funding of €429,285 has been allocated to Kerry Diocesan Youth Service for these youth services. I am also aware that my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, provides funding to Kerry Diocesan Youth Service through the community programmes unit of the Irish Youth Justice Service, for the operation of Garda youth diversion projects in the county. The question of additional funding to my Department to support the provision of youth services is a matter for consideration in the context of the annual Estimates and budgetary processes and having regard to the resources available to the Government.

Deputy Tom Fleming: Kerry Diocesan Youth Service is a model organisation and an ex-

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ample of what can be done in dealing with youth in areas with significant social problems and where well-supervised recreational facilities are needed. Over the past 25 years, Kerry Diocesan Youth Service has built an extensive network of facilities and social services. The organisation has its headquarters in Killarney and offices in Tralee, Listowel, Castleisland and youth cafés in towns and villages throughout the county. It provides an essential mobile service which goes out to the remote areas and the little villages in all corners of the county.

I welcome the Minister's announcements about funding but the special projects for youth funding and youth information grants have been gradually reduced over the past five or six years with a reduction of 30%. These are core grants and I ask the Minister if he could escalate these grants and perhaps reconsider how they are applied.

Deputy James Reilly: I concur with the Deputy's comments about the service provided by Kerry Diocesan Youth Service through its invaluable work. All these groups are tremendous value for money from the point of view of a return to the taxpayer. It is not just about putting a price on the services they deliver, which can be done, but it is about putting a value on the work they do and the impact they have on the development of children and youth. They have our absolute support. Notwithstanding the fact that the public finances are improving, we still have a fragile economy and we have to make sure the recovery is not endangered in any way. The latitude, therefore, for spending additional sums is limited and my Department is in discussions with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, as we approach the annual Estimates and all these points are being made. We are striving as best we can to ensure no further reduction to service.

Deputy Tom Fleming: Due to the financial shortfall, KDYS has experienced job losses over the past few years, in particular, and the organisation is trying to maintain services, protect, in particular, core services and create new programmes as they emerge. Current State funding is restricting progress and future development. The cuts are destabilising and they undermine the positive plans KDYS has to advance its programmes. It has expanded strong services relating to recreational activities. It is a model organisation and it needs to protect and enhance these structures. I very much welcome the Minister's response but adequate funding will have to be provided for this organisation. We must recognise the great work these people are carrying out in these demanding times for the youth of our country.

Deputy James Reilly: I refer to a breakdown of where the money is going: Killarney & South Kerry Youth Project, €55,183; Listowel-North Kerry Youth Project, €81,576; Sliabh Luachra-Castleisland Youth Project, €74,651; Tralee Youth Development Project, €173,394; and Tralee and Killarney youth information centres, €107,481. We fund a range of services. The youth service grant scheme is in receipt of almost €10 million in 2014 while €14.5 million has been allocated for special youth projects, €18.3 million for rounds 1 and 2 of the Young People's Facilities and Service Fund, €1 million for the local youth clubs grant scheme, €1.234 million for youth information centres, €1.1 million for local drugs task force projects and €630,000 for Gaisce, the President's Award and so on. The commitment of the Department to this area is clear. We greatly value the work these organisations do and we strive in every way we can to support them.

Other Questions

Questions Nos. 6 and 7 replied to with Written Answers.

Dáil Éireann
Preschool Services

8. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children with special needs accessing mainstream preschool education and the plans in place to provide the additional supports required to facilitate children with additional needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35730/14]

Deputy Robert Troy: The question relates to the scenario in which children with special educational needs access preschool education. What plans has the Department put in place to provide additional supports to children with special educational needs?

Deputy James Reilly: I thank the Deputy for his question. My Department implements the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme, which provides a free preschool year to all eligible children before they commence primary school. The programme is a free and universal provision to which all children have access.

A number of additional provisions have been added to ensure the ECCE programme is more accessible to children with special needs. These include an exemption from the upper age limit for qualification under the programme where a child would benefit from starting primary school at a later age. In addition, children with special needs can apply to have the preschool year split over two years on a *pro rata* basis, for example, availing of the programme for two days a week in the first year and for three days a week in the second year.

I am aware that the Health Service Executive does, where possible, provide additional supports to children with special needs to enable them to avail of preschool services in mainstream preschool settings. My Department has been working with the Department of Health in the context of building better supports to facilitate children with special needs. The aim is to develop an agreed framework for the provision of resources to support special needs children in mainstream child care settings. However, the issue of supports for children with special needs availing of services in mainstream child care settings remains a matter for the Department of Health and the HSE.

Figures relating to special needs children availing of the ECCE programme are not collated by my Department. However Pobal, which assists my Department in the implementation of child care programmes, conducts an annual survey of the early years sector. According to its 2013 report, of the 2,592 respondents to the survey, 1,254 services reported that they have at least one child with a disability in attendance. A total of 3,899 children with disabilities of varying types were accessing their services.

Deputy Robert Troy: Who has statutory responsibility? Is it the HSE or the Department of Education and Skills? Neither of them claims responsibility. Currently, the provision of services is disjointed throughout the country. In a number of counties, service provision is positive while in others, it is poor. The Minister alluded to the Pobal survey that was published during the summer which highlighted that 1,254 services reported that they had at least one child with a disability and there were a total of 3,899 children with varying disabilities in services. If one extrapolates those figures based on the 61% response rate, it means that more than 6,000 children with a disability attend these services. When I asked the Minister's predecessor last year the number of children with a disability who were availing of the preschool year over two years, to which he alluded, she replied it was only approximately 260. Given that according to the Pobal survey, approximately 6,000 children with special education needs avail of these

services, why are only 260 children availing of the preschool year over two years?

Deputy James Reilly: One should be careful about extrapolating the figures based on the survey because that may not be accurate. I do not say that is unreasonable but it may not be accurate. We are reviewing this area because the Government is keen to support a second free preschool year at some point in the future and there is concern among providers that we need to address inconsistencies in quality, inspections and standards before introducing a second year. That work is ongoing. I have had meetings with the representative bodies and I have listened to their concerns. It is well accepted that we need to conduct the review before we move forward.

There are 4,300 child care services and almost all the preschool services in the country participate in the ECCE programme.

Deputy Robert Troy: I am aware of the major problems with quality and so on. I did not refer to the introduction of a second free preschool year. I asked about how the Department will support children with special educational needs who cannot avail of the current preschool year, which is the primary problem. What does that say about the Government's inclusion policy?

The Minister did not answer the question about who has statutory responsibility for this area. Is it the HSE or the Department of Education and Skills? A national inclusion policy is needed to ensure these children receive the necessary supports and to ensure a uniform approach throughout the country. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act must also be implemented in full to provide legislative back-up. Is the Minister aware that service providers are legally entitled to refuse to accept a child with special educational needs seeking to avail of the free preschool year if the necessary supports are not available?

Deputy James Reilly: I reiterate that the initial supports for children with special needs availing of services in mainstream child care settings remain a matter for the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive. I hope that clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Department and HSE have statutory responsibility.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 9 in the name of Deputy Clare Daly cannot be taken as the Deputy is not present in the Chamber.

Question No. 9 replied to with Written Answers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 10 in the name of Deputy Timmins cannot be taken as the Deputy is not present in the Chamber.

Question No. 10 replied to with Written Answers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 11 is in the name of Deputy Troy.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: This is some lottery.

Deputy Robert Troy: Sometimes it goes in our favour and sometimes it goes against us.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: That certainly seems to be the case.

Child Protection Services

11. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the action he proposes to take following the Child and Family Agency reporting that over 9,000 instances of abuse or neglect involving children are awaiting a social worker to be assigned to the case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35728/14]

Deputy Robert Troy: This question, which is similar to one of the priority questions I tabled, relates to a report that a social worker has not been assigned to more than 9,000 cases of abuse or neglect involving children. I ask the Minister to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy James Reilly: Measuring the Pressure, a report prepared by the Child and Family Agency, indicates that at the end of June 2014, the agency was providing 19,766 children with a social work service. The report also highlights the increasing service challenge facing the agency, with 9,548 cases waiting to be allocated to a dedicated social worker. Approximately one third of these were deemed to be high priority. These cases represent a mix of new referrals that need further assessment and social work input and children known to the agency who need a continuing social work service. It is important to note that a duty social worker has been involved in these cases.

I am assured by the Child and Family Agency that emergency cases are dealt with immediately and high priority cases are kept under review. We must ensure the most vulnerable children in our society receive a timely and appropriate response. The data and analysis contained in the Measuring the Pressure report provide critical management information to assist the agency in service planning and resource allocation.

This year, the Child and Family Agency is in receipt of funding of €6.7 million to alleviate identified service pressures and support the continuing implementation of the reform programme across children and family services. This funding is being targeted at a number of areas, including the replacement of staff on maternity leave by way of a 12 month temporary contract. The most recent figures indicate that at the end of August, 164 staff were on maternity leave, 82 of whom were social workers.

The Child and Family Agency is also finalising proposals for the introduction of a guaranteed and protected one year induction programme for newly qualified social workers. These initiatives are designed to assist the agency in responding to identified service pressures and to provide for a targeted response to such pressures, taking account of identified need and available resources.

Deputy Robert Troy: There is no doubt that the shortage of social workers is leaving children in a vulnerable position and placing them at risk. Social workers on the front line inform me that they are at their wits' end and do not see any light at the end of the tunnel. They have spoken of leaving their offices on Friday evenings with bundles of case files. Their role has become one of fighting fires rather than taking preventative measures, which is what they should be doing.

The Minister referred to the number of social workers on maternity leave. What is the total number of social workers employed by the Child and Family Agency? Has the agency reached the full complement of social workers promised when it was established?

Deputy James Reilly: As I indicated in response to previous questions, additional posts

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have been filled and recruitment is under way for additional posts. To be specific, 106 social work posts were filled by the Child and Family Agency in the first eight months of 2014 and a further 148 posts are at various stages of recruitment. The Deputy asked how many social workers are employed in total. The Child and Family Agency employed 1,388 whole-time equivalent social workers as at the end of August 2014.

A rigorous system of risk analysis has been established in each area to ensure that staffing numbers do not fall to an unsafe level. Gaps identified through this process are addressed with the additional resources of temporary staff, as required. All identified vacancies are the subject of a recruitment process to ensure they are filled at the earliest opportunity.

Deputy Robert Troy: May I assume from the Minister's reply that there are no vacant social work posts in the Child and Family Agency and the agency has achieved its full staff complement in the area of social work?

Deputy James Reilly: It would be extremely devious of the Deputy to so do.

Deputy Robert Troy: I asked the question because I am seeking certainty about this issue. How many positions are vacant? Has a panel been established from which social workers taking maternity leave can be replaced? I understand that professionals are not replaced when they take a career break or maternity leave, as they are entitled to do, or are absent from work due to long-term illness. As a result, the number of staff working on the ground does not correlate with the number of posts in the Child and Family Agency. What action will be taken to ensure the full complement of social workers is reached? When will the recruitment process for hiring social workers transfer from the Health Service Executive to the new Child and Family Agency?

Deputy James Reilly: I reiterate that a further 148 posts are at various stages of recruitment. Vacancies are, therefore, awaiting filling while the recruitment process proceeds. As I indicated in previous replies, it is difficult to recruit social workers in some areas for various reasons, just as it is difficult to recruit doctors in some areas. The bottom line is that 106 social work posts were filled by the Child and Family Agency in the first eight months of this year and a further 148 are at various stages of the recruitment process.

Deputy Troy asked about other initiatives in areas such as maternity leave. The Child and Family Agency is finalising proposals, at my request, arising from the provision of additional funding for the targeted recruitment of graduate social workers. This initiative will involve the introduction of a guaranteed and protected one year induction programme for newly qualified social workers. Discussions with IMPACT and other parties are ongoing and the merits of the scheme will be clear when the details are finalised.

Child Poverty

12. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs his strategy for addressing child poverty in the short term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35760/14]

Deputy Tom Fleming: I ask the Minister to set out his strategy for addressing the growing problems of child poverty and food poverty.

Deputy James Reilly: Support for families who require income support to meet basic needs

is provided through the social welfare system, which is the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister for Social Protection. A range of income supports is available to parents who are unemployed or on low incomes. The Department of Social Protection also has lead responsibility for the national action plan for social inclusion. As provided for in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 - 2020, the Department of Social Protection, under commitment 4.2, has lead responsibility for a national child-specific social target to lift 70,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020, a reduction of at least two thirds on the 2011 level. This target will include reducing the poverty rate for households with children, which is consistently higher when compared with households without children and for children as compared with adults. It is expected that this commitment will be addressed on a cross-departmental basis.

My Department is working on a number of initiatives which are relevant in addressing issues related to children poverty. It is, for example, leading the implementation of the area based childhood programme, better known as the ABC programme. The programme is being co-funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and will have a total funding allocation of up to €29.7 million. The programme draws on best international practice to break the cycle of child poverty where it is most deeply entrenched and improve the outcomes for children and young people and existing services.

In terms of other provision, my Department is spending €260 million annually on three child care support programmes which provide child care to 100,000 children. A number of these programmes are targeted at those on lowest incomes. My Department also provides funding for targeted support for disadvantaged, marginalised and at-risk young people through three schemes. The three programmes are the special projects for youth scheme, the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund and the local drugs task forces. In addition, national and regional youth work organisations are supported under my Department's youth service grant scheme. In 2014, current funding of €49.78 million has been provided to my Department for these schemes.

Deputy Tom Fleming: A recent research report states that almost one in five teachers stated that they have seen an increase in the number of children arriving at school hungry over the past year. The study polled more than 500 primary and secondary schoolteachers. Some 40% stated that they had taken food into the school for a child who was regularly hungry. That is a serious indictment of society. Some 19% of teachers stated that they saw children arrive hungry for lessons every day, while one in three teachers stated that they had children falling asleep in the classroom due to a lack of food and to neglect. Another survey also confirmed that one in five children goes to bed hungry because of the lack of food in the house.

The Minister quite correctly stated that the Department of Social Protection has a responsibility and that there are services provided by that Department, but perhaps there is a need for an awareness campaign as well. I would ask the Minister to liaise with the Department of Social Protection and endeavour in the forthcoming budget to get more relevant funding to address the issue that is growing by the week.

Deputy James Reilly: Through the implementation of the Department's document, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, and its supporting strategies, the Government aims to achieve the following transformational goals to support the achievement of better outcomes for all children and to address the concerns that Deputy Tom Fleming raised. One of the most important aspects to address in this context is support for the parents. Parents will experience improved support in the important task of parenting and feel more confident, informed and able. These

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are the goals. As I mentioned, a key target for earlier intervention and prevention is to lift more than 70,000 children out of consistent poverty. The programme also focuses on issues such as improving access to affordable early years education and addressing childhood obesity and youth mental health issues. It seeks to shift the emphasis from crisis intervention to prevention and early intervention.

We want to promote a culture that listens to and involves children and young people. The Government will promote a culture which not only recognises, protects and fulfils the rights of children and young people, but also encourages them to become actively involved in public life. Last week there was a good event run by UNICEF at which more than 150 children expressed their will and desires and what they felt were the priorities, not only on national issues but also global ones.

Deputy Tom Fleming: Much of this is generated by difficulties faced by what is called the squeezed middle. I would refer to these as being the new poor. In many cases, they are good members of society who have played their part down through the years in being model members of their communities. At present, they are faced with considerable difficulties and problems. I refer to all their overheads, not only mortgages but charges for various services, increasing taxes and crèche costs. Preschool costs are also on the up. Many of these parents are perhaps a little embarrassed to come forward and seek help from social services and the Department of Social Protection. We need to identify the root of the problem. Something must be done. The children are victims. I ask the Minister to use his good offices to correct matters in this regard.

Deputy James Reilly: I thank Deputy Fleming for his comments. It is a serious matter, from the Government's perspective, to help the parents of whom he speaks who have worked so hard and sacrificed so much in helping the economy recover. That is why it is so important in the budget that our focus will be on continuing reform of the tax system in order that more unemployed people are encouraged to go back to work, because every person who comes off the live register saves the taxpayer €20,000 per annum and that funding then becomes available for the services the Deputy mentioned. The Government's aim is to continue the recovery of the economy to the benefit of the people and not only for the benefit of the economy itself.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 13 is in the name of Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan. Deputy O'Sullivan is not present and we will go on to Question No. 14.

Question No. 13 replied to with Written Answers.

Departmental Expenditure

14. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will provide a Supplementary Estimate for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, in 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35727/14]

Deputy Robert Troy: This is somewhat similar to the question I asked earlier. It relates to the provision of a Supplementary Estimate for Tusla, the new Child and Family Agency, in 2014. If the Minister was not able an hour ago to give me a definitive answer on whether a Supplementary Estimate brought forward would be forward at the end of this year, I doubt he will have his mind made up. All the same, maybe we can hear what he has to say.

Deputy James Reilly: As I mentioned already, the financial allocation for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, in 2014, its first year of operation, was set at €609 million. This comprised €602 million in current funding and €7 million in capital funding. It is acknowledged that delivering the range of services required of the agency within this budget is challenging. Notwithstanding the significant level of resources provided, certain areas of expenditure, such as legal costs, which we covered already, have in the past proven difficult to manage within the allocated budget. It is also noted that other areas of expenditure, such as private residential and foster care, have experienced strong demand in 2014.

The agency is implementing significant reform to seek to achieve greater value for money and efficiencies in such areas and the progress in this regard is subject to ongoing monitoring and review with my Department. This is an issue about which Mr. Gordon Jeyes is extremely concerned and is working hard to address. Officials in my Department continue to monitor closely the cash position of the agency and are working with the agency to determine an evidence-based full year cash requirement. No final determination has yet been reached in this regard.

In the event that supplementary funding is required to meet the running costs of the agency in 2014, the matter will be discussed with Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as part of the ongoing budgetary discussions.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister was the Minister for Health at the time the new agency was set up and its remit transferred from that Department to Tusla. Is he satisfied the new agency was left to carry over a deficit? Surely, the new agency should have started off afresh with a blank sheet. That would have sent a clear signal that we want this agency to work.

I accept the issue of legal costs has been ongoing for several years but that does not mean it should not be tackled. In fact, it has not been tackled over the past four years. Two years ago, an article in *The Sunday Business Post* pointed out the legal fees came to €35 million in 2011 alone, much of which was made up in payments to guardians *ad litem*. What has been done to tackle these exorbitant legal fees? What were the legal fees for 2011 to 2014, inclusive? Is this issue being tackled and have they been reduced year on year for the past several years?

Deputy James Reilly: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue as it concerns us all. The legal fees issue is being addressed with steps taken including the negotiation of reduced fees and stricter controls on accessing legal advice. Sometimes one has to question the necessity of the use of a legal team in certain matters. It is often a case of if you are lawyered up, then I have to be lawyered up too, a scenario that is being addressed.

I will do my best to get the breakdown of the amounts of moneys spent on legal fees. There will have to be a breakdown in previous Health Service Executive bills that relate to child care issues. The Deputy knows my view that moneys spent on medical-legal compensation should be going to victims, not to the legal profession with no disrespect to it. That issue is being actively addressed by Mr. Gordon Jeyes and is one of the top items on his agenda.

A commissioning strategy is being developed for the issuing of grants to ensure the most effective use of available resources. Much work has to be done to bring about measurable evidence-based outcomes. While we can have a sense that these services are delivering in a great way, some elements may not be achieving the outcomes we want and others could be promoted more if we had measured outcomes. Much work will be done with these services, particularly

youth services.

Deputy Robert Troy: It is extremely important to tackle the waste through exorbitant legal fees. I do not accept the Minister will try his best to ascertain the figures involved. They should be readily available and we should know what is being spent by the Department in any given year in any particular area on legal fees. I got them before and I hope the Minister's office will make them available again. I also hope they will show a downward trajectory and that the issue is being tackled. It is not right or proper to see that level of funding being spent at any time but particularly at a time when our budgets are under so much pressure and when the numbers of children in care have increased from 5,247 in 2005 to 6,460 in 2013. This is also a time when there has been a 91% increase in reported child protection issues while the number of social workers remains static. The workload has doubled for the same workforce but this cannot continue.

Deputy James Reilly: If the figures are readily available, the Deputy will have them. If not, he will not. Given what I said earlier, it is not reasonable to expect we would have completeness in this when some people do not submit their bills for four years.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister should know what was spent, however.

Deputy James Reilly: Yes, we can tell the Deputy what was paid. However, if X million euro is spent this year for bills for services incurred three years ago, how will that inform the Deputy what were the actual legal costs incurred in this year alone? I hope he accepts this point.

On the 91% increase in reported cases, much has changed since 2005 with the Ryan report and other issues leading to a greater awareness of the issue of child abuse and neglect. There is a much greater willingness to report than before. There has also been an increase in the child population with the welcome increase in the birth rate. This presents difficulties in the workload for child care social workers. That is why we need to ensure social workers are freed up to do the work they are specifically trained to do and not get side-tracked by administrative duties that others could be doing. Traditionally because they have not had that support, they might be spending some time on that area. That is not a criticism of social workers. It is the situation in which they find themselves. It is our job to support them and allow them do the work they alone can do.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Sport Ireland Bill 2014: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy David Stanton: The Irish Sports Council defines sport as 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.

We must be careful that we do not make sport too competitive at a young age which may lead to youngsters being excluded from sport if they are seen not to be good at it. It has been noted that some youngsters might not be good at a certain age but peak later at 18, 19 or 20. There is a sport for every age in life. Other Members spoke about sports for those with disabilities and we must ensure services are provided in this regard.

There is a concern that young people give up sport when they are doing the leaving certificate because of perceived pressures from academia, as well as the need to get good results and spend time studying. My experience as a teacher indicates that young people involved in sport also do well in their academic studies because sport acts as a catalyst to give them more energy, interest and to be more positive in their outlook. I would like to see some form of credits at leaving certificate level for young people involved in physical activity to encourage more participation in sports. I know the Gaisce awards are in place. We must balance the academic pressure faced by students at leaving certificate level in particular. Everyone should be involved in some form of sport and if young people are involved in sport at some level perhaps we could consider giving them credit or points towards the leaving certificate. Education is about the whole person and we now know that physical activity is a very important part of preparing for life, which is the purpose of education.

I spoke yesterday about alcohol and the below-cost sale of it. Reference was made to the positive role of sport as a deterrent from use and abuse of alcohol. Other studies indicate it also has a beneficial effect in terms of leading people away from delinquency and crime.

I also raised the need to expand the swimming pool programme. The economic value of sport is interesting. In 2008 an Indecon study concluded that Irish households spent more than €1.8 billion on sporting activities and that sport brings in more than €200 million into the economy per year. The volunteer element of sport, which is very important, is valued at between €322 million and €582 million annually.

Sports partnerships operate all over the country. They were established by the Irish Sports Council. They are very important and do a very good job. They bring sport to the most local level possible. The Minister of State should be aware they probably need more support in terms of resources and focus in the work they do. I would like to see mechanisms put in place whereby encouragement is provided for the formation of clubs for minority sports such as badminton and table tennis. Such sports cost very little and local sports partnerships could be funded in order to provide funding for a badminton club or basketball club to start up. All that is required is a few nets and some rackets. Small amounts of money could help get clubs started. They might also need help with the rental of premises but once they start up they would form a dynamic of their own. We should devise a programme to promote that aim. Doping is addressed in the Bill, which is very important to preserve the integrity of Irish sport. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: Thank you, Acting Chairman, and congratulations on your elevation to the acting Chair. I wish you well in the new role you have taken on.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Derek Keating): I thank Deputy Flanagan.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: Like previous speakers I welcome the Bill, which will bring about a merger between the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority. Any merger which will result in efficiencies, improvements and shared services, in particular at a time when money is scarce – as the Minister of State is very well aware – is to be welcomed. I congratulate the Minister of State on his recent reappointment to the position. As Minister of State with responsibility for sport I am aware he has a huge passion for sport. I often see him on TV at various events that take place. He puts a lot of time and effort into promoting sport in Ireland. He is very suited to the role he has taken on.

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The creation of a single entity, sport Ireland, will make a difference. The sports campus at Blanchardstown is one where world-class training will be provided for sports people in future. The National Aquatic Centre is located there and the diving training centre, the horse sport arena and the pentathlon centre are already constructed. They are very much state of the art and will help elite sports people to compete at the highest level and to stay in this country and achieve excellent results.

A new national indoor athletics track, an indoor sports centre and a gymnastics training centre have been provided for in the budget. Could the Minister of State provide an update on how the work is progressing? The previous speaker referred to indoor sports such as basketball, badminton, squash and handball. What assistance will be provided for such fringe sports in the national sports arena to encourage more participation in them? Has a study been carried out on the number of sports in which the country competes internationally? If we have the information we could dedicate the small resources we have to certain sports such as boxing, sailing and equestrian sports in order to achieve the best results in areas that provide the best opportunity for achieving medals, for example, in the Olympics. There is a case to be made for us to focus more on an international level on the sports in which we achieve more success. It is important that sport is funded adequately in this country. We want to see more sports people competing and doing the country proud, as it brings great pride to the country and we all get a lift in our spirits when Irish athletes compete and do well internationally.

Childhood obesity is linked to children not competing in sports. They play computer games indoors rather than play outside. Has the Minister of State given any thought to having a national sports day to encourage schoolchildren to compete? Perhaps he would even tog out himself in order to encourage more participation in sport which is good for health and physical and mental well-being. Obesity is a scourge among children at present. We must take more preventative action in order to keep people out of hospital so as to avoid further strains on hospital resources in the future.

Sports clubs and organisations are the cornerstones of our communities and provide an important outlet for local residents to socialise. Sports clubs bring communities together. We are all familiar with the GAA and the great impact it has had on the country. Everyone gets involved and follows the local parish team. It is the same with soccer clubs. Such participation very much helps communities.

Sports grants, in particular the sports capital funding scheme, which the Minister of State has reopened – there have already been two rounds – have been most successful. I congratulate the Minister of State on all the work he has done in that regard. I accept the resources are limited and it is difficult to please everyone. It is important that all parts of the country get a fair crack of the whip. In my constituency, football clubs in particular have benefitted, for example, Kilbarrack United FC, Mid Sutton FC, St Malachy's in Edenmore and Howth Celtic. Other local sporting organisations that have benefitted include Howth Yacht Club and the sailing and boating club, Trinity Boys boxing club, Clontarf tennis club, Clontarf yacht club and Suttonians Hockey Club in Sutton. A number of local GAA clubs were also successful with their funding applications, including Parnell's in Coolock. I am not sure whether the Minister of State has had an opportunity to visit the club yet but it is a fine establishment that is doing great work in helping young children to compete in Gaelic games. As the Minister of State is aware, such work is very important for various reasons. I hope there will be a programme next year and in the coming years. The fund provides great help and support to clubs badly in need of investment to keep games alive.

11 o'clock

The Irish rugby teams, both women and men, have done very well in recent years. The captain of the Irish women's rugby team, Fiona Coghlan, hails from my constituency of Dublin Bay North, so I kept a close eye on the great success of the team in defeating New Zealand and reaching the semi-finals of the Rugby World Cup. Raheny United is a football club in my constituency that is doing well at its level of the Champions League.

I hope the success of Irish sportsmen and women nationally and internationally encourages more people to get involved in sport. Sport has a positive effect on health and provides a social outlet that allows people to meet in sports clubs and the like. Lifelong friendships can be made between sporting competitors.

Regarding the Bill, I note that the Minister will appoint the first chief executive officer, CEO, and that thereafter the board will appoint his or her successors. Will the Oireachtas committee have a role to play in this process? Will the appointment of a specific nominee be debated in the committee before it is decided? What efficiencies will come about as a result of the merger? Will there be redundancies or will savings be achieved through natural wastage over time? I know, for example, there will only be one CEO, rather than the two currently employed, so that is a saving in terms of management. More information would be helpful.

Alcohol sponsorship in sport is a thorny subject, as the Minister of State is aware, and I know this country has an unhealthy relationship with alcohol. However, alcohol companies are providing funding to sport that is needed by various organisations but is there a plan to wean them from such sponsorship and remove alcohol from the sports equation? I know this will take time but I believe a working group in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department of the Taoiseach is examining this subject. Can the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, give us a report on this?

I am sure the Acting Chairman, Deputy Derek Keating, is delighted that Dublin will host Euro 2020 matches and I too welcome this news as it is a boost for Dublin. I congratulate the Minister of State on this legislation, wish him well and ask that he respond to the issues I raised.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important Bill, which has been brought forward by the Minister of State, Deputy Ring. The legislation will establish sport Ireland by combining the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority and this is a significant move that fits the Government's policy of streamlining national organisations and agencies. Bringing together two organisations with such expertise will give a better focus on the development of sports policy in Ireland as they have separate skill sets.

When I was a child little thought was given to sport and it was not very developed. We did some running during the community games and that was about all we did so it is incredible how things have changed in a short amount of time. We now focus on developing elite athletes while encouraging young people to achieve all they can at the highest level they can attain, be that local or amateur level. When I was young the focus was on community and amateur sports but there would be a burst of national pride when an individual won an Olympic medal for running, boxing or the like. We did not understand how people reached such a level or who encouraged them to do so. We did not think we could achieve such feats because we did not have role models.

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The approach today is more sophisticated and our understanding of the role of sport in society has improved. Today some individuals pursue excellence on the world stage while others are encouraged, through engagement with local communities, to attain at different levels, regardless of the type of sport in question, whether it be soccer, GAA, boxing, swimming or cycling. Nowadays even a weekly walk or a rare jog is considered to be sport as they are part of the overall sporting picture in the country. This sporting picture applies to everyone. Whatever level a person can attain, he or she should participate in sport at some level, regardless of age or sex. It is important to realise that clubs and sporting organisations need support.

The reintroduction of sports capital grants was good recognition of the opportunity presented when clubs apply for funding. There was a fantastic response to the scheme from clubs and this shows the commitment that exists. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, on reintroducing this in recent years. A cross-section of clubs in Offaly - from handball clubs to boxing clubs to soccer and GAA clubs - applied for and received funding. Some clubs were left disappointed and this is a pity, but there were many successful applicants and I was heartened to see the variety of proposals received. For example, clubs with extensive sports pitches are using the space around the pitches to give safe access for walking and running. There is so much traffic on roads now that this offers a safe alternative to those who were put off such free and easy exercise. I commend the clubs that are diversifying and making walking and running tracks available for entire communities. Once upon a time there was much talk of insurance and restricted access due to fear of twisted ankles and so on, but this has been overcome. It goes to show the commitment in communities to equal access for all. Most of these clubs have access for disabled people too, and this is very important so that they can get fresh air and exercise like everyone else.

On the subject of disability, I hope that Sport Ireland will ensure that any sports facilities that are being constructed, from pitches to national stadiums, will be accessible to people with disabilities. Designs must be adequate to ensure people with disabilities can participate and view in comfort, like everyone else. I had the privilege of launching the Irish Wheelchair Association's building guidelines, which were produced for the building industry. These guidelines were produced after wide consultation with all of its members. It is difficult to believe that despite the fact it has been producing these guidelines for so many years errors are still being made in designing sporting buildings and other buildings throughout the country. When people produce plans to develop pitches or new stadia they should ensure they are disability-proofed by using these fantastic guidelines produced by the people who know exactly what they need. I would like these guidelines to be a module in every course for every planner, architect and engineer throughout the country so they would be very familiar with the needs of people with disabilities. The association was very complimentary about Croke Park and the wonderful work done when it was being developed. The Aviva Stadium has also been made very accessible for people with disabilities and they can view sporting events the same as everybody else.

Access to sporting opportunities is different in various parts of the country and we need to focus in particular on access for young women. By having role models such as Katie Taylor we have seen an upsurge and interest in young women's boxing. I had the privilege of presenting the national jerseys to our team which went to Assisi earlier this year and returned with four medals. Young fit women from throughout the country committed to training and aiming for the top and they were an inspiration. One of them is from Edenderry in Offaly and she returned with a medal, which was wonderful. St. Mary's boxing club there is doing wonderful work in supporting them. A young woman from Tullamore, Gráinne Walsh, also won a gold medal.

These young people are committed to training and aiming for the top and the fact they have role models encourages them to participate at this level.

The anti-doping aspect of the Bill is most welcome and critical with regard to education and a commitment to link with the international community on measures to prevent doping. We are all agreed that sport is good for us, whether one participates in it or not. The terrible negativity associated with being involved with doping and cheating is a disgrace for the athletes, their clubs and the country. Every effort needs to be made to link all of the sporting organisations and share data with An Garda Síochána so people can compete cleanly on a level playing field. Whistleblowers need to be listened to in the sporting arena also. We have heard about many people raising a flag and stating something is not right and being ignored. They have been proven to be right in the long term and we need to think carefully about this.

I welcome the announcement yesterday by the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, on the valuation legislation with regard to clubs only paying rates on the part of the club generating income. This will be very welcome because it has been a concern for many clubs which have made a huge effort to build and develop their facilities.

It would not be fair to speak about sport without reflecting on the wonderful successes of our Paralympians and Special Olympians. This week we had tremendous success in the Special Olympics. I will be parochial again and refer to Conor Dwyer from Birr, County Offaly who brought home gold in swimming. His family and the entire community are proud of him and what a tremendous achievement it is.

As a society we must reflect that participation in sport enhances everybody's quality of life, whatever one's capability or capacity and whether one is aiming for elite sport or just going for a run every week. One's quality of life is much better as a result of participating. It would be good for us all in the long term if we participated a bit more in sport. The knock-on effects in health are well documented.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. I commend the Minister of State on the outstanding work he has done on it. It bodes very well for future sporting policy development in Ireland.

Deputy Brian Walsh: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this important legislation. The Sport Ireland Bill will see the amalgamation of two prestigious bodies that have made a considerable contribution to sports in the country since their initiation. The Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority, NSCDA, have overseen the development and growth of sports in their respective remits, and their functions will now be assumed by spórt Éireann.

At times of economic crisis and social change, it is easy to overlook sport and underestimate its importance and afford all other areas a priority. While economic recovery has no doubt retained the focus of the Government since it assumed office three and a half years ago, if we were to neglect the area of sport it would very much be at our peril. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, and his officials in particular on keeping the focus on sport and fighting tooth and nail to ensure it got its fair share. The Minister of State has been responsible for not one round of sports capital funding but two rounds and I know it is his intention to seek support for a third round before the Government leaves office.

Visitors from Newbridge College in County Kildare have just left the Visitors Gallery. Time

and again experts tell us it is not a young person's level of academic ability that determines his or her success but rather his or her level of self-confidence and self-belief and the social skills acquired as he or she develops. These are the qualities which determine future success in our young people. Sporting clubs throughout the country and the Minister of State have done a huge amount in very difficult times over the past three and a half years to nurture, encourage and develop these qualities in our young people. This is the ultimate achievement of any sporting organisation.

There is a firmly established correlation between the level of physical activity of a population and its standard of health. The most effective vehicle for encouraging people, particularly young people, to increase their level of activity is sport. There is also a link between the level of participation in sporting activities and reductions in tobacco, drug and alcohol use. It also creates an awareness of the importance of good nutrition and has a positive impact on integration and social environments. These are all key societal objectives of any responsible government, and its lead agency in this area is therefore one of considerable importance. Spórt Éireann will assume this role.

Unfortunately, studies have consistently shown that the number of Irish adults who regularly engage in a desirable level of physical activity is too low. In 2007, the proportion of adults exercising at least three days a week was just over 40%. Similarly alarming is the fact that this figure had not changed over the previous ten years. In 2002 it stood at 40% and in 1998 the figure was 38%. However, through increased levels of participation in sports from a young age people can learn the importance of physical exercise, and this figure can be improved upon in the future.

Participation in sporting activities, of course, reduces the risk of chronic diseases and is an essential tool in our bid to combat obesity. Equally, at a time when mental health is such an increasingly urgent issue, the importance of sport and physical activity in addressing related problems cannot be underestimated. The effective management and promotion of sports in the country is central to capitalising on all of these benefits and this serves to highlight the importance of the legislation which the Minister of State has brought before us.

The Government recognises the importance of sport and the role it has to play in maintaining a healthy population and in fostering social cohesion. Enormous credit is due to the Minister of State who has overseen effective and substantial investment in Irish sport and recreation services over the past three years. In my constituency, I have worked very closely with a number of clubs and organisations that have benefitted under the sports capital programmes in recent years. These include clubs such as Claregalway GAA, St. James GAA, Mervue United, Salthill-Knocknacarra GAA and Galway Rowing Club.

The sports capital programme has been spread evenly throughout the country. I was in Belmullet - in Blacksod - at the weekend and I noticed that the Minister of State did not leave out Mayo; there has been a huge investment in sporting clubs in Mayo and some very fine facilities have been developed across the country. These clubs provide wonderful role models for us all and particularly for our young people who now more than ever require role models. They were very significant investments because sport is just as important in the community as it is at a national level. Having been involved in these organisations I can see how the investment in clubs in many areas has had a very positive impact on teams, communities and individuals. The Minister of State, Deputy Ring, and the officials in his Department obviously have a great appreciation of the importance of that and it has seen him succeed in maintaining a substantial

level of investment in sport in spite of the background of serious challenges with finances he would have faced.

Sports Ireland will have a parallel complementary role to play at community and national level. At national level the agency will have an important part to play in preparing for Euro 2020 when the eyes of the world will be on us in Ireland as we host matches in the group and last-16 stages of that competition. That obviously will be a massive occasion for the country and for Dublin. Our success in demonstrating our ability to cater for events of that scale will open the doors in future for similar and bigger opportunities. Galway city very successfully hosted the Volvo Ocean Race and the Minister of State presented the winning team with that prestigious award. That showcased Galway and demonstrated the city's ability to host these big events. So successful was that initial event that we won the right to host the finale on a second occasion. It was a huge boost for Galway city and the region.

There is immense economic and reputational value in hosting these events and this new body will have an important role to play in facilitating future events of this nature. The role of sport Ireland in promoting participation in sport at community level must never be neglected at the cost of its activities on the national or international stage. I welcome the Bill and I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Derek Keating): The next speaker is Deputy O'Reilly, who is sharing time with Deputy Butler. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Joe O'Reilly: I welcome the legislation. The objective of the Bill is to provide for the dissolution of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority with their merger into the new sport Ireland body. It designates sport Ireland as the national anti-doping agency. The legislation allows for retaining the current master plan for the National Sports Campus. Those are laudable objectives.

The main principle of the new body is to be responsible for the development and co-ordination of sport in Ireland and the campus. It is also part of the rationalisation of bodies proposed by the Minister, Deputy Howlin, in the public reform plan 2011 with the objective of focusing on customer service, new ways of doing things and an emphasis on delivery. Those are laudable objectives. The objectives the Minister, Deputy Howlin, set there are very important and worthwhile and should be implemented. This is another example of that.

One of the main functions of sport Ireland will be to encourage recreational sport, as well as competitive sport and getting sponsorship. Recreational sport is of enormous importance. An emphasis on participation is very important in the fight against obesity. It is self-evident how it impacts in that regard. It is very important to develop a range of activities to which many people can relate and involve themselves in, including cycling. I am very happy that in my county since the Government came into office, we have provided many cycle lanes in our towns and hinterland. Walking trails are important and my county council is doing considerable work in that regard. Mass participation in walking is important. All of these activities are important for health and for self-confidence in our young people and their capacity to avoid substance abuse etc.

I pay particular tribute to the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, who has been extraordinarily effective and dynamic in his Ministry. In the context of the times in which he has functioned, he has been particularly effective. The actual value of the sports capital grants is inestimable. We

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have had two rounds of them under the stewardship of the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, and we are heading into another one, we hope. They have done an enormous job. In partnership with the Minister of State and through assisting clubs with applications and empowering clubs in so far as I and my office could, I am delighted to say a large number of clubs from a diverse range of sports, backgrounds and activities, from urban, rural and different socioeconomic areas etc. in my constituency have benefitted greatly from sports capital grants. I salute the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, for that.

Far better than any platitudinous remarks about sports or grand speeches is to provide people with the wherewithal. We are now building the facilities and providing floodlighting for use in the winters, Tartan tracks and other infrastructure to allow for mass participation in sport. I am very proud to see this activity, which of course is labour intensive in many instances and creating jobs, but very importantly allows for mass participation in sport. It is an enormous achievement and one of which the Minister of State and the rest of the Government can be immensely proud. I am certainly proud to have been a facilitator and to some degree an organiser of a number of those. It is extremely important work.

We are all acutely aware of the cost of the health service in contemporary times - it is a perennial debate and does not merit repetition here. When we think of the cost of the health service, sport as an antidote or an alternative to health breakdown and difficulty is a very cheap option. It is not used enough. It is a very good way to keep people physically and mentally well, particularly our young people. Parents, educators and people who have experience of youth work will say that young people who enjoy and are involved in sport at some level - it does not need to be a high competitive level - do not become victims of substance abuse. Invariably they live complete lives and critically have a good self-image.

For young people it is how they perceive themselves and the degree of inner confidence they have that are important and will allow them to make the correct choices in life. Sport is key to giving young people that kind of inner confidence and the disciplines that go with training and participation in sport, the team effect etc. Even for those who are less athletic the participation and camaraderie that goes with it are important. There is wisdom among many sporting organisations in this respect.

A mass-participation activity in the sporting sphere that many people enjoy is swimming. I am delighted that through the good offices of the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, we have been able to support many swimming pools in my constituency, including those in Cavan town and Bailieborough. It is an important mass activity.

As well as developing recreational sport - the main issue is participation - I urge the new council to focus on participation in a range of activities. I encourage the Minister of State to include a sufficiently wide range of activities, whether it is walking, swimming or cycling, so that there is something for everyone. I note that in some ways, cycling has become the new golf and has developed significantly. While that sort of activity is important, we must also develop our competitive sport, which also is important. One must salute the work of the GAA and other sporting bodies in this area. Social historians will never record properly the good done by the voluntary personnel in the GAA throughout the country on Saturday mornings, Sundays and week nights as they do their training and the pitch preparation, sometimes in dreary and dark conditions. These people are real patriots. However, there also is a need to develop and support competitive sport, and in this respect, it has been a wonderful achievement that key matches in the latter stages of the Euro 2020 competition will be played here. This again is a credit to the

Government, the Minister of State and the collective effort. It is a huge achievement for the country as it is highly prestigious and will be very significant in terms of tourism product and the county's profile, as well as in the encouragement of participation in sport.

The new body will have responsibility for tackling doping and the supervision of the anti-doping regime. It is critical that doping be eliminated and for a set of structures and checks to be in place that prevent even its contemplation. It is so important from every perspective, including the country's image, as well as for sport and all things, that doping should be controlled, that there should be disqualification and discipline and that a transparent process should be in place. This is implicit in and central to the legislation and will be implemented. As times are improving, thankfully, one of the new body's important roles will be to develop the national sports campus. It is a huge campus with enormous potential on which 500 acres are available, and I look forward to its development, which will be an important step.

Coaching is part of the new body's brief. As a primary teacher by background and as someone who represents a community and observes what goes on around me, coaching in schools has had an enormous impact. I refer to the trained qualified coaches, in respect of whom there must be standardisation, that is, the proper good quality coaches who have been vetted in every way for child protection and so on and who have been going into schools. I urge the Minister of State to develop coaching and make sure it becomes a mass activity everywhere. It is very important to support such activity.

This legislation is good and brings together a lot of very good work. It ties it together, puts it under one roof and rationalises it. I salute what the Minister of State has achieved thus far and I commend its continuation. If this was able to be done to the extent it was during recessionary times, much more can be done now that we are emerging from recession. The objective is that each person in the country, irrespective of age, social background, educational level or health profile, has some level of participation every week in something that can be described as sport or recreational sport. This must be the objective and the aim and I commend that to the Minister of State as an objective above all others.

Deputy Ray Butler: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill and congratulate the Minister of State and the Departments concerned on getting agreement to have part of the Euro 2020 championship finals played in Ireland. The Sports Bill 2014 provides for the dissolution of the Irish Sports Council, ISC, and the National Sports Campus Development Authority, NSCDA, and for the merger of the functions into a single entity to be established and known as sport Ireland. This is to be welcomed. A merger of the council and the authority is part of the Government's programme for the rationalisation of State agencies and is in line with Fine Gael's manifesto commitment to cut the number of Government quangos. The merger of the organisations will result in a number of savings, including savings resulting from the removal of duplication of administrative functions, as well as reduced salary costs on foot of the elimination of one chief executive post.

My forte arises from my lifelong involvement with the four-legged athletes of the greyhound industry, and it is evident that a reduction in the number of chief executive posts would represent a huge saving. President Obama would not be getting the same wages as some of the chief executive officers who got posts from the previous Administration, and this measure is to be greatly welcomed. I am familiar with the huge cost associated with putting in place the anti-doping measures within the greyhound industry, and I am sure it is the same in respect of two-legged sport as well. Consequently, the reduction in the total number of board members,

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with a consequential reduction in fees payable, is also to be welcomed because many of these boards were quangos and I definitely agree with this reduction in numbers.

The Bill also designates sport Ireland as the national anti-doping organisation for the State and proposes enhanced provisions in respect of anti-doping in Irish sport. The Bill includes new provisions that will help sport Ireland in its work combatting doping in sport, thereby continuing the work done by the Irish Sports Council in this area. As all Members are aware, doping is a serious problem in all sports. I hope the single body, sport Ireland, will finally bring in serious new rules and regulations in respect of doping in sports. If people do the crime, the punishment should fit the crime. When a lifetime ban is being given, it should mean a lifetime ban, not like other bans where, after a period, this sentence is changed. While there is a saying that time is a good healer, when it comes to doping and cheating, nobody should get a lighter sentence if found guilty. This issue even has arisen in the sport I love so well, namely, greyhound racing, in which bans were imposed but then were lifted. In other sports, such bans also were lifted after a period. This should not be the case and if a lifetime ban is handed down, it should last a lifetime.

I also welcome the announcement yesterday by the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, regarding the rates issue on sports facilities that sporting bodies with bar licences will only be valued for rates in respect of the bar in the clubhouse. This is welcome because sporting bodies nationwide have been left with huge rates bills and have been obliged to close the facilities. In my home town of Trim, the GAA club built a fabulous sports facility and bar, and although the bar only took up one room in the area, the club's rates bill was astronomically huge. It was obliged to close the bar, which was very sad because it was a wonderful facility in the clubhouse. When the club runs functions, it currently is obliged to seek a licence for just the nights on which they are being run, which is a great expense to the club. Moreover, the club is paying off a huge rates bill with which it was left. Consequently, this is welcome news for all sports and social clubs nationwide.

To revert to the Bill, it is to be welcomed. It provides for a statutory basis for Ireland's anti-doping programme and for Irish anti-doping rules. It also provides for information sharing between sport Ireland and relevant organisations, including the Irish Medicines Board, the Garda Síochána and Customs and Excise, which is an essential element in the fight against doping in sport. It is essential that sport is played on a level playing field, and this Bill will ensure this takes place.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Derek Keating): The next speakers are Deputies Hannigan and Wall, who are sharing 20 minutes. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Jack Wall: It gives me great pleasure to support this Bill, which is a vital piece of infrastructure in respect of improving the image of sport in Ireland. The Irish are a nation of sports fanatics, be that in respect of the four-legged beings to which Deputy Butler referred or simply the two-legged beings. I first wish to congratulate the Minister of State on all his efforts during his term of office over the past three and a half years to put sport on an even higher pedestal than we in Ireland had placed it.

The sports capital programme is vital to clubs and organisations in every part of the country. It gives an impetus to communities, with grants supporting employment through the local contractor and so on. All of this spin-off brings a vibrancy to whole communities, regardless of which sporting organisation or club receives the grant. It gives people a sense of pride to

know they have fought for their own, developing their community and providing an alternative to anti-social behaviour, drugs and so on. That is of enormous value at this time. In recent days we saw that the drug barons are working hard to bring their product into the country. It is a hard battle we are fighting. Sport offers young people a positive alternative and we must continue to develop it in every shape and form.

Our elite athletes have served us well and shown a great example to young people. Nobody can deny the time, effort and dedication they have given to their country, whatever the sport in which they represent it. Golf is one of our major sports and I take this opportunity to wish Paul McGinley, Rory McIlroy and Graeme McDowell well tomorrow when they represent Europe in the Ryder Cup at Gleneagles. Mr. McGinley has been a wonderful ambassador for Ireland as captain of the Ryder Cup team and we hope it all goes well for him tomorrow.

As I said, supporting local clubs is vital, not least because of the role they play in preventing anti-social behaviour and ensuring the drug barons do not win. The only way we can defeat them is by reducing the demand for what they sell. To do that we must provide outlets that will engage young people. As a fanatical supporter of sport, it seems to me it is one of the best outlets. There is a challenge to be met here. I urge the Minister of State to speak with all the national organisations to examine this aspect. There is always somebody left out when funding is distributed, and it is when young people are isolated and bored that drugs can seem attractive. There are wonderful people giving of their time voluntarily throughout the country. Deputy Joe O'Reilly spoke about sports volunteers working every hour of the day and night. We must support what they are doing by giving direction from the top.

The Minister of State has a feel for sport, which is essential for the job he is doing. I saw the delight on his face at the announcement of host countries for the European Championship in 2020. This is a great achievement for Ireland and will mean a great deal to the young people who believe in soccer. The latter is not my sport, as John Delaney would readily acknowledge; it has always been the GAA for me. I have been chairman of the county board and of supporters' clubs. That is incidental, however, because the particular sport is not relevant. It is about encouraging young people to participate in something they enjoy.

Reference was made to the greyhound industry. In my constituency, the bloodstock industry plays a vital role and we look forward to the redevelopment of the Curragh racecourse. The home of the five Irish classics should have best facilities and be able to attract people from all over the world. I urge the Minister of State to work with Horse Racing Ireland to ensure that happens. The Punchestown festival is another wonderful event, second only to Cheltenham and almost matching it at this stage.

It is about focusing on the future and getting young people interested in sport. We must work to direct them toward participating in whichever sport takes their interest. We must help them to think positively about themselves and what they can do. Everybody has a role to play in their own community, club, school and so on. The only way to reduce demand for drugs is via education and offering people alternatives. The drug barons can take drugs themselves if they wish, but they must not be allowed to harm our children. Their aim is to get as much money as they can, with no concern for the effect on anybody.

Measures to reform the rates and valuations system are of great importance. Problems in this regard have been ongoing for a long time. We have all expressed concerns about the drinks industry, alcohol advertising and so on, but that is not what this is about. It is about a wrong

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that was done to sports clubs whereby they were obliged to pay higher rates than was ever envisaged simply because their facilities included a bar. It is only right that such rates should be reduced. The moneys we are talking about are used by volunteers to develop facilities for their communities. It was crazy to ask people to pay those types of rates when they were about to be of such benefit to their town or community. People worked hard to earn the cash they were using to support and develop a particular sport.

We are approaching the time when the sports capital grants will be allocated and I have no doubt that the Minister of State will be thumping the table in an effort to secure as much funding as he can. There are 166 Members in this House and 60 in the other House and not a single one would argue against the importance of this scheme, because it means so much to people. I am sometimes amazed when I visit a club or organisation which has benefitted from big money. I am also amazed when I see how even a small allocation can make a huge difference to another club. I wish the Minister of State well as he seeks to secure another round of funding.

The national sports campus is a fantastic asset. I recently met members of Team Tyrone, which is the GAA supporters' club in that county. In Kildare, we have the Hawkfield centre of excellence for elite footballers. The Tyrone people could not understand why it had been given this elite designation, because, apart from the county teams, it deprived everybody else of the use of it. They could not see the logic in it at all. Their training centre, they explained, was for everybody, not just the elite. I urge the Minister of State to ensure that clubs all over Dublin or anywhere else in the country who wish to train in the national sports campus are facilitated. When people go home to their own club, they can tell their fellow members what they did and what they learned. This already happens to some extent in the case of Croke Park, with local clubs and schools encouraged to go there and see the facilities. The same should apply to the national sports campus. As we develop that facility for every aspect of sport, I hope we will see this type of inclusiveness.

Several speakers referred to the increasing numbers taking up walking and running in recent years. My club in Castlemitchell was recently involved in a couch to 5 km initiative. People came to the club to train to walk, cycle or run the 5 km. Some 70 to 80 people turned up for the 5 km. The benefit to the community of showing what the GAA club was able to do was enormous. When we get an opportunity, we should not throw it away because a club is a rugby club or whatever. People may be able to use facilities on its grounds, etc. and that can be of huge benefit to the community.

Deputy Dominic Hannigan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill, which is a very positive move. Not only will another quango disappear from Irish life but a new leaner organisation will take its place. I hope sport Ireland will play a key role in the development of sport throughout the country and, in particular, will focus on young people and on people from new communities and get them involved.

Like the previous speaker, my colleague, Deputy Wall, I know of the importance of sport in people's lives and I also know of the commitment of the Minister of State. He has not had the pleasure of watching his own county win an All-Ireland final unlike my colleague, Deputy Wall, and myself but I note he was an all-Ireland winner when at school in the vocational schools all-Ireland competition. I know the Minister of State realises how important it is to ensure not only one particular group in sport gets all the funding and that we share as much money as we can across communities.

In my constituency of Meath East, I have seen how a little bit of funding can go a long way to help to build communities, in particular new communities, of which we have seen a large influx recently, but also rural communities. We have spoken in the past about a particular athletics club in Meath. Cushinstown Athletics Club was set up in the middle of a small townland and over the years, the community has come together to turn it into one of the best athletics club in the country. Clubs like that need to be supported.

The Minister of State will also be aware of the Boyne Valley cycle route - the new greenway that stretches all the way from Drogheda along the River Boyne to the Battle of the Boyne site in Oldbridge. It is a great new amenity only made possible by the support of this Government and the Minister of State's Department. It is open approximately six months but it is already being used by many tourists and locals and it is helping to promote a healthy lifestyle as well as tourism and expenditure in the local area. Making sport Ireland leaner and efficient is very positive as is ensuring we target the money to those clubs which need it so that communities can benefit.

I refer to Schedule 1 on how the board is appointed, which is very relevant given the discussion over the past few days. I have a few suggestions which perhaps the Minister of State might consider taking on board. Schedule 1, paragraph 2(2) states that the members of sport Ireland shall be appointed by the Minister. I wonder whether we could be stronger here and state that the members of the board of sport Ireland will have to go through the Public Appointments Service, so that they are assessed on their experience and merit before they are appointed. That would be proper and transparent and I believe it is something the public wants to see.

Schedule 1, paragraph 2(6) states that the Minister shall, in so far as is practicable, endeavour to ensure that among the members of sport Ireland, there is an equitable balance between men and women. That does not go far enough. People will say they could not find the right candidate. We need to be stronger than this and state that there must be a minimum number of males and a minimum number of females. My party has gender quotas so that in an election, there must be a minimum number of candidates of each gender. That would be stronger and would help to redress the balance we see on many State boards where we see 60%, 70% and, in some cases, 80% males. I would like the Minister of State to consider that. There are no age limits for service on the board, which is a good thing. We need to be very inclusive of all age groups in Irish society.

Schedule 1, paragraph 2(5) suggests that we need at least one board member with finance experience and at least one board member with law experience, which is fair enough, but we need another two paragraphs here. Somebody from the disability community should be represented on the board as a matter of course. We have seen the successful performance of our athletes in the recent Paralympics. We need to learn from that and ensure their particular insights are brought to bear in the decisions of the board. We should also look at how we can involve new communities in sport Ireland. We are not at the stage yet at which other countries are, where they have heroes from members of their new communities. Germany has players like Mesut Özil, Italy has players like Mario Balotelli and the UK has Mo Farah, all of whom are members of the new communities who became national heroes. We have only seen immigration in the past 12 to 15 years. We are not at that stage yet but we can expect, and we should plan, to see members from new communities taking part and running or playing football for their new country. I would like to see new communities represented on the board so that their particular concerns and issues are taken on board in the planning of sport Ireland.

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I thank the Minister of State for the commitment he is showing to sport and for the work he is doing to ensure clubs have the necessary capital expenditure when they need it. This Bill is very positive and I commend it to the House.

Debate adjourned.

Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Derek Keating): 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 Dominic Hannigan - the status of the planning application for the new school campus in Ashbourne, County Meath; (2) 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; (3) Deputy Jonathan O'Brien - the need to address the conditions in Kinsale Road reception and accommodation centre, Cork; (4) Deputy Terence Flanagan - the need for Irish Water to ensure that water meters are fully accessible to those with disabilities; (5) Deputy Willie Penrose - the need for legislation to facilitate the introduction of a quota for Irish music on the airwaves; (6) Deputy Pat Breen - the need to provide additional funding to maintain services at the North West Clare Family Resource Centre, County Clare; (7) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - data protection issues arising out of Irish Water's demands for PPS numbers; (8) Deputy Michael Moynihan - the need to address poor broadband service on the Banteer exchange, County Cork; (9) Deputy Brendan Smith - the need to address the issue of the ebola epidemic; (10) Deputy Joan Collins - the issue of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and the need for a multi-disciplinary team in the HSE or funding of treatment abroad scheme for initial consultation in the UK; (11) Deputy Joe Costello - the need to put in place new educational facilities for All Hallows College, Dublin, to ensure its continuation as an educational campus; (12) Deputy Seán Crowe - the need to address concerns in relation to cuts to funding for the school completion programme in officially designated disadvantaged areas; (13) Deputy Thomas Pringle - the need to provide a Garda car for Carrick Garda station, County Donegal; (14) Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly - the need to revise and reduce the late payment penalties relating to the non-principal private residence charge; (15) Deputy Clare Daly - the need to discuss the UN Security Council resolution requiring countries to pass laws outlawing travel to join terrorist groups; (16) Deputy Anthony Lawlor - the need to address concerns regarding deduction at source payments of the local property tax by social welfare recipients; (17) Deputy Charlie McConalogue - the investment plans for Malin Head in light of its strategic importance in the development of the Wild Atlantic Way; and (18) Deputy Mick Wallace - the need to discuss the UN Security Council resolution requiring countries to pass laws outlawing travel to join terrorist groups.

The matters raised by Deputies Terence Flanagan, Richard Boyd Barrett, Deputy Michael Moynihan and Anthony Lawlor have been selected for discussion.

12 o'clock

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Barry Cowen: I am sure the Tánaiste is aware that many people are nervous to walk the streets of our towns and cities at night, and even during the day. Violent crime is a huge concern and the Government needs to show greater support to the Garda in tackling it. In

recent weeks we have seen a number of high profile violent assaults. Such crimes appear to be occurring more frequently, in broad daylight as well as at night. An epidemic of knife attacks appears to exist in many parts of Dublin and many areas are becoming no-go areas. We woke up this morning to hear that a post mistress in Bayside was involved in a tiger kidnapping and of the shooting dead of a person at a school in Balbriggan. People are worried and afraid to walk our streets. It appears the lack of Garda presence is feeding that frenzy.

The issue is not confined to Dublin. There was a massive meeting in Roscrea during the summer, where counterparts from Dublin and many small towns and villages expressed their fears and anxieties about the Government's policy for the availability of gardaí on our streets. A crisis is developing in Dublin whereby locals and tourists alike fear for their safety on our main streets. O'Connell Street, Grafton Street and other well known streets in Dublin and other towns unfortunately appear to be threatening nowadays. There is drug dealing at Luas stations. Dublin is fast getting a reputation for being a crime ridden city.

The lack of gardaí on the beat is cause for grave concern. The number of gardaí on our streets continues to decline. People need an assurance from Government in regard to how it will assist the Garda to confront crime ridden cities and towns throughout Ireland.

The Tánaiste: In regard to the attack on Jonny Cooper at the weekend, to which I presume the Deputy was referring, I offer Mr. Cooper and his family the sincere sympathies of the House. It seems to have been a particularly horrific attack.

I was surprised, when the Deputy referenced Dublin city, that he was not aware of the complete overhaul taking place on both sides of the city centre over a protracted period to get gardaí back on the beat in the city centre and residential areas between the canals. This initiative has been hugely successful. If the Deputy takes the trouble to speak to the gardaí who visit communities, streets and individual houses, he will find that both gardaí and local people have praised the initiative. I understand the results are being constantly evaluated so that lessons may be learned from what has happened. I do not know if the Deputy has heard of the initiative but it has certainly resulted in a significant activation of gardaí, particularly at street level, on the basis he appears to wish to seek. I would expect him to congratulate the Garda management on this initiative. Yesterday morning I spoke with a number of gardaí at a function in the docklands about their experience of the initiative. They spoke about how well it is proceeding in terms of co-operation with local communities of the kind that the Deputy describes as desirable.

The CSO crime statistics that were recently released do not reveal any dramatic changes. However, any crime that happens to an individual is traumatic. Anybody who is subject to a burglary or any other type of crime finds it a traumatic experience. The Deputy will be aware that the process for recruiting new gardaí and reopening Templemore has commenced. The issue of Garda numbers has been addressed by this Government. I am, therefore, slightly at a loss to understand the Deputy's description of the matter in light of the current figures. Any crime is of huge significance to the individuals, families, streets and communities concerned but the CSO crime statistics do not indicate major change. He appears to be completely unaware of the initiatives that Garda management has taken to put gardaí on the street and to connect to individuals and local communities.

Deputy Finian McGrath: They are not delivering. If the Tánaiste went to the northside she would see that.

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An Ceann Comhairle: This is Deputy Cowen's question.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Mr. Cooper, to whom we all send our best wishes, is one of many unfortunate victims in recent times. He may be more high profile than others but he is one of many. I speak with gardaí, and I empathise with them and congratulate them for the efforts they are making.

The Tánaiste: Good.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I also speak to members of the public, as should the Tánaiste. If one speaks to people in the large estates in Dublin and throughout the country, one of the main points they make is that they do not see enough gardaí on the beat or available to help them and to protect our streets. We need a greater presence. I accept what the Tánaiste said in regard to Templemore but what assurance can she give the House and, more particularly, those whom we represent that in three weeks' time, when the Government has to make decisions on how it will build the recovery, it will have cognisance for the fears and anxieties that exist in Dublin and other cities over the lack of available gardaí? Can she assure us that funding will be made available to increase the number of gardaí on the beat and on our streets to reassure people with their presence? That is what we need to hear. She can speak about statistics for as long as she likes - every day if she so wishes - but the people we represent want her to make a commitment to make funding available to increase the number of gardaí on the street and to assure people they can reside in a safer place.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy suggested that he has some experience of speaking to gardaí but his comments did not reflect the efforts the Garda is making-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: That is not true.

The Tánaiste: Sorry, but the Deputy is in denial-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: How dare you. It is not true.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The only gardaí dishonoured are those being attacked, and the Government is asleep.

The Tánaiste: As I speak, an initiative that the Garda has taken to revitalise community policing, using a model developed in the city centre and which has been in operation for a considerable period, is bearing significant fruit. It is popular with members of the public and there is appreciation in the community. The heart of the policing relationship is with the community at a local level, and I agree with the Deputy in that regard. Community policing is vital and what the Garda management is doing shows us the way to increase contact with the community, as well as collaboration and co-operation, which is essential.

With regard to robberies in the Dublin area and other large towns and cities, the Garda has operated a number of specific programmes. I am sure the Deputy is aware that these days, the motorways have become avenues for professional criminals to travel to distant parts of the country, away from their locality. The Garda has set in train a number of very specific programmes which have been quite successful in apprehending some of the professional criminal involved in such activities.

The Deputy asked about commitment to the Garda. The first recruitment to Templemore since 2009 took place this summer, with more to follow. That is the commitment this Govern-

ment has made to increasing the strength of the Garda. The Government and I were very gratified to see the major interest from people in joining the Garda force.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When the Government took office in 2011, it promised a departure from the stroke politics and cronyism which had permeated past Fianna Fáil Administrations. At the time, An Taoiseach went so far as to describe the election of this Government as a democratic revolution. Nevertheless, here we are in 2014 and we can see that An Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, has clearly bought into the politics of the past with his nomination of Mr. John McNulty to the board of the Irish Museum of Modern Art in order to facilitate him as a Fine Gael candidate in the upcoming Seanad by-election. It appears that at least An Taoiseach regards the use of State appointments as an appropriate way to bolster the qualification of his candidate ahead of this election. It is a case of jobs for the boys.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Yes.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Given the stink of cronyism that hangs around this turn of events, will the Labour Party fall in behind Fine Gael once again and support Mr. McNulty's nomination? Does the Tánaiste support An Taoiseach in his actions and will her Labour Party colleagues support and vote for Mr. McNulty?

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not usual or acceptable in this House, by tradition, to name individuals from outside the House who are not here to defend themselves. I ask Members to respect that practice.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Stick to the cronyism.

An Ceann Comhairle: You have a great habit of interfering in things in which you hold no interest. You are too smart.

The Tánaiste: The practice has been that if a vacancy arises in the Seanad from one of the Government parties, the party from which the vacancy arises would nominate a person to fill the vacancy. Deputy McDonald would be familiar with the parallel practice for city and county councils, as well as the European Parliament. When people from the Deputy's party have stood down and a vacancy arose, the party would have nominated people to fill the vacancy. We are talking about a standard practice relating to the filling of casual vacancies and with the Seanad, the vacancy would lie with the party from which the vacancy arose. It is consistent with what Sinn Féin has done on previous occasions-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Government made the appointment to the board.

The Tánaiste: -----with city councils and in the European Parliament.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The candidate should be suitably qualified.

The Tánaiste: All parties and Independents have followed-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Did the Government participate in the appointment to the board?

The Tánaiste: -----that practice. Fianna Fáil and Independents have followed the practice in the past. It is the norm.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It is not.

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The Tánaiste: The nomination is a matter for the Fine Gael Party, its leader and its members. It is not a matter for the Labour Party but rather it is for Fine Gael.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Wrong.

The Tánaiste: It is a matter for the party which has the vacancy and it is for that party to make that nomination.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Labour Party has facilitated it as part of the Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should mind his own business. We are dealing with Deputy McDonald's question. The Tánaiste should be allowed to answer as her time is nearly up.

The Tánaiste: With regard to the Deputy's comment on the gender of the individual, she asked where the Labour Party stands. Of the 11 appointments to the Government from the Labour Party, five of those are women and two of them are at a senior Government level. There are two at the Minister of State level and the Attorney General is also a woman. If the Deputy is trying to throw some dust on the policy of the Labour Party regarding the promotion of women, I suggest she consider the history of the Labour Party. We have a justifiably proud record of promoting women throughout the party. With the Seanad nominations, the number of appointments from the Labour Party - whether on elected panels or otherwise - had a good gender balance, with women featuring prominently.

If the Deputy is asking me to account for the internal practices of Fine Gael, it is a matter for that party, so I suggest the Deputy address her issues to that party. Sinn Féin has been heavily involved in appointing different members of its party to boards when vacancies arose. In the context of its participation in the government in the North, the party has been able to influence appointments. It has been pointed out that the party's current MEP from Dublin, Ms Lynn Boylan, was appointed to *safe*food Ireland. There is a list of Sinn Féin people who were appointed to boards as vacancies arose. I am sure those people were all eminently qualified.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Unlike the Fine Gael fellow.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Take it easy, Timmy.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask people on both sides of the House to respect the ruling of the Chair. I am here as an independent referee and I must enforce time limits. I also remind Deputies that there is a long-standing practice in this House that the business of the Seanad ought not to be discussed. I have allowed latitude because it is a leader's question. This is a matter for the Seanad.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I did not raise the issue of gender.

Deputy Noel Harrington: The Deputy mentioned "jobs for the boys".

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I raised something entirely different. I asked the Tánaiste if she approves of and supports the actions of An Taoiseach in using an appointment to a State board to create qualifications for his candidate for an election.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot make accusations like this in the Chamber.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have asked the Tánaiste if she supports-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is not allowed to make such accusations. People can make up their own minds about the appointment.

Deputy Peter Mathews: It is just a statement.

An Ceann Comhairle: It should not be on the record of the House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I ask the Tánaiste if she supports the manner in which An Taoiseach has managed this affair, which has given rise to considerable public comment and concern. Should State boards be used as a springboard to qualify an individual for a Seanad panel? Is that appropriate? The Tánaiste says this is a matter for Fine Gael. Appointments of that nature are a matter for Government, as are appointments to State boards. They happen on the watch of the entire Government. Is the Tánaiste satisfied with the manner in which An Taoiseach has conducted this appointment?

In her very lengthy response, which managed not to answer the questions, the Tánaiste described a process of co-option, which is not the case in the Seanad by-election. That is an election. I asked the Tánaiste whether she and her colleagues in the Labour Party-----

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not a matter to discuss here.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----would support and vote for the Fine Gael candidate. These are the questions I am asking.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has no right to stand up in the Chamber and ask people from whom they are going to vote. Would the Deputy please resume her seat?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am sorry, a Cheann Comhairle-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I will not be sorry. The Deputy is not entitled to use this Chamber for political reasons like that.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is the only place we cannot do that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Asking people who they are going to vote for is not acceptable. The Deputy should resume her seat. She is over time. Would the Tánaiste please reply?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Ceann Comhairle is deliberately preventing me from asking the questions I wish to put and I would like an answer to them.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am applying the rules of the House in case the Deputy does not understand them.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does An Tánaiste support the Taoiseach in this and will the Labour Party again fall in behind Fine Gael to back the candidate?

An Ceann Comhairle: We do not ask those questions in this Chamber.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I think those questions are clear and I look forward to the Tánaiste's response.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should resume her seat. This is not what Leaders' Questions is about.

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The Tánaiste: The Deputy is not addressing the Ard Comhairle of Sinn Féin now-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I can see that.

The Tánaiste: -----where she may choose to tell people how to vote, or else. She is speaking in the Dáil. She has no right to direct people of any party or none as to how they are to cast their secret ballot. It is quite impertinent of her to suggest how Members of the Dáil or the Seanad should vote. It is fine if she does that to her own members, via her own processes. They are voluntary members, as I understand it, of her political party.

Deputy Noel Harrington: Volunteers.

The Tánaiste: She can offer them her guidance and direction if that is the way her party works. This is a secret ballot. The nomination falls to the party which has the vacancy. That is the practice within government. I accept that practice because that is how it is and has been done.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What about appointments to State boards?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy also raised questions about the appointment to the board of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, IMMA.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. We are over time, Tánaiste.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: That is a farce.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The Tánaiste can dream on.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Is there no instruction to the Labour Party members on how to vote? Is it a free vote?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Mac Lochlainn is outside the Chamber. He should please stay quiet.

Deputy James Bannon: He has joined the Reform Alliance.

The Tánaiste: Deputy McDonald-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Tánaiste to respect the Chair. Is she listening to me?

The Tánaiste: I am listening to the Ceann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask her to respect the Chair and please resume her seat because she is over time. The matter raised has been dealt with.

The Tánaiste: That is fine. Thank you.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I wish to raise the circumstances surrounding the Y case and the subsequent report. The last time I addressed this issue was on the day the Dáil went into recess. That was in the week when the United Nations criticised the Irish abortion regime,

particularly in cases of rape, incest, fatal foetal abnormality and where the woman's health is at risk.

Since then there has been the tragic Y case and the publication of draft guidelines which appear to be even more restrictive than the limited legislation. Under the guidelines, Ms Y would be even less likely to have received the termination she requested. A consultant psychiatrist, Veronica O'Keane, writing in *The Sunday Business Post* said that the opening statement of the draft guidelines serve to reinforce the complete prohibition on abortion and not, as one might expect, to make abortion legal when a woman's life is at risk.

Over the summer we read the barbaric details of the Y case. A very young woman arrived in a foreign country having been raped and was told that it was not within her financial remit to have a termination. After attempting suicide she was forced to deliver the baby through an unwanted caesarean section. There have been the X case and the tragic Savita Halappanavar case. We are running out of letters in the alphabet for these cases. Behind each one is a real woman who happens to be a wife, a sister, a mother, a daughter.

This Saturday people will take to the streets in a march for choice. Each time this happens the numbers grow. How many times will it take for this to happen before the Government listens and acts?

To judge by the report, the young woman involved was not even consulted. Everyone else seems to have been consulted but not her. The Government can ignore the calls for the repeal of the eighth amendment. The last time I asked the Tánaiste about this she said people were consulted in 1983. One had to have been born before 1966 to have been consulted then.

Did the Tánaiste see the guidelines? Did she agree to the guidelines? Is she aware that the guidelines are more restrictive than the legislation? Will she acknowledge the public calls to repeal the eighth amendment and the changing public opinion on repealing it?

The Tánaiste: We are all aware that the Y case is a very sad one of a young woman who arrived in Ireland as an asylum seeker. Subsequently her baby was delivered. My concern in discussing this is that her confidentiality and vulnerability should be respected, as should those of the baby. This involves a young mother and a baby. We want to see the best outcomes for both. She has since been granted refugee status in Ireland. I also understand that she is in contact, through her legal representatives, with the team inquiring into the circumstances of what happened.

The information published recently in the media is not a report. It arises from work being carried out in the context of the report's being prepared. Ms Y, through her legal advisers, which is appropriate, is in some contact with the people carrying out the inquiry. That is a matter for her and her legal advisers. It is important that we do not intrude on her privacy or that of the baby in respect of this inquiry, which I hope will conclude as quickly as possible. We will then get the full facts of the case.

As we know since this case first came into the public domain and in the information published to date and broadcast this week, there seems to be information missing about what happened to her at various stages. This is not a report. Nothing has been published. It would be appropriate to wait until the full facts of this case, as far as they can be established, are published by the HSE inquiry team. The chief executive of the HSE made that commitment in late August.

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The Minister for Health and the HSE published the guidelines last week. I expect that doctors involved in the care of women during pregnancy, at birth and after pregnancy, will discuss and consider those guidelines.

I believe I answered the Deputy's question on the eighth amendment before. In 1983 the Labour Party did not support the introduction of the eighth amendment into the Irish Constitution. I told the Deputy that the people voted for an amendment to the Constitution in their wisdom and many parties in this House supported the amendment. I campaigned against it at the time. I agree with the Deputy that public opinion in this matter has changed. I remind her that approximately 70,000 babies are born in Ireland every year. We want those babies to be wanted, and we want them to be born in the best possible circumstances.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: A draft report was published in the newspapers this week.

The Tánaiste: There was no draft. Sorry, it was not published.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The report was highly critical of the disjointed nature of the process and the impossibility of co-ordinating a response. I have to say that is really setting alarm bells ringing with regard to the protection of women in situations in which their lives are at risk. I acknowledge the role the Labour Party played in 1983. It was brave. It was against public opinion. It took courage. The Tánaiste is letting down the people who went out in 1983. It seems that the position she took then is not one she is prepared to take now, when public opinion is on her side and she is in a position to do something about it. I have to say that must be hugely disappointing for Labour Party people. The Tánaiste did not adequately answer the question I asked about the guidelines. Is she satisfied with them? They row back on the legislation, which was restrictive in itself. Did she agree to them? Is she happy that the restrictive legislation is being restricted further by the guidelines? What role did she play in agreeing them?

The Tánaiste: If I may say so, I think the Deputy is rushing to judgment.

Deputy Finian McGrath: She is not.

The Tánaiste: I can understand why she is doing so, given her own stance. She has always been upfront about these issues. I respect that. I think she is rushing to judgment, however. I want to draw a distinction in this regard. We have to find the actual facts of the case. It says on each page of the document that was published earlier that it "is a draft document and can only be considered as such". It is also made clear that the document "can be expected to contain factual/clinical inaccuracies and/or information that may require additional clarification". I put it to the Deputy that it is not a report. It is not even a draft report. It consists of workings and draft documentation in relation to a report that will be very important to establish the facts of what happened. The Deputy is asking me to anticipate the outcome of the report. I cannot do that because I do not know the facts. I want to be very clear about that.

On the guidelines, I would like to say my view is that the legislation passed by the Dáil has operated up to now to protect the life of the mother and life of the baby during pregnancy, which is what it was designed to do. From what we know from the public domain, the circumstances of this case came to the panel, in line with the operation of the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013, at a very late stage of the pregnancy. If the Deputy is suggesting that somebody should be given an abortion at 24 weeks, I want-----

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The Tánaiste is going off on a tangent.

The Tánaiste: -----to make it clear that-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: That is not what she said at all.

Deputy Joe Higgins: That is outrageous.

The Tánaiste: -----it is not a position-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Tánaiste is waffling.

The Tánaiste: -----I agree with.

Deputy Joe Higgins: She was deliberately fobbed off.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Tánaiste is only a waffler.

The Tánaiste: I want to make it clear that-----

Deputy Joe Higgins: The Government should hold a referendum.

The Tánaiste: -----it is not a position I support.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Tánaiste is waffling.

The Tánaiste: What we do not know, and what we need to wait for the report to get the best possible information on, is what actually happened to the young woman in the period between the identification of the pregnancy and her appearance before the panel in the context of the operation of the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013. We do not yet know the answers in this regard.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: What about the guidelines?

The Tánaiste: That is why I think Deputy Murphy is jumping to conclusions before we get the facts.

Deputy Finian McGrath: She is not.

Order of Business

The Tánaiste: It is proposed to take No. 15c, motion re revision of ministerial rota for parliamentary questions; and No. 5, Sport Ireland Bill 2014 - Second Stage (resumed). It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that No. 15c shall be decided without debate.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is one proposal to be put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 15c, motion re revision of ministerial rota for parliamentary questions, without debate agreed to? Agreed. I call Deputy Cowen on the Order of Business.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Is it proposed that the contents of the forthcoming health practitioners Bill, which is listed in section A of the Government legislation programme, will be cognisant of any new agreement that may be reached with general practitioners following the breakdown of what was previously proposed by the former Minister for Health? Can we be assured that the new Minister will meet GPs with a view to drawing up a schedule and agreeing ample legislation to reflect their views and aspirations for the trade, as well as those of the

Minister?

The Tánaiste: The legislation on the A list relates to the availability of medical cards to people over the age of 70. I understand the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, has indicated he will meet GPs and their representatives. That process is probably already under way in the Department of Health and in the context of the HSE.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Some of the survivors of mother and baby homes who were outside the Dáil gates earlier this morning were in the Visitors Gallery for Leaders' Questions. I acknowledge their presence. We were supposed to have the terms of reference for the inquiry before the summer recess. We were then told we would see the terms of reference in September. We are still waiting as September draws to a close. I am sure the Tánaiste will appreciate and acknowledge the anxiety and expectation among survivors of mother and baby homes, the Bethany Home and other institutions across the length and breadth of the country. They are waiting to see the terms of reference to ensure they measure up, are fully inclusive and will facilitate the telling of the full story and the unearthing of the true facts about what happened to mothers and their young children in these institutions. When I was coming in here for Leaders' Questions, some of the survivors said they would like a minute's silence to be observed in the Dáil Chamber today in recognition of them. While I do not believe today would be the appropriate time for that, I want to reflect to the Tánaiste the anxiety of survivors as they await these terms of reference and the absolute need for full acknowledgement of the experience, trauma and violation of rights of these women and their children.

The Tánaiste: When we spoke at length about this last week, I said that this is a certain part of the hidden history of Ireland. I have had a long personal involvement in this issue. I know many people who were in these homes and institutions. I told Deputy McDonald last week that Judge Yvonne Murphy has been appointed by the Government to conduct an inquiry. Rather than rushing the terms of the inquiry, it is important for us to get the terms right. I said last week that I believe the terms should be comprehensive. A number of significant issues relating to mother and baby homes have been raised by individuals and groups. I advised the Deputy last week of what has been happening to date. Individual records of institutions around the country have been made available in cases in which requests have been made to the registrar of births, marriages and deaths. Records relating to Tuam, which is one of the best-known cases to have been highlighted in the media, have been made available on foot of the work of a local historian. The second is the case of the records of the very large mother and baby home in Bessborough in Cork. As I pointed out to Deputy McDonald previously, there was an extensive interdepartmental interim report on the state of knowledge of the various issues that have arisen to date in Ireland's quite sad history in this area. It is important for the sake of the people who were in mother and baby homes that we have whatever expert assistance is required from people like historians, archivists and so forth in order that the records are retained. The state of the records varies enormously. Some of them were handed over to the HSE while others remain with the original bodies involved, both adoption societies and individual institutions. It is essential, from the point of view of those who were in mother and baby homes, that their records are maintained, for themselves, their children and grandchildren. As the Deputy knows, this does not just affect people who were brought up in Ireland or the UK. It also affects several thousand people from mother and baby homes who were brought up in the United States of America. We heard testimony from Ms Philomena Lee at a recent conference on adoption about the importance of being able to access the records. I look forward to the terms of reference coming-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When?

The Tánaiste: I cannot give the Deputy an exact date because the work is ongoing, but it will be as soon as possible. It is important that we get the terms of reference right because this is part of the story of hidden Ireland in the 20th century. We want to try to address all the relevant issues. There are some issues which can probably be addressed in other legislation such as, for instance, tracing rights. Indeed, Deputy McDonald has also raised that issue previously and I responded to her on it.

Deputy Seamus Kirk: Subsequent to the recent independence referendum in Scotland, the British Government has indicated that it is going to devolve additional powers to the Scottish Parliament. Obviously that will have implications for the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Assembly in Wales. Has there been any briefing from the British Government to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade or to the Government generally as to what its intentions are in that regard?

The Tánaiste: I am looking forward to the North-South meeting scheduled for the end of next week, in the context of the outcome of the referendum in Scotland and the ongoing debate in the British Parliament at Westminster about the implications of the result for the different regions in the United Kingdom. The North-South meeting will provide a timely opportunity to hear the views of people from the North and of the parties in the Executive on these issues. There have been continuous contacts between the Minister and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and their British counterparts. I look forward to the resumption of the North-South meetings next week.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I wish to ask the Tánaiste about the commitment in the programme for Government to open up the budgetary process. There has been very little progress made on that. It is still a highly secretive process which does not serve the people very well. The Taoiseach made a statement recently that the budget priority for the Government is to cut the top rate of tax, which will do nothing at all to help more than 80% of people in this country. In light of that statement and the Tánaiste's role as Minister for Social Protection, will she give consideration to reinstating the poverty-proofing exercise on the budget that was formerly carried out by the Combat Poverty Agency? Unfortunately that agency was abolished, but will the Tánaiste undertake to poverty-proof any proposed budgetary measures to see exactly whom they impact upon?

The Tánaiste: Deputy Shortall may be aware that there is a social inclusion division in the Department of Social Protection which publishes extensive material on poverty and inequality both before and after budgets in Ireland. That material, much of which is prepared in conjunction with the ESRI, is widely available and I have appeared before the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection on several occasions to discuss it in some detail. I also appeared before that committee in the past two weeks to discuss the social welfare Estimates for this year and the priorities for 2015.

On the question of equality in the context of social welfare, Deputy Shortall will have noted the recent publication by the ESRI and the statements by Professor John FitzGerald which found that the level of income inequality in Ireland has decreased since the onset of the economic crisis. The ESRI has set out in considerable detail how those decreases in income inequality have come about. Professor FitzGerald has also acknowledged in the aforementioned publication that the maintenance of our social welfare system in Ireland, notwithstanding the crisis, has been one of the hallmarks of how we dealt with the economic crash in contrast to many other European countries.

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I will make available to Deputies copies of the most recent publications by the social inclusion division on this year's budget. Unfortunately, I cannot share with Deputy Shortall the contents of the forthcoming budget. She will appreciate the long-standing practice in this House whereby we learn the contents of the budget when the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform announce it in the middle of October. That said, I would point out that in the agreement between myself and the Taoiseach on the revised priorities for the Government for the remainder of our term, we said very explicitly that, in the context of any relief that becomes available, our objective is to improve the situation for middle and low income families. We also specifically set out a number of measures aimed at assisting older people and those on social welfare.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Cutting the top rate of tax will not-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Shortall to resume her seat. We are not having a debate on this issue. The Order of Business is about promised legislation.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The budget is promised legislation.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: A mediation Bill has been promised to deal with disputes between neighbours on issues such as overgrowing trees blocking light and so forth. At the moment, people in such disputes must go through the civil courts process and the mediation Bill is intended to deal with such cases. Can the Tánaiste indicate the progress made on that legislation?

I also wish to ask about the building control Bill. In light of Construction 2020 and the focus on ensuring the construction of more houses in the years ahead, putting the construction register in Ireland on a statutory footing is important in order that all builders are fully compliant and that we have no more Priory Halls. Can the Tánaiste update us on the status of that legislation?

The Tánaiste: The mediation legislation should be ready early next year and the building control Bill is also expected next year.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The geothermal energy development Bill is on the list of promised legislation. Is that Bill a priority for the Government? Have the heads of the Bill come before Cabinet for approval yet and when is it likely to come before the House? It has been promised for 2015 but perhaps it will be ready before then. I wish to ask the same question about the sale of alcohol Bill, which deals with an issue that has been much discussed in recent years. Have the heads been approved by Cabinet and when is it likely to come before the House?

The Tánaiste: The geothermal Bill will be published late next year. As Deputy Durkan will be aware, the minerals Bill is coming through in this session.

On the sale of alcohol Bill, the heads of that Bill were cleared by the Government some time ago but I expect it will come back to Government again before coming before the House.

Deputy Brendan Smith: In response to Deputy Kirk's question, the Tánaiste mentioned a North-South meeting next week. I presume that is a North-South Ministerial Council meeting rescheduled in view of the cancellation of the July meeting. Could the Tánaiste assure us that at that meeting she will have on the agenda the need to establish the civic forum and also the need to progress the proposed Irish language Bill, Bille na Gaeilge? These are both important issues

and commitments in the Good Friday Agreement and St. Andrews Agreement. It is important that progress is made on those particular issues.

Joan Burton: I do not have the detailed agenda to hand but I will come back to Deputy Smith separately.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I have two matters. There is a sense of urgency about the children (amendment) Bill in relation to the commitment given on St. Patrick's Institution.

On the moves being made by the Tánaiste's colleague, Deputy Noonan, to spend €35 million or €40 million on various stock market consultants in flogging off a large portion of AIB and EBS, will the House have an opportunity to discuss that proposal or is it something that will come forward in the Finance Bill? Is it the settled policy of the Tánaiste's party that we should sell this State asset, which cost the people in excess of €20 billion and which devastates the budget?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Broughan is straying a little.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Is it the Tánaiste's settled policy-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We do not deal with party policies.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: -----that we will flog off AIB and EBS, which lost its independence as a mutual through a stroke pulled by the former Minister, the late Deputy Brian Lenihan, and that Fianna Fáil Government? Is that the Tánaiste's policy?

An Ceann Comhairle: We do not deal with policy on the Order of Business.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Will the Tánaiste give us a chance to discuss it?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is another issue. There are other ways to raise it.

Joan Burton: The children (amendment) Bill is for this session. On the recovery of funds from the banks and the financial institutions in the context of the banking collapse, as Deputy Broughan will be aware, strong progress has been made in renegotiating some €40 billion in savings from the national debt and very significant savings in interest from the different arrangements which have been entered into. That is a considerable saving. It is one of the reasons the economy is entering a recovery period. I would think Deputy Broughan would welcome that. On whether the Minister, Deputy Noonan, will discuss that with the House or, if a Bill is appropriate, bring it before the House, I am sure the answer on both issues is "yes".

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: On the outstanding reports of the Constitutional Convention, the House was told earlier this week that there would be an item to deal with this on the business for next week. In fact, the Whips have now been told that will not happen, albeit that the report on blasphemy is ready.

My real question is about the fact that the Government set a series of timeframes for the Constitutional Convention itself to do its work and the convention adhered to that timeframe. Other timeframes were set by the Government for the Government to consider the reports and to bring them before this House. None of the timescales set by the Government have been met. It would appear, from what we are being told at Whips meetings, that the delay is arising in Departments not feeding back the necessary responses to the reports.

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An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Feargháil will appreciate we cannot have a debate on this.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I do not want to. I just have a final point.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is only a minute left.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: That indicates that the Ministers in control of the various Departments do not attribute the same priority to the convention as the Government appeared to attribute to it when it was initiated.

Joan Burton: As I understand it, there is a memorandum coming to Cabinet next week on this matter. As Deputy Ó Feargháil will appreciate, there have been a number of changes in terms of officeholders and the new Ministers have had to come to grips with their new Departments. I expect the memorandum will come before Cabinet next week and will come before the House at an appropriate time subsequently.

Deputy Joe Higgins: By decree of the Government, in only seven days' time it will have another punitive tax on ordinary people in the form of water charges. Is it not incredible that we still do not have the information from the energy regulatory as to what exactly the Government will demand from households? On the social welfare Bill, will the €100 grant the Tánaiste proposes for some categories of welfare recipient be provided for in that?

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot discuss the content of Bills.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Does the Tánaiste realise how insulted people feel that she thinks that makes up for the complete breach of a promise she made at the election that there would be no water tax when, for a family of four, it will be €500 a year? What does the Tánaiste say to people who are fearful of what is coming down the line?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Tánaiste might be able to think about it but she cannot say it on the Order of Business.

Joan Burton: Deputy Higgins asked, on pending legislation, would the measure for the 410,000 households which will benefit from a quarterly payment of €25 or €100 per annum be legislated for after the budget, and the answer is "yes". While he may wish to disregard it, many feel that is an appropriate and helpful assistance.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Then the Tánaiste is completely out of touch.

Joan Burton: It will assist 410,000 households, including pensioners, carers, those who have a child on a domiciliary care allowance and those on disability. It will also be of significant assistance in reducing their water charges bill. As Deputy Higgins will be aware-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have a debate. We are over time.

Joan Burton: -----the best way to reduce water charges is to reduce consumption.

Deputy Joe Higgins: The Tánaiste is a disgrace.

Joan Burton: When people are able to be advised of their consumption, we will have a significant opportunity to reduce expensive water usage.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Deputy Higgins should sit down. He is out of touch.

An Ceann Comhairle: That completes the Order of Business.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputy Higgins resume his seat?

Deputy Emmet Stagg: Deputy Higgins is a bully.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Higgins knows he is out of order. He is long enough around here.

Deputy Joe Higgins: It is a disgrace.

Criminal Law (Child Grooming) Bill 2014: First Stage

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for offences in relation to the grooming of children for the purposes of sexual exploitation; to provide for matters connected therewith; and to give effect to Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combatting the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, and replacing council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for this opportunity to outline to the House the reasoning behind my Bill, which seeks to create an offence of child grooming for sexual exploitation and to explain to colleagues why such legislation is necessary. Through my work on the Oireachtas Joint Committee Justice, Defence and Equality and my contacts with front-line agencies, I believe such a move is necessary to tidy up the current laws to ensure the protection of children.

Deputies may note that while this is a short Bill, that does not take away from its important content. We all will be aware of the considerable levels of public concern about allegations of grooming on a large scale in Rotherham in England, especially allegations that many of those responsible have managed to evade justice. Deputies, however, may not be aware of the number of children shockingly being moved around our country to be sexually exploited, 30 of whom were detected over a two-year period. Members from all sides of the House will agree that we must ensure the most robust laws possible are in place to combat these heinous crimes.

The intention of this Bill is clear. Persons undertaking certain acts, including soliciting, requesting, counselling, encouraging, procuring or enticing a child under the age of 17 to do any act, including meeting an adult, shall be guilty of an offence. In addition, persons communicating with a child, by whatever means, with a view to gaining the trust of that child for the purpose of doing anything that would constitute sexual exploitation shall be guilty of an offence. To underline the seriousness of the crimes involved, such offences shall carry penalties on conviction not exceeding 14 years' imprisonment.

It is also important to note that while some of the public commentary around my proposals has been about online grooming, these offences would also apply to offline grooming so as to protect children in the general community and not only when they surf the net. It is worth

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noting that the proposed measures already enjoy cross-political support, with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality in June of last year unanimously backing the creation of the offence as part of its review of the laws on prostitution.

Since placing the Bill in the public domain, I have been greatly encouraged by the number of people coming forward to support it and the endorsement it has received from front-line agencies, including the Immigrant Council of Ireland, the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and Ruhama.

1 o'clock

We now have an opportunity to ensure that those who seek to harm our children can find no hiding place in the law and cannot use legal confusion to escape justice. I am seeking the support of all Deputies for this Bill. The creation of the offence not only reflects the unanimous view of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality but will also bring Ireland into line with European directives. We must build on the political consensus already achieved. It is my hope we quickly move to establish this offence and ensure there is no escape for those who want to prey on children.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Deputy Emmet Stagg: No.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Central Bank and Financial Services Authority of Ireland (Amendment) Bill 2014: First Stage

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the strengthening of the functions of the Financial Services Ombudsman, the consumer complaint procedure and related matters.

We are living in strange times where many people are facing eviction from their homes by banks that only survived because those same people bailed them out. Many lost their jobs as a result and now these banks are sending thousands of legal letters demanding payments. Yet the rules are weighted in favour of these banks and other financial institutions when a dispute arises or a complaint is made.

This Bill attempts to re-adjust that balance in favour of the consumer. It aims to make justice more accessible and affordable to people in conflict with a financial institution. I commend the Office of the Financial Services Ombudsman for the good work it does on behalf of consumers. Whether this Bill is passed or not, I believe that office should be playing a more active role in defending consumers, especially struggling home owners, trying to stand up to aggressive banks. I also pay tribute to the work of the Free Legal Advice Centre for its work on this issue, especially through its recent report, Redressing the Imbalance.

This is a short Bill focusing on the most immediate changes needed in legislation to give consumers a fighting chance when taking on a bank or other financial institution. There is an argument that a total restructuring of the domestic legislation is needed and the nature of EU law-making in this field leaves much to be desired. The Bill brings the definition of consumer in line with the version used in both the consumer protection code and in the Consumer Credit Act. The current definition is too broad and has led to a situation where the Financial Services Ombudsman is perhaps left without adequate time and resources to look after the interests of individual consumers.

The Bill would also remove the ombudsman's obligation to act in an informal manner and without regard to technicality and legal form. These phrases add nothing to the legislation and their interpretation can lead to inconsistency. Section 4 moves to allow consumers make a complaint within the standard six years or within two years of becoming aware of an issue. This change has long been proposed and would be an important step in strengthening consumer rights.

The Bill places a new onus on financial institutions to engage in a mediation process. If they do not engage, then they must provide the Financial Services Ombudsman with convincing reasons for their refusal. Section 7 allows for the ombudsman to arrive at a wider range of findings to give a more accurate picture to the complainant. Critically, this Bill will make the appeals process more affordable for consumers, replacing the High Court with the Circuit Court as the forum for appeals. The use of the High Court discourages appeals and also limits the range of the appeal because of the so-called "curial deference". My Bill will permit a full re-hearing.

The Bill is a package of amendments aimed at redressing the imbalance in favour of the consumer. It aims to make access to justice for the small person affordable, timely and transparent.

I commend the Bill to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): No.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

An Bille um an gCeathrú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht 2014: An Chéad Chéim

Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution Bill 2014: First Stage

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Tairgim:

Go gceadófar go dtabharfar isteach Bille dá ngairtear Acht chun an Bunreacht a leasú.

I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Constitution.

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This Bill will have the effect of allowing a referendum to repeal the eighth amendment to Article 40.3.3° of the Constitution, which is the constitutional ban on abortion. It would then allow the Government to legislate for abortion in Ireland.

There are significantly pressing issues facing ordinary people in this country such as the ongoing austerity onslaught, the housing crisis, water charges and so forth. The continued existence of the eighth amendment of the Constitution, however, is a pressing issue for women in this country. It is a life-and-death issue for many of them, as we saw over the summer with the case of Ms Y. Women who have restrictions on their ability to travel abroad for an abortion include migrant women - migrants make up 24% of my constituency - and working class women who do not have the money or the means to travel due to the onslaught of austerity. These are the people who pay most for the ongoing hypocrisy of the majority of parties in this Chamber who have seen fit to ignore their reality for the past 31 years. These women cannot wait any longer to have this referendum.

On the last day of the Dáil before the summer recess in July, the Tánaiste, when asked, said the Government would not revisit this issue and that the people had spoken. What an insult. My generation of women, those of child-bearing age most affected by the eighth amendment, never got an opportunity to speak on it when it was originally passed. Their lives are dictated by a provision on which they had no say. In the Dáil recently, the Minister for Health, Deputy Leo Varadkar, said the church should not be brought into this as it is about what is right. It was the Catholic Church and a range of Catholic groups which lobbied and pressed for this amendment in 1983. No other religion, Protestant or otherwise, supported it. It is, therefore, a sectarian amendment which has no place in the Constitution.

The past is a different country. The Catholic Church does not now enjoy the support it once did. However, the political establishment still seems to be determined to give it inordinate power and influence over health, education and other spheres of people's lives, particularly women's. The mantra is we will not revisit this as there is not an appetite to do so. There may be no appetite on the part of Fine Gael for political expediency but there is certainly an appetite among ordinary people to have a referendum to repeal the eighth amendment. The Socialist Party is well aware of this from its work on street stalls and in conversations with people. ROSA, the organisation for Reproductive rights, against Oppression, Sexism and Austerity, has the same experience.

An opinion poll at the weekend confirmed this even more. Of those polled, only 19% oppose the idea of a referendum in the lifetime of this Government. The concept of a referendum in the next year is supported by 59% of those polled with 72% supporting abortion where a mother's life is at risk, 69% supporting it in the case of rape and 68% in the case of a threat to the long-term health of a woman. People on the ground have gone way beyond the political establishment.

While the Government may not have an appetite to change the law, perhaps it should take a lesson from Spain. In the past few weeks, the Spanish Government had to withdraw in a humiliating fashion its attempts and proposals to curb abortion when tens of thousands took to the streets in 20 cities around Spain. This Saturday, there will also be a march for choice in Dublin - yet another one - because men and women have had to take to the streets to get the Government and the establishment to listen. I hope this march will be very large.

Will the Labour Party continue a legacy and culture of a Catholic Church influenced State

which allowed the Magdalen laundries, the mother and baby homes and symphysiotomy? Will it stop controlling women's bodies and lives and allow women their health care and their rights? We have designed and published a simple Bill. We call on the Labour Party in particular, whose members say they support the repeal of the eighth amendment, to accept the Bill, to introduce it and to allow the Second Stage debate on the issue to proceed in Government time. A referendum could be held in the spring, along with other referenda such as the one on marriage equality. There is no need to bring people out on several occasions. Let the people have their say on the issue, as it makes sense, is practical and women cannot wait.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): No.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: I declare the motion for leave to introduce the Bill agreed. Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Tairgim: "Go dtógfáir an Bille in am Comhaltaí Príobháideacha."

I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): I move:

That, notwithstanding the Order of 9th March, 2011, and until the Dáil shall otherwise order, with effect from 4th November, 2014, the order in which Questions to members of the Government, other than the Taoiseach, shall be asked in accordance with Standing Order 37(2) shall be as follows:

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection

Minister for Finance

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Minister for Defence

Minister for Justice and Equality

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Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

Minister for Health

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Minister for Education and Skills

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

Question put and agreed to.

Sport Ireland Bill 2014: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on Deputy Joe Carey, whom I understand is sharing time with his constituency colleague, Deputy Pat Breen.

Deputy Joe Carey: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, could I share time with Deputy Noel Coonan?

An Ceann Comhairle: By all means, we can share time.

Deputy Joe Carey: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Second Stage debate on the Sport Ireland Bill 2014. The purpose of the Bill is to establish sport Ireland as a new body, which will replace the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority. With the passage of the Bill, sport Ireland will continue the work currently being done by the Irish Sports Council to promote, develop and co-ordinate sport in this country. The new body will also continue the work of the National Sports Campus Development Authority.

Sport is essential to the lives of Irish people. I have had the pleasure of attending four senior All-Ireland hurling finals in which my native county of Clare participated and, thankfully, it won three finals since 1995. We also had recent success in the under-21 age group this year, which in fact completed three in a row. I congratulate all those involved in the team, both the management and those on the panel. Such victories gave a huge boost to people in County Clare. I congratulate all those who participate in sporting activities: the players, mentors and all those who give their time voluntarily to coach young hurling teams, camogie teams, soccer teams or Gaelic games. It is important that young people participate in sport.

The Government will be judged on its record. The reinstatement of the sports capital programme in 2012 was essential. I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, for pursuing the agenda and delivering on it. Money spent on sport is a wise investment in people's future. More than 2,030 applications were received in the most recent round of applications for funding, the second highest number of applications for the scheme, which illustrates the continued requirement for investment in sporting facilities throughout the country. I listened to the open-

ing address of the Minister of State in the Second Stage debate. He made the case for the continuation of the sports capital programme next year. I support that aim. It is essential that we continue to invest in sport and have a properly funded sports capital programme. It would make sense to have an annual sports capital programme. Given that the public finances are shaping up it would make sense to invest in sports capital projects.

I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, and his officials for securing four games in the 2020 UEFA European Football Championships, Euro 2020. It was a big coup for this country. It will be first time we have hosted such an event. I wish him well in his efforts to secure the Rugby World Cup for this country.

I also wish to stress the importance of investment in the horse and greyhound industry. The inaugural Irish Champions Weekend for horse racing was held recently. An upset occurred with The Grey Gatsby beating Australia. However, it was a great race. It highlighted what could be done in terms of existing events and with co-operation between Leopardstown and The Curragh racecourses. A big crowd of people attended. It is important to invest in horse racing because it sustains the tens of thousands of people working with horses in this country. It is important that we look after the industry, promote it and invest in it. In addition to the Irish Champions Weekend there are week-long festivals in Galway and recently the festival was held at Listowel. Such festivals mean a great deal to the local economy and it is important to continue to invest in the sector. The same is true of the greyhound industry, due to the local jobs produced in rural areas.

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to inform Deputy Breen that Deputy Carey is sharing his ten minutes with Deputy Coonan.

Deputy Noel Coonan: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for your co-operation in affording me the opportunity to address the Bill. I extend my congratulations and welcome to the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, for introducing the Bill and for the work he is doing as Minister of State with responsibility for sport. In the so-called good times we did not have a round of sports capital funding but as the economy began to improve, he reintroduced the scheme in 2012. Such a scheme was welcome and is encouraging.

It is important to recognise the benefit of sport to the entire community but in particular to the youth. There is an old saying that the idle mind is the devil's workshop. It has been proven that there is nothing better for the community and young people than involvement in organised sport. The return is evident in abundance in terms of the effect that has on community life and the health and well-being of the young people involved. I say well done to the Minister of State.

Deputy Carey referred to the significant number of applications for the sports capital grant. I sometimes asked myself if the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, had responsibility for sport because when it came to allocations of the grant in Tipperary another Minister claimed credit for all the allocations. However, it is clear that the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, is really the Minister for sport. While Mayo might not reach the pinnacle in terms of All-Ireland football glory, the Mayo Deputy has reached the pinnacle in sport in this country.

Initially, I was concerned about the proposed amalgamations in the Bill because amalgamations are not always for the best. A bigger group can often be less effective than a smaller, more active group. In the context of local government when town councils were dissolved problems arose with the larger areas of responsibility and the services provided. However, I welcome

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the assurances given by the Minister of State that it will not be the case in the context of sport Ireland and that it will be of much more benefit to sport to have both the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority united.

I share the view expressed by Deputy Carey that sports capital funding should be provided on an annual basis. There is no better investment for the country. The news that Euro 2020 games will be played in Dublin has been welcomed but every year the GAA has four major games in Dublin and the capacity of its stadiums should be compared to that of the Aviva Stadium. The GAA caters for the entire country and we should not forget the work of the GAA in our delight at the news about Euro 2020. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, to bear in mind that the GAA caters for the entire country. Thurles is a provincial town but it has Semple Stadium, the home of hurling. I wish Tipperary well on Saturday in the All-Ireland final replay and I know the Ceann Comhairle will be there to cheer the team on - he is impartial but I expect him to show his true colours on that occasion. We should focus on rural Ireland and continue to support the GAA - we must not lose sight of the tremendous work it does across the country.

Speaking of facilities, the Curragh is often mentioned to me, one of Ireland's prime horse racing venues. The facilities at the Curragh need to be updated and substantial investment is required. The Curragh is the pride and joy of Irish racing but people who visit from abroad are often taken aback at the standard of facilities, which should be modernised. Thurles is the home of hurling but it has a fine racecourse that has hosted many good trainers and breeders and needs development.

I welcome the spirit of this Bill and, as my time is up, I will not delay my colleague, Deputy Pat Breen, who is from Clare. Clare won the hurling All-Ireland last year and had hard luck this year but Tipperary will try to pick up the mantle. Finally, congratulations to Kerry on winning the recent football All-Ireland final.

Deputy Pat Breen: The contributions we have just heard show the spirit of two good punters and I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. It is great to see the Opposition has such interest in this important Bill as the other side of the Chamber is empty. The Bill provides for the merger of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority into a single authority, sport Ireland. This merger is in line with the Government's programme to rationalise a number of State agencies and is driven by our goal to ensure better service delivery and value for money for service providers, State agencies and, above all, taxpayers. The Bill also provides for sport Ireland to become the statutory body with responsibility for our anti-doping programme and makes provision for the sharing of information between sport Ireland and such organisations as the Garda Síochána, Customs and Excise and the Health Products Regulatory Authority. This is essential if we are to stamp out doping in sport.

The Irish Sports Council, ISC, was set up in 1999 and it has a number of very important functions to support sporting activity - its remit extends beyond supporting just elite international athletes. The ISC has been to the fore in encouraging greater participation at every level in sport, especially local level. This is hugely important because physical inactivity is now recognised as a serious risk factor for a number of chronic illnesses including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some cancers. Experts believe that we can reduce our risks of developing these diseases by 50% simply by being physically active. The Minister of State, Deputy Ring, has focused on this, given his special responsibility in the area of sport. Sport is very important in the lives of many people, especially in my county, and Deputy Carey referred to this. The Clare team won the senior All-Ireland hurling final last year and was hurling champion at un-

der-21 level three times in a row, which was important. These young players are role models for young people in Clare because participation in sports and leisure activities is rising throughout the country.

A key factor in this increased participation is awareness of the various activities that are available and this awareness has been driven by the development of the local sports partnership. In 2001 the Clare local sports partnership was set up and it has been successful because it brought together all of the key agencies in the county such as the vocational education committee, VEC, the local authority, Clare youth services, Clare Local Development Company, the chamber of commerce, the Clare Community Forum, the Clare sports forum, FÁS and the HSE. It has also been successful because it tailored its activities to cater for the local community and ensured that there was some activity in which everybody could get involved, no matter the level of fitness. Next week, in an effort to encourage people to improve their health and well-being during the autumn, a community active leisure week is being organised at the Shannon leisure centre. I wish everyone well with this initiative and encourage as many people as possible to avail of the various activities that are taking place in Shannon. Nationally, some 200,000 people participated in locally delivered programmes last year and an additional 200,000 took part in women in sport activities. Local sports partnerships are critical in the battle to encourage people to live a healthier lifestyle and I urge sport Ireland to continue to support local sport partnership programmes.

Leisure activities are not just important from a health point of view, but make a huge contribution to tourism development. Last year, some 685 trails were registered with the Irish Sports Council under the national trails register, amounting to over 9,000 km of trails, and included walking, cycling, greenway and equestrian trails. This additional investment in various trails is testament to the renewed interest in participating in these activities and marketing promotions such as the Wild Atlantic Way. The Minister of State is very familiar with the Wild Atlantic Way because he initiated it with his Department. It is a fantastic programme that has greatly increased tourism and walking activities.

Now that Shannon Airport is on the up again we are encouraging tourists to land there, and I know the Minister of State will not mind this as Knock Airport does not take trans-Atlantic flights. Cycling and walking trails are a new initiative that can form an important part of sport tourism. The development of greenway infrastructure will be critical to sustaining this segment of the market and I would like to acknowledge the support of the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, for these projects. We are at an advanced planning stage of the greenway route that will link Ennis to Lahinch via Corofin and Ennistymon and the Minister has provided €40,000 in seed funding for the project. There is an idyllic coastline in County Clare and we already have a beautiful 20 km coastal walking trail which links the Cliffs of Moher to Doolin. When the Minister of State is in the area I encourage him to take this walk as it is a great magnet for tourism in Clare.

Last weekend we had the centrepiece of the GAA football season and millions of people all over the world tuned in to watch the All-Ireland football final between Kerry and Donegal. Only three weeks ago the same was the case for the hurling final and this week everybody is eagerly awaiting the hurling replay on Saturday evening between Tipperary and Kilkenny. There is great anticipation around the Ryder Cup, especially given that Paul McGinley is captaining the side. The majority of Irish people love sport, whether it is hurling, football, golf, rugby, soccer or athletics, and while I know that the sports capital programme referred to by other speakers is not relevant to this Bill, funding is a real issue for many local sporting organisations. I am

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glad to say that my county shared in the €40.5 million which was spent under the programme this year and I compliment the Minister on the increase in funding. The increased funding is allocated on a *per capita* basis and this has been instrumental to the success of many clubs in County Clare. Sports clubs that receive such funding are very grateful as it means a lot to small parishes so I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Ring. Like the other contributors, I hope the Minister of State succeeds in his efforts relating to a new sports capital scheme for 2015.

There was not a dry eye in this country when Katie Taylor won a gold medal at the London Olympics. The Minister of State, Deputy Ring, was there to congratulate Ms Taylor and was a bit shy on television. The victory lifted the country but it is important that we do not forget that her victory and those of other elite athletes would not be possible without the support that they received from the Irish Sports Council. Without such help they might not have won those medals. In 2012 some 67 medals were won at various world and European competitions, compared to six medals in 2001.

One can see the increase in the number of medals won by Irish athletes as a result of the Sports Council, and all those associated with it are to be complimented on the work they have done. The high performance programme has paved the way for our increased success.

At the London Olympics Irish athletes competed in 13 of the 26 sporting events. We won five medals and for the first time since 1980 we won medals in more than one sport. We should not forget the Paralympic team, which was most successful in winning 16 medals, including eight gold. If we invest in our athletes they will deliver success, as we have seen in recent years. They deserve our support and I hope that Sport Ireland will continue to invest in this programme. I am sure the Minister of State will comment on this.

I wish to turn briefly to the anti-doping aspect of the Bill. Part 4 outlines Sport Ireland's responsibilities in terms of addressing doping in sport. While we all like to believe no doping exists in sport, events have taught us otherwise. One of the most high-profile cases involved Lance Armstrong, and as a result of a doping investigation, he lost his seven Tour de France titles.

The Irish Sports Council has responsibility for our anti-doping programme and in 2013, the programme cost more than €1.2 million. A total of 1,093 blood and urine tests were carried out in Ireland and overseas. At the European team championships last year, 49 pre-competition and 43 post-competition urine tests were carried out, and the success of the anti-doping programme in Ireland is because of the co-operation received from the national governing bodies and athletes. Initially the Sports Council carried out this function in line with our commitment to the Council of Europe ruling, but in more recent times additional requirements have arisen given our ratification of UNESCO convention which commits the Government to full compliance with the world anti-doping code launched in 2003 and revised in 2008. The Bill will put anti-doping on a statutory basis and will give Sport Ireland a stronger hand in the battle against doping. The majority of our sports people do not resort to the use of drugs to enhance their performance. It is worth pointing out that Irish athletes are among the most tested in the world and it is important that we continue this programme to maintain and enhance our teams' reputations abroad.

I commend the Minister of State on bringing the Bill before the House and I have no doubt that the merger of the Irish Sports Council and the NSCDA into one entity, namely, Sport Ireland, will have undisputable benefits for the development of sport and related leisure activities

throughout the country.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next speaking slot will be shared by Deputies Anthony Lawlor, Paul Connaughton and Catherine Byrne.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I will start by giving out to the Minister of State because he is too fair. His predecessors used to curry political favour in the home county of the Minister with responsibility for sport or the Minister for Finance. The Minister of State has been most fair in giving each county a fair share of the funding available based on population. Limited though the funding is, each county has benefitted on a *pro rata* basis and I congratulate the Minister of State on this, even though I am giving out to him for being too fair.

My county received a number of small amounts of funding for various groups which I know will be used to great benefit, as it was on the previous occasion, particularly as the amount of matching funding required by the clubs or organisations was reduced from 30% to 15%. A former Minister from my constituency, Charlie McCreevy, dished out allocations of €700,000, €800,000 and €900,000 and clubs had to come up with 30% of it. As a result some of them are now in financial difficulties because they had to borrow to provide the matching funding. The Minister of State has been smart enough to recognise a small pool of money can go a long way to get more people participating in sport at local level.

I congratulate the Irish Sports Council on its phenomenal work. Everyone speaks about the elite athletes, and I congratulate the two sailors who qualified for the 2016 Olympic Games. However, when one looks at the figures beyond the elite athletes one sees that 700,000 kids participate in sport, which to my mind is a huge success for the Irish Sports Council. The establishment of the sports partnerships in each county, and the annual funding of €5 million allocated to them, has accrued benefits in getting people participating in sport.

There are 685 walking trails throughout the country. Walking trails cater for someone as young as three years of age to someone as old as 100 and are of huge benefit to cross-sections of the population. I will be parochial and ask the Minister of State to examine the canals running through Kildare. I have been pushing hard for many years for these to be opened for cycling and walking. Kildare is bereft of tourism and we do not have a Westport or the glorious sights along the Atlantic Way such as there are in Mayo. We are fortunate to be the thoroughbred county and horse racing is our main sport. I must say to the previous speakers, who are from Tipperary and Clare, that Kildare won more all-Ireland hurling championships this year than either Tipperary or Clare, or Cork for that matter as I see Deputy Creed looking at me.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I remind Deputy Lawlor he is sharing time with two colleagues.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I appreciate that.

Deputy Paul J. Connaughton: He is only getting good now. Let him off.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: For winning an all-Ireland, I suppose.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: The canals are a potential tourism facility in Kildare, and if they were opened up to cycling and walking, it would be excellent. I can see huge potential in the long term.

Investment in sport occurs in a number of ways and one way which goes unnoticed is how

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the Tús scheme works for sports clubs and sports organisations in helping to maintain what they have and allowing improvements to be made.

I am delighted we will amalgamate two organisations. The National Sports Campus Development Authority started off on a bad vein with the Bertie bowl, and thanks be to God this was got rid of years ago. It also had problems with the pool. We will have a national sports centre run by the Sports Council, which has an interest in sport. With the amalgamation of the two bodies will we see a reduction in staff and the associated administrative costs? If amalgamations take place in the private sector, inevitably there are staff reductions. Will we see this in the short term or will it take longer to reach the objective of reducing the costs of running the two organisations?

I have not seen any mention of a board in the Bill. The Sports Council board has nine members and there are 15 on the National Sports Campus Development Authority. Will there be a board? People speak about gender equality. I am very much in favour of putting people on boards who have the capacity to add to the board and are not put on it for the sake of being put on it. I would welcome as many sporting people as possible because they have a knowledge of sport.

My next point is not associated with the Bill. It is with regard to a serious problem with young people, which is concussion in sport. I have written to the Minister for Education and Skills and perhaps the Minister of State will be able to help me in this matter. There is a good programme in Northern Ireland for schools to ensure the implementation of the procedure to be followed when concussion occurs. Perhaps we need to implement something similar in our schools. I have seen it at national sport level but not in school sports and we need to address it. The Minister of State might contact his colleague about implementing what is going on in the North of Ireland at the moment with regard to concussion in young people.

I wish the Minister of State the best of success with this. He is most unfair in being even throughout the whole county. I hope we will have the next round of sports capital grants as soon as possible.

Deputy Paul J. Connaughton: Leaner government and a common-sense approach to the nation's housekeeping is what the Government is about. The Sport Ireland Bill 2014 is another example of the practical steps being taken to simplify and slim down the number of Government agencies. The Bill provides for the dissolution of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority and the merging of their functions into a single entity, sport Ireland.

Earlier this week we had further evidence of the common-sense approach taken to sports and sporting facilities with the news that sports facilities are to be exempt from commercial rates which will come as a very significant boost to sports clubs across the country. Many sports clubs will welcome the extra money they will retain in their coffers and will put it to good use enhancing the availability of sports across the country.

The health-giving properties of sport for the mind and body are well known. In an era when child and adult obesity is an increasing problem it makes sense to channel further investment into sports facilities at community level. Combatting obesity through sports and making sports more attractive and accessible to all form one element of our national approach to sport. However, there is a darker side to sport in some cases and the Bill designates sport Ireland as the

anti-doping organisation for the State.

Almost three years ago the public service reform plan was announced. It had at its heart a plan to reduce the cost of government and seek better value for money while at all times placing customer service at the core of each service. That plan sets out 48 rationalisation measures involving 30 actions and 100 agencies. Today's Bill emerged from that rationalisation drive.

The past three years have seen very significant developments at the National Sports Campus at Abbotstown. Three years ago proposals were submitted for the development of a national indoor athletics track, a national indoor sports centre and gymnastics training centre. In 2012 ownership of the lands at Abbotstown was transferred from the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine to the National Sports Campus Development Authority. Last year saw the Irish Sports Council and 20 other national governing bodies move to Abbotstown. We also had the opening of the National Modern Pentathlon Centre, the National Horse Sport Arena and the National Diving Training Centre.

The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, has announced €13 million for the new national indoor training arena. Earlier this year all-weather synthetic pitches for Gaelic games, soccer and rugby opened. All of this represents a significant action by the Government and significant commitment to the development of sport in Ireland. It is most encouraging for international athletes, too many of whom in the past had to train in substandard facilities.

I issue one word of caution over the development of this world-class campus which relates to cherishing all our athletes and potential athletes equally. The new sports campus adjoins the M50 which will make it accessible for many people. However, we must look at the effect of such centralised facilities and the impact on athletes whose homes are more than 100 miles from these facilities. Do they have an equal opportunity to access these facilities or can supports or measures be put in place to make those facilities more accessible? Pardon the pun, but is it a level playing field for all competitors? I recognise that centralised facilities must be convenient for as many people as possible and cannot be located in remote areas, but I am sure measures could be put in place to reduce the expense and inconvenience for people whose homes are a long way from the new campus.

I welcome the Bill and the practical approach that underpins it will pay dividends for Irish sport, but I want to see the benefit of that spread among athletes from all corners of the country.

Deputy Lawlor and others raised the issue of sports capital grants. While they can be somewhat of a pain in the neck for public representatives it is good to see after two rounds the amount of good work that has been achieved from relatively small amounts of money, with clubs spending it to increase activity in our community. I would like to see another round of sports capital grants if that is possible under the tight budgetary circumstances the Minister of State faces.

We have a major issue in the country with mental health and particularly suicide among young males. At times we have a tendency to suggest that we should do something about it through schools. We seem to put everything through schools and on top of teachers. Sport can play a very active role in this regard. We have coaches in every kind of sporting activity teaching these young people in the evenings when they are out of school. Maybe these people have not been given adequate training to understand the signs of young people who may be in trouble. We talk about people falling through the cracks. Surely it is better to offer a sort of 24-hour service than just an eight-hour service when they are in school. Perhaps there could be

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an overall approach involving the Departments of Transport, Tourism and Sport; Health; and Education and Skills. We should bring in all these coaches who deal with these people on a totally different level to see if they can help in combatting this terrible scourge.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: As the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, said yesterday evening, the Bill brings responsibility for the implementation of Irish sports under one single agency, which I welcome. With the merging of the two bodies as part of the Government programme for rationalisation of State agencies it makes sense to have one unified body responsible for all sports and sports activities. This new body will look after the development and management of sporting facilities and will implement a high-performance programme and general participation in sport.

I welcome last week's great news that Ireland is to host some of the Euro 2020 games, which is very positive for the tourism and sporting sector here. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, on helping to bring this event to Ireland. I also commend the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on its support of sport in Ireland, particularly through the sports capital grants, which the Government reinstated in 2012. I was delighted to learn that seven clubs in my area received funding of more than €382,000.

Last year we were very proud that our international athletes won over 67 medals in international competition at junior and elite levels. Our recent success at the Paralympic Games and the Special Olympics shows that nothing can stand in the way when one comes to competing at international level. I agree with the Minister of State that sport is a very important element of the lives of Irish people, both socially and from a health perspective. Sport plays an important role in young people's development. Not only does it enable young people to get fit and learn new skills, but it also helps them to become team players and interact with their peers. It encourages healthy competition and sportsmanship, and respect for the opponent. It also encourages leadership skills and helps young people to grow in confidence.

I hope sport Ireland will also play an important role in supporting our sporting clubs and organisations throughout the community. Sport is the glue that holds communities together. On a personal level, from a young age I was involved in sport - in soccer, running, basketball and long jump. I had the proud privilege to play soccer locally and play in the national league. Crucial for me, as a young person, was the Community Games. Being involved in the Community Games played a huge part in encouraging me and many other young people to get involved in sport and to continue their love of sport through the years. Sadly in some communities the Community Games is no longer functioning as it did in the past, which is a shame because it has helped young people who normally did not have the opportunity to be involved in other sports to come along and take part.

While physical education in schools may not be in the Minister of State's jurisdiction, it is important to mention it. I come from an area with two schools that do not even have a gym. One of the class teachers goes in and performs the PE class, which is a terrible shame. We are always trying to encourage young people to take exercise and particularly with the younger age group because of obesity and things like that. It is a shame to think that in this day and age certain schools do not have that facility.

I wish to deal with drugs in sports. I commend all those who participate in sports and do not use drugs. It is sad that some people who participate in sport use drugs occasionally because it undermines the whole ethos of sport, which is about living a healthy lifestyle and being in-

olved.

I commend the Bill to the House, which represents a very important step. It is very important to unite groups to work together, not just for communities but also for national sports.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next speaking slot is being shared by Deputies Creed and Dowds.

Deputy Michael Creed: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the Sport Ireland Bill which is a welcome and overdue piece of housekeeping in respect of the administrative structures for Irish sport. In welcoming the merger of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority, I pay tribute to the staff of both organisations. I have no doubt but that under the new aegis of sport Ireland, whomsoever may be at its helm will be as committed as were its constituent parts to the promotion and the best interests of sport in Ireland. In the brief time available to me, I wish to raise a number of issues that sport Ireland might take up as issues of interest to it and to the public at large in respect of sport and participation. I also wish to raise some issues the Minister of State might usefully pursue. At the outset, I congratulate the Minister of State on his tenure as Minister and, in particular, on his success in securing funding in difficult times for sport infrastructure nationwide. I also thank him for the even-handed approach he has adopted with regard to the distribution and allocation of that funding, which I believe is significantly at variance with that of his predecessors.

One issue that sport Ireland may take up but the Minister of State in particular must take up is the inaction by the Government on the issue of alcohol abuse. At present, the Government's approach to this issue is borderline shambolic. It is stumbling from proposals for minimum pricing and is long-fingering proposals in that regard. Abusive alcohol consumption is a cancer in Irish society and is closely associated with sporting organisations, which is very regrettable. According to figures provided by the National Off-Licence Association before an Oireachtas committee hearing, incredibly Irish taxpayers subsidise the below-cost sale of alcohol to the tune of €21 million per annum through refunds to the multiples that have grossly offensive advertisements in the daily newspapers every day of the week, as well as in every Sunday newspaper, which are designed to increase footfall in order that they may sell other products to consumers. Members must get serious on this issue, as the current position is borderline shambolic. The Government appears to have abdicated its position on minimum pricing until such time as the European Commission rules on the Scottish proposals, which are now under appeal there. The Minister of State should be in no doubt but that we are dealing with a powerful vested interest in the form of the drinks industry. Members have seen the tobacco industry flexing its muscles on plain packaging, but equally I have no doubt Members are witnessing arm twisting behind the scenes by the drinks industry with regard to minimum pricing. I note that at the stroke of a pen in the morning, the Government could reinstate the ban on below-cost selling of alcohol as was provided for in the groceries order that was abolished in 2006. This measure is long overdue and I urge the Minister of State to take it on board. Taxpayers are subsidising the multiples to the tune of €21 million in selling below-cost alcohol. Were it possible to ring-fence that funding for the Minister of State's Department, he could make a great deal of progress on capital infrastructure nationwide.

Section 4 provides that sport Ireland will have responsibility for tackling doping. This is welcome and I also welcome the role played by the Irish Sports Council in particular in this regard, as well as the funds it has committed. I raise two related issues, the first of which is the use of creatine and sports supplements in sport, particularly in physical contact sports, which

is not exclusively but perhaps predominantly associated with rugby. I believe that all physical contact sports are experiencing the increasing use, by young people in particular, of supplements and creatine. It is important to put on record the comments of people who I consider to be prominent and I hope I will not misquote them. Tony Ward, who is a former international rugby player and is a high-profile individual, is on the record as stating he considers the supplement or drug culture now infiltrating the game to be legalised cheating. Ruth Wood-Martin, who is the nutritionist with the IRFU, has stated that no player under 18 should use supplements and should avoid creatine. She went on to state that some supplements may be harmful and routinely contain banned substances. As for the long-term consequences for the young people concerned, this is a ticking time bomb and many parents in particular in a way are almost helpless to counter the growing demand from their children, who like everybody wish to be the next Brian O'Driscoll or the next Paul O'Connell. I dare say this is not exclusive to rugby because I am sure it is crossing over into other physical contact sports, including the GAA codes, soccer and so on. Clear and binding protocols on all bodies affiliated to the Irish Sports Council or Sport Ireland are required in this regard.

The other issue I believe must be taken up is that of head injuries. There has been extensive coverage in the media of the adverse consequences, which regrettably in some of the most extreme cases include death but which routinely involve dementia and brain damage. I note that Dr. O'Driscoll resigned from the IRFU medical advisory group because of its failure to abide by or adhere to recognised international norms in this regard. Every day, the newspapers carry sad stories about individuals who have suffered in this regard. The Minister of State will be aware of the clash of the Mayo titans that took place recently down in Limerick. While it may or may not have been a contributory factor to the outcome, I believe that Cillian O'Connor and Aidan O'Shea clashed accidentally on the pitch. Although both were taken off, both actually came back onto the pitch. While I appreciate they had medical advice on the sidelines, had binding protocols been in place one must question whether that would have been allowed. I believe it is time to tackle the issue head on. The entire area of head injuries associated with sport is a silent global epidemic and it is a matter that should be tackled head on.

Another ticking time bomb for society is obesity. A HSE task force on obesity, which by coincidence was chaired by Mr. John Treacy, head of the Irish Sports Council, produced a report in 2005 which found that in Ireland, 39% of adults were overweight, 18% of adults were obese, and 2,000 premature deaths were associated with it at a cost of approximately €4 billion per annum to the State. While this report was from 2005, I have not seen any great evidence that the State is sufficiently exercised to address the issue. I will turn to some of the more interesting comments in this issue. At a conference held by the Irish Heart Foundation, the former Secretary General of the Department of Health, Dr. Ambrose McLoughlin, stated the obesity problem is so bad that the present generation of parents may be the first to bury their own children. This is a wake-up call as to the scale of the problem. Professor Donal O'Shea, a consultant endocrinologist, stated the health service is close to being overwhelmed by the number of obese children. He stated there has been an increase of 1,200% at the extreme end of obesity, that is, those with a body mass index score in excess of 52, whereas an index score of between 18 and 25 is considered to be the norm. These statistics should be real wake-up calls. While this is somewhat like the point made by my colleague, Deputy Connaughton, there almost is a knee-jerk reaction in such circumstances to load a great number of things to do onto schools, which have a role to play. While Sport Ireland will have many roles to play, it could usefully take up this issue of obesity and be the advocate for cross-departmental change in this area.

There is no single issue that will solve this problem but as I stated at the outset, it is a ticking time bomb that must be tackled. For example, I have referred to alcohol advertising but Members will have seen the recent Coca-Cola advertising whereby one can now get Coke with one's name on the bottle. This constitutes pernicious advertising targeted at children who increasingly and regrettably lead sedentary lifestyles with less activity, sitting before televisions, playing Xbox and so on. Members must challenge this culture and must challenge the advertising that is targeted selectively at children to consume products that are not compatible with a healthy lifestyle. If I may use the term, there is much food for thought in this area and while I am not being prescriptive as to what is the best way to tackle the problem, sport Ireland should champion the cause of healthy lifestyles, with sport being a part thereof. It is true that those who participate in sport go on to be higher achievers in respect of academia and, therefore, Members should encourage children to participate.

2 o'clock

In that context, I wish to raise one further issue. The Minister of State has rightfully received plaudits from many corners with regard to the funding for the sports capital grants. It might be time to consider whether that funding could be used for purposes other than capital provision, which includes new dressing rooms, playing pitches, flood lighting and so on. Is there a case, for example, for ring-fencing some of it for children from poorer backgrounds who may not be able to afford the cost of participating in certain sports? As the father of three young children, I am aware of the pressure parents are under at this time of year. As well as the usual back-to-school expenses, there are costs attached to children participating in GAA, basketball, swimming and so on. Unfortunately, some parents will not be able to afford those costs. If a portion of the sports capital allocation were ring-fenced for initiatives to facilitate access, particularly to minority sports, it could benefit a lot of children.

In fairness to GAA and soccer clubs, cost has never been a stumbling block to participation in those sports. On the other hand, in the case of swimming, for instance, access may be a problem. In rural areas, in particular, the only pool might be in a hotel which charges for admission. If schools could access facilities pertaining to minority sports by way of a fund from the Minister of State's Department or one channelled through the Department of Education and Skills, participation levels might well increase. Lest my comments be misinterpreted, the point I am making stands as a tribute to Gaelic games, rugby and soccer. However, I would guess that up to 90% of the sports capital provision goes to those three sports. The Minister of State has spoken in the past about how we can increase participation in minority sports. The suggestion I have made might offer a way forward.

I welcome the Bill and commend it to the House. I congratulate the Minister of State on his achievements in office.

Deputy Robert Dowds: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I agree with Deputy Michael Creed's comments on below-cost selling of alcohol. We must tackle that issue as rapidly as possible. I also concur with his comments regarding minority sports. In the case of boxing, for example, even though it has provided Ireland with more Olympic medals than any other sport, it is in many ways a poor relation. This might be because those involved in it are not as well organised as their counterparts in the GAA, for instance, when it comes to seeking grants and so on. Neilstown boxing club in my constituency was waiting years to secure a premises, while the club in Palmerstown is still seeking one.

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The Bill before us will help to improve the governance of sport in Ireland. I welcome the merger of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority. It is an example of common sense governance which should also save the taxpayer money without having an adverse effect on services. Several speakers referred to the importance of sport in Ireland, of which there is ample evidence in every community across the land. I concur with the remarks by my colleague, Deputy Jack Wall, regarding its importance in keeping young people away from bad influences, including drugs. Sport has positive benefits on a range of fronts, including health - both physical or mental - the capacity for developing friendships, and so on. Moreover, these are benefits which impact both individuals and communities. There is a great deal of pleasure to be had from sport even if one is too old to participate and is merely a spectator.

I commend the Government on its decision this week that sports clubs will not be liable for commercial rates in respect of non-commercial components such as dressing rooms and so on. This should lead to substantial savings for many clubs. I am aware of the difficulties this issue was causing in my constituency for such organisations as Round Towers GAA club and the Clondalkin and Lucan rugby clubs.

I take this opportunity to highlight the potential threat posed by the practice of match fixing. While the Bill assigns a role to sport Ireland in tackling doping, it does not mention any function for the new entity in combating match fixing or other sports fraud. Earlier this year, the Union of European Football Associations, UEFA, called on governments across Europe to insert a specific crime of match fixing into criminal justice legislation. This would make it easier to bring forward prosecutions and secure the conviction of any persons threatening the integrity of sport in Ireland. While we have not yet had any high-profile instance of match fixing, there have been numerous prosecutions by our nearest neighbour, the United Kingdom. We must be proactive in guarding against such a development here. I am drawing up a draft Bill on this issue and, when it is ready, I hope to meet with the Minister of State to discuss whether it might be a runner. I look forward to hearing his views on the matter and hope he will refer to it in his reply.

Several speakers referred to the huge growth in the numbers of walking and running groups throughout the country in recent years, a development which I hope sport Ireland will support. Last year, I introduced the Access to the Countryside Bill 2013 in this Chamber, which seeks to improve access for walkers and runners. That Bill is awaiting reception in the environment committee. One of the proposals it contains is to give walkers and runners the option of using footpaths instead of dark roads in remote areas. While some might consider the Bill as focusing on urban concerns, my view is that it would in fact offer most benefit to rural dwellers. I hope the Minister of State will bear the proposals in mind when reflecting on ways to encourage greater participation in sport. As well as addressing that objective, the Bill also has potential to provide an economic benefit by way of increased tourism. The Minister of State will be well aware of how the local economy has benefited greatly from the lovely pathway and cycleway between Westport and Achill in his constituency.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies Gabrielle McFadden and Michelle Mulherin will share time, with each having ten minutes.

Deputy Gabrielle McFadden: I begin by noting that there is no Opposition Member in the Chamber. Clearly, Deputies on that side of the House do not consider this Bill of sufficient importance to participate in the debate and are not particularly concerned about the well-being

of people in this country.

On Sunday, Rory McIlroy will compete as the world's number one in the greatest golf competition in the world. The value of sport to Ireland's international reputation is incalculable. Sport is serious business, contributing between €1.4 billion and €2.4 billion to GDP and supporting in excess of 40,000 jobs. Sport is said to be the fastest growing niche of the global tourism industry. Indeed, sports tourists have been found to spend almost twice as much as so-called ordinary tourists. In my home town of Athlone, we have an annual triathlon, triAthlone, and we have even hosted a European championship. It is impossible to get a bed in a hotel or guest house in the area on those weekends. The Dublin to Galway cycleway, into which the Minister of State has had a major input, is very beneficial to all the towns along the route. The same is true of the Mayo greenway and the Wild Atlantic Way. These initiatives have shown the clear connection between tourism and sport. At the same time, such measures also benefit local communities and the well-being of residents. We are all aware of the value of sport to the health and well-being of the nation.

I support the provisions we are discussing today. The purpose of the Bill is to provide for the formation of a new statutory sports body, sport Ireland, or spórt Éireann, which merges the two existing sports bodies, the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority. I welcome this merger as it is part of the Government's programme for the rationalisation of State agencies, which was promised. It brings responsibility for the implementation of Irish sports policy under a single agency. The new agency will take over responsibility for the relevant functions currently performed by the Irish Sports Council and the authority. Sport Ireland will continue the good work currently being done by the council in promoting, developing and co-ordinating sport in Ireland and the work of the authority in developing the National Sports Campus at Blanchardstown.

One aspect of the Bill I particularly welcome is the provision to statutorily underpin the national anti-doping programme and the Irish anti-doping rules. The clampdown in doping in Irish sport will receive a major boost from this merger. Under this new plan, the Garda, Irish Medicines Board and, where necessary, customs officials will be able to share information. It is vital for the reputation of Irish sport that all athletes are competing on an equal footing. The decision will allow sport Ireland to protect a culture of clean sport. This work is important for everyone who loves sport, whether competing, training or just spectating. It will allow young people and serious athletes to compete in the true spirit of sport.

As others mentioned, many sports clubs have benefitted from the sports capital grants. My constituency was very happy to have benefitted from them. Many clubs of all sorts of descriptions and sizes received grants, including Gaelic, soccer, boxing and rowing clubs. It is not necessary part of the Bill but is there a possibility, when the Minister of State has funding again to give out grants, to have a preliminary check for applications, where a preliminary application could be sent in, checked and returned to a club before the closing date so it could adjust its application, if necessary, and it does not get the news at the last minute when it is too late to do anything about it? That would alleviate much of the frustration clubs feel. Having said that, many clubs and groups in my constituency were very happy to benefit from the Minister of State's very fair way of distributing the money throughout the country and not only his constituency, as has happened in the past.

I compliment the Minister on all the work he has done on sports tourism. As I mentioned, it is a vital part of regrowing our tourism industry, our economy and our international reputation.

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Deputy Michelle Mulherin: The purpose of the Bill is to provide for the establishment of Sport Ireland, or spórt Éireann, and for the dissolution of the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority and to amalgamate and rationalise the activities of each of these organisations. It gives us a great opportunity to look at the significance of sport in our country.

I commend the Minister of State, my colleague in County Mayo. He has embodied the whole idea of sport and has brought great energy and passion to the job. Although he is the Minister of State with responsibility for sport, he has sometimes doubled up as the Minister for Health to try to get the nation healthy. I congratulate him on that and I know many people feel the same way about how he has undertaken his job as Minister of State.

When we think of sport, we initially think of all the headline things, such as an international soccer match and the All-Ireland and the highs and lows that go with them. Sport is unifying and gives us a great sense of both national and county identity. If anything unites people of different political persuasions, beliefs or otherwise in County Mayo, it is when the county jersey is worn. It is the same everywhere. We all get together and put on the Mayo jersey, or the jersey of whatever county we come from. We are very proud of it, even though, for the most part, other than cheering on the team, we have very little to do with it. It is the same when an Irish team or athlete competes on our part. We get such joy and a thrill from seeing the spectacle of the participation and the hoped for win, which may come from it. However, we all know those are the headline sports but there is so much more going on in terms of sport.

Sport is an integral part of creating a healthy nation. It is fair to say that the most successful nations are those whose governments have invested in the health of their citizens. This is very visible in things like education, health care and social welfare. In the case of health care, it is only recently that the Government has moved from being a mere bystander in this crucial health component, physical exercise, to actually facilitating individuals and groups and not only professional or elite athletes. The importance of sport is getting through to people and they are being facilitated. Facilities are being put in place and groups and organisations are being funded. Deputy McFadden referred to the best example of this, namely, the sports capital grants. Many sporting organisations around the country have benefitted from sports capital grants. They are putting in so much effort to bring sports to children and adults and it gives them such a boost.

The Minister of State has endeavoured to deliver and divide up the sports capital grants in the fairest way he can in order to provide real benefits to all sorts of diverse organisations, minority groups and sporting groups promoting women in sport, which would not have received the same attention in the past that sporting organisations supporting men would have had, which are all to be commended.

As we look forward as a nation, we should look at how we want to grow a healthy nation. Physical exercise, like a healthy diet, is a learned habit and a responsible Government encourages and invests in this. It makes economic sense in that we have a more productive nation and people who are less inclined to be sick. We know that many illnesses, including certain types of diabetes and certain mental health issues, are related to, or at least made worse by, lifestyle. It is great we have many mod cons and technology which, in many ways, takes physical labour out of our lives, work and leisure time but there is a price for that. It means we have to push people towards exercise.

We all have our own experiences and knowledge of groups which are pushing out the bound-

aries and employing new thinking in bringing sport to the ordinary person. In my town, Ballina Athletic Club has a fit-for-life programme. Periodically, it runs a scheme called coach to 5 km. In the past, people would have been fearful saying they were going for a run or a cycle because they thought one had to be gifted in some way to be athletic. Now one sees the joy and thrill of people who never in their wildest dreams thought they were athletic. I would count myself among them. I would not have been sport inclined. I played basketball but I think I got on the team because I was tall and not because I was athletic. People have a sense of personal achievement when they challenge themselves. Often the challenge in life is not about being better than the person beside me but about battling with the clock. It is about personal improvement.

I recently attended the launch of a walking festival organised by the Foxford Ramblers, with which the Minister of State will be familiar, for 4 and 5 October. The Foxford Ramblers meet on a weekly basis to go on walks and open trails to people in a guided and safe manner so they can see the fantastic Mayo countryside. The poet, Pat Upton, recited poetry at the launch which blew me away. It was inspired by the landscape. He brought home to me that when one gets onto the wilds of the trails or climbs a mountain, whether Nephin or Croke Patrick, the experience goes beyond the physical to enter, in his description, a soulful experience. He spoke about how he sees the landscape reflected in the people, whether in Kerry or Mayo, with the distinctions this entails. He was describing something one feels instinctively when one goes on a trek for several hours. It is uplifting for the soul and the mind. Given our great landscape and our issues with mental health, going outdoors for physical exercise could be seen as a tonic.

I recently attended my first active schools flag event at Behy National School. The active schools programme aims to bring sports to the daily lives of children. It goes beyond the 30 minutes or one hour of physical education provided in class to educate children about the importance of healthy lifestyles, diets and minds. A healthy body equals a healthy mind and these children will be more fit for life and learning. It is fantastic.

There are also knock-on effects for tourism and economic value from initiatives like the Great Western Greenway. We are also commencing the development of a greenway between Ballina and Killalla along the River Moy. I thank the Minister of State for the €250,000 in seed money provided for this project. We are now looking for further funding through the rural development programme and Leader. This will be a major tourist attraction for north Mayo and will help to put the area on the map. The project also goes hand-in-glove with the Wild Atlantic Way. I acknowledge all that the Minister of State has done in this regard and he is welcome to come back to the area for walks. It is a pleasure to deal with him on these issues because he likes to see progress and to work with local groups.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I welcome this legislation and congratulate the Minister of State on bringing it forward. Anyone who has listened to the debate on the Bill would be impressed by the contributions from a number of Deputies. It is clear, in terms of representation in this House, that a considerable number of people agree not only with this legislation but also with all the work that the Government and the Minister of State is doing in the area of sports, health and fitness. This includes improving aspects of our heritage and culture to facilitate more sporting activity. There is in-depth knowledge in this Parliament and I welcome that Members of Fine Gael are able to bring that knowledge through that Minister of State to influence national policy.

This Bill merges two quangos, which I welcome. On entering Government we made a commitment to reform the political system, to reduce the amount of money the State was spending

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and to increase the efficiency in how the money is spent. An important part of this process involves merging or abolishing quangos. We have not dealt with all of them yet but this is a process that takes time. This legislation is welcome as part of that process.

I had a conversation recently with a colleague who was knowledgeable about the doping aspects of the Bill. It is great to hear that we are regarded as a standard bearer and role model in respect of certain aspects of doping. Doping and performance enhancement has become a critical aspect of sports in the modern age. Sports have the ability to lift a nation but they also have the ability to shame a nation when doping scandals come to light. We have dealt with several such scandals in this country. It is a difficult matter which nobody likes to see. The more we can do in this area to protect our honour and integrity as a sporting country, the better.

Several speakers referred to the sports capital grants programmes. The Government has implemented a number of initiatives but few are as tangible in communities and constituencies as sports capital grant projects. Considerable moneys have been invested in a fair manner in local sporting activities around the country. This is a good example of how the Government, by giving a little support to a community, can make a big difference in improving facilities and increasing participation in particular activities and sports. The programmes also provide an important regional stimulus in certain parts of the country. I do not know if the Minister of State has costed this as part of the expenditure review underway with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform for 2015 but another sports capital grant programme would be excellent for the country. The numbers may not allow it, however, because we are not yet out of the water in terms of repairing the public finances. If there is leeway due to additional taxes or buoyancy in the economy, this is an area in which money could be spent.

We are using sports all the time to bring money into the economy. I welcome the recent announcement on the European games. We have also attracted American football games which have brought significant amounts of money to Dublin and to the rest of the country. We must continue to host these games because not only do they get Irish people interested in the sport but they also bring people to the country as tourists and show them our positive face. As we repair the public finances, we will have to find similar creative and endurable ways for people to spend money. The US football games in the Aviva has been a way of doing that and it should be encouraged. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Donohoe, and his predecessor, Deputy Varadkar, as well as the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, have been creative in this area.

We have been debating the Rugby World Cup bid for the past two years. This is another example of how we can be creative with our facilities and our love of sport in order to showcase Ireland to the world and to put on an incredibly important event. It would add an extra element to our great tradition of Rugby. We are hoping to bid for the tournament in 2023. The committee, which is chaired by Hugo McNeill, has finished its work and the Minister is now considering the matter. Considerable work remains to be done but people are very excited about the matter. By chance, I met a group of students from my old school, St. Michael's, who were visiting the Houses. I estimate that 50% of the students' questions were about the Rugby World Cup bid. The questions were not about the Dáil or what was going on in the Chamber even though they came to observe our debates. They wanted to know whether we will be hosting the tournament, which stadiums will be used and where the All Blacks would be training and playing. We should not get too excited about it because it may not happen and it is a legacy this Government would leave for the future but it would reach every corner of Irish life and its impact would be felt on all parts of the island. I look forward to hearing more about it. Perhaps

there will be an opportunity to discuss it further during Question Time next week.

Deputy Mulherin touched on the idea that when we speak about sport, we are not just talking about organised team games but about activity and getting people turned on to the idea of getting out and doing something. We are seeing much more of that. Getting up in the morning or going out in the evening for a run is a means to fitness, and the park at Sandymount strand is very busy, which is fantastic. One project is being progressed, albeit too slowly, and that is the Sandycove to Sutton cycle way. That will be the longest cycling route in Europe when completed, and we are almost there, with just a small gap needing to be completed. It is a fantastic segregated cycling route mostly off the main road on the northside, and we want to see the same on the southside. One could cycle along Dublin Bay when it is finished. People will take part and it will be something to do on a Saturday, Sunday or in the evening. A leisure cycle is good for fitness and health, and there are positive aspects around that. The Minister of State might be interested in examining that, and I would be more than happy to introduce him to the campaign committee and show him some of the route. It is a fantastic project design, and although some money has been put into it by councils, it needs a bit more political support and attention to get it completed.

I have received feedback from friends who participate in sports which are less well-known, and they have told me about the attention that this Government and the Minister of State has given to smaller sport activities. I visited University College Dublin for freshers' week and I met some of the people involved with the fencing society, martial arts and shooting club. These sports do not have significant participation or cannot raise much money like the more popular sports such as football, rugby, etc. Every bit of help they get is fantastic and with the recent sports capital allocations, in my own constituency many small clubs involved with martial arts, rowing, etc. got a bit of money, which made a major difference. I spoke to members of a rowing club in Dún Laoghaire and although it received a small amount of funding from the Government, it was enough, with its own efforts, to pay for a new boat. That would dramatically change the prospects for a rowing club, and such a use would do more than an equivalent amount being given to a bigger sport or club. We should not downplay that impact.

Most people remember where they were for Katie Taylor's famous fight. I was in Kerry at the time and we made it to the pub to see the fight when she won the gold medal. One also remembers everybody trying to get to a television screen to watch Sonia O'Sullivan run in the Olympics. There are sports which do not have wide participation because they are not as popular or on television, but they have an ability to inspire the nation when people become good at them and show off the country. As a result, more people come into the sport. It is fantastic that boxing is getting funding. My niece is a big boxing fan and loves Katie Taylor because of what she did. Katie Taylor made her achievements in part because of the way she was supported not just by her community but by the little bit of Government money that went into those facilities.

As we look to next year and beyond with the sporting budget, it would be good to target smaller clubs and societies or non-traditional sports. The impact is disproportionate and with the smaller clubs, there is a better and bigger outcome than what might occur in other areas. I congratulate the Minister of State on this legislation and everything he has done to date and will continue to do. I hope we can get this Bill through quickly and get to the next bit of sporting work we must do.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I welcome the Minister of State and compliment him on his outstanding stewardship in the Department. If we consider sport under the regime of this Minister

of State, we can see that every key performance indicator has increased, with positivity and leadership shown in the Department. This goes from the elite sporting athlete to people who are less active. As Deputy Eoghan Murphy rightly stated, with the sports capital programme the Minister of State attempted, successfully, to assist sporting bodies, from the biggest to the smallest, throughout the country, and I compliment him on that.

This Bill is part of the Government's ongoing implementation of public sector reform. When the Government came to power, it set out how it wanted to change and reform the public sector, with clear plans regarding the streamlining and delivery of public services and reduction of agencies. This Bill is concerned with that effort. I am pleased the Minister of State has put this Bill before the House to implement reform in the area of sports policy. The Bill will establish a new body, Sport Ireland, a great name, to replace through merger the Irish Sports Council and the National Sports Campus Development Authority. I pay tribute to Mr. John Treacy of the council for the work he has done. Those of us who grew up in the 1980s remember the passion and pride he brought from the racecourse in Limerick to the Los Angeles Olympics, and he is doing the same thing in his current role.

Both of these bodies have been excellent at providing essential services for sport in Ireland, but this change allows the potential for more efficient delivery of these services. When the Bill is enacted, a more streamlined organisation will emerge for the development of sport and implementation of sports policy, which is critical. I know the Minister of State has great plans in this regard, and I hope we will see further strategic thinking regarding elite sportspersons and sporting bodies, particularly on the international stage. It will bring responsibility for sports under a single agency.

Deputy Murphy referred to the anti-doping policy which will become part of the provisions of the Bill, which we welcome. Any of us involved with sport at any level is cognisant that an anti-doping programme, with the Irish anti-doping rules underpinning the programme, is critical in the development of Irish sport. It makes it clear on all levels that our national policy prioritises a sport that is clean and that participation in sport must be clean. Placing our anti-doping policy on a statutory footing ensures that probity and the integrity of Irish sport and its athletes will be a central element. We already have a very successful anti-doping programme and last year, 868 tests were carried out across 32 sports. This shows we are serious about the process, that the programme is successful and that it can be even more robust. Sport Ireland will be a national anti-doping organisation for the State, with its functions and obligations set out under the anti-doping code and the UNESCO anti-doping convention. Anti-doping rules will be quite clear.

It is important that those involved with sport, particularly our governing bodies at a national level, place an obligation on staff, coaches and trainers to comply with national anti-doping rules. It is a heavy burden but I know from being involved as a chairperson in my club that we must recognise it as important work, because we need a strong, single and coherent message on doping and taking illegal drugs. There must be serious sanctions, including loss of funding. Many of our international athletes have spoken out against doping in sport, with some even calling for increased sanctions. I hope that as this provision becomes part of legislation, it will be welcomed across the sporting fraternity. It would be ideal if all countries placed similar obligations on athletes, but all we can do as a nation is lead by example, and I hope we can encourage other countries to take similar measures.

Next Thursday, the Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children, which I chair, is begin-

ning an important piece of work dealing with concussion in sport. This is not an issue that just affects sporting people on television or elite athletes. It affects everybody who participates in physical activity. Under the Minister of State's tenure, we have seen a very heavy emphasis on physical activity, whether it is cycling or walking. For once we have seen a joined-up approach between tourism and sport in the development of a tourism product that attracts people to the country. I hope the Minister of State, through his good offices, will persuade local authorities in some parts of the country which should be playing a more significant role to join the movement by promoting active tourism and giving people an opportunity to visit the country. In my area of Cork, the different bodies could do more to promote walking, cycling and other physical activity.

The issue of concussion in sport is as relevant to the school yard, the recreational walker, the five-a-side player on a Thursday night or the club junior hurler or footballer as it is to the elite athlete. Concussion can have a severe health consequence. Head injury is potentially life-threatening and can impact severely on people's quality of life. The committee will examine the issue, not to admonish people, but to come up with a uniform approach to understanding and educating people about concussion in sport. The hearings will provide an opportunity to explore the treatment policy with the governing bodies along with leading medical expertise and practitioners. I hope that as a consequence of bringing medical experts in to investigate the condition and treatment for it, we will get a better understanding of it and discuss its impact with players' advocacy groups and sporting groups. Sporting organisations are doing a lot of work on the matter. We need to put in place best practice policies for the long-term welfare of all involved in sport.

Sport is not just for the elite players who played in Croke Park last Sunday or who play in the Aviva Stadium. It involves all the people who take to the fields and the courts, indoor and outdoor every day of the week. Sports concerns the health and well-being of our nation. It does not have to be high intensity activity. It is a question of participation in physical activity. The most important aspect of sport policy is encouraging wider participation that will have personal and societal benefit for the nation. I very much welcome the decision of the former Minister for Health, Deputy James Reilly, to set up the Healthy Ireland Council and I welcome the appointment of the former Secretary General of the Department of Health to a role in supporting the council.

I pay tribute to the Cork sports partnership, which makes great efforts to encourage participation, organising weekly 5 km runs and Parkruns in Macroom, Clonakilty and Cork city which have been immensely successful. I hope it will involve areas such as Douglas, Carrigaline, Mahon, Blackrock and Bishopstown in its programme. Last June it ran a very successful Cork bike week which was aimed at encouraging lifelong participation in physical activity. All these events are important to communities as they continue the efforts of all involved in team sports and encourage people to participate in Cork sports week. Partnership means encouraging people and working together. The Government, local authorities, the education and training boards, ETBs, and the sports partnership programmes must increase physical activity in a safe recreational environment.

Participation in sport is not just a matter of competition but of encouraging participation for the sake of health and well-being. If we can focus on that and encourage people to remain active we will reduce and tackle obesity, diabetes and heart disease, which have cost the nation billions of euros. I welcome the Bill, commend the Minister of State's work and his leadership role, and hope the legislation will be passed as quickly as possible.

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Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): I thank the Deputies for their contribution and for their support for the Bill. I have listened with interest to the input of Deputies on all sides. The various issues raised will be considered further in the Department, as the Bill makes its way through the Houses. I believe that the merging of the council and the authority in one new body is a positive move for the development of Irish sport. They already work closely together and enjoy an excellent working relationship. We are bringing together the expertise of two bodies which have delivered a lot for sport in recent years. I am confident that the good work that is being done for Irish sport will continue into the future under the new sport Ireland structure.

This is turning out to be another great year for Irish sport. I congratulate all our athletes and teams who have competed at international events this year and who have done us proud. This is an exciting time for sport and there is much to look forward to in the coming years.

The announcement by UEFA that Dublin will be a host city for the Euro 2020 is great news for Ireland. We can look forward to the excitement of a major international tournament here with all the benefit that will flow from the massive TV coverage throughout the world. I again thank everybody who was involved in preparing Ireland's bid. Everyone put on the green jersey and worked together on our bid to ensure that this prize could be delivered for Dublin and for Ireland.

Deputies spoke about the need to increase participation and to get more young people involved in sport. Events such as Euro 2020 have the potential to encourage more young people to get involved in sport. It will be a great opportunity for them to see some of the best that European football has to offer and I hope it will inspire them to get involved in sport. The 2016 Rio Olympics are coming up and I am delighted that already athletes and teams have qualified. I congratulate our equestrian events team and our sailors on qualifying recently. I wish the best of luck to all our athletes in their preparation for Rio.

I will now deal with some of the issues raised during the Second Stage debate. Deputy Dooley referred to section 9, dealing with consultants and advisers. I can assure the Deputy that there is no intention that sport Ireland will spend large sums of money on consultants. In some cases consultants will be required and section 9 allows sport Ireland to engage consultants when that is necessary. This might be for expert services to do for example with sports science and medicine. In all cases, however, sport Ireland will comply with Government guidelines on engaging consultants.

Some Deputies also mentioned the need for a national sport policy. We are working hard on preparing a policy, and I hope it will be ready soon. Among other things, the policy will address the important question of where the focus should be for investment in sport. Deputy McClellan mentioned women in sport. I agree that it is important that women are represented in sport. I will certainly ask sport Ireland to continue to fund the women in sports programme and to deliver strategies for increasing participation by women and girls.

Deputies also mentioned cross-Border co-operation in sport. The Irish Sports Council already works very closely with Sport Northern Ireland. I am confident this co-operation will continue under sport Ireland. Several Deputies mentioned the need to provide support and advice to clubs to help them make their applications for capital grants. We are always open to considering how to improve the way we do things in the Department. I will certainly ask my officials to consider this again for any new round of the sports capital programme.

While I welcome Deputy Dooley's positive comments on the Sport Ireland Bill, I cannot understand his anxiety to revert to the old Fianna Fáil way of delivering sports capital grants. Since coming into office I have given sports capital funding *pro rata*. I am very proud of that. Every commentator in the media and everywhere else has acknowledged that this was done fairly. Counties such as Clare, Deputy Dooley's home county, have gained since I came into office because I loaded money into counties such as Clare which had done badly in the last round of the sports capital programme. I cannot understand how he would want us to go back to the old Fianna Fáil way by which Donegal, Kerry and Waterford got big funding because the Ministers came from those counties. That is not how it should be done and that is not how it will be done. I hope Fianna Fáil is not saying that if it gets back into power it will do this again.

Deputy Wallace asked about two clubs in Wexford which lodged invalid applications. How could I allocate funding to invalid clubs? It would be like the penalty points situation. Every Deputy from every county and every party would tell me that I took invalid applications and made them valid. That will not happen. A total of 36% of applications in the last round were invalid, but 64% were valid. I am sure Deputy Wallace is not saying that I should give funds to the 36% that were not valid. I could not do that.

We have a very small team in Killarney. People think we have a big staff in Dublin and in Killarney. We do not. When I open clubs and facilities throughout the country that the sports capital programme has supported, many pay tribute to the staff in Killarney and I agree with them. I thank the staff for the way they work and their co-operation with everybody who made applications in the last round. We did make things easier. We had it on computer yet we had many difficulties with invalid applications. I will give an example. I know a club that did not have its title in order when the first round came in. When they sent it in the second time around, the title was not in order again. They wanted to blame Deputies, councillors and my officials in Killarney for it. The application was invalid the first time and again the second time. No invalid application will be dealt with in my reign as Minister of State with responsibility for sport.

Many Deputies spoke about the sports capital programme, which has been a lifeline for many clubs that have used the funding very well. I compliment these clubs on the way they are able to raise money.

Many other issues were raised in relation to the Bill. I agree with what Deputy Joan Collins said about young people who are honoured to be called to represent this country abroad in sporting events but do not have the money or resources to enable them to do so because of family circumstances. I intend to get the national governing bodies and the Irish Sports Council to try to look at this. I have received a number of letters on this issue throughout my tenure as Minister of State. Parents have written to me to say that their son or daughter has been picked for Ireland, but they do not have the resources to send him or her abroad. No competitor should be prevented from representing our country because his or her family does not have enough resources. It is something we need to look at.

I thank all the people who contributed to the debate on this Bill for their kind comments. I will take up many of the issues that Deputies have raised when we consider this legislation further on Committee Stage. As Deputy Wall said earlier, Irish people love their sport. It does not matter what sport it is. That is why I am glad the sports capital programme that has been in place for the last two years is to continue. I hope the Government sees fit to provide the funding for another round of the programme. I will talk to the Ministers, Deputies Noonan and Howlin, to make sure they see the benefits to rural and urban Ireland of putting that funding in place.

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Some very fine speeches were made by the various contributors. My officials have taken note of many of the good ideas that were outlined during the debate. We will examine what has been proposed. I hope we can assist and help along the way. I ask any Deputy who intends to bring forward amendments to this Bill to give the departmental officials sight of those amendments at an early stage in order that, where possible and appropriate, the amendments can be considered on their merits rather than being rejected for technical reasons or because there was insufficient time to consider them fully. I ask Deputies to submit their amendments quickly. We will have a look at them, and if there is anything worth pursuing we will certainly do so. I thank everyone who spoke for contributing to the debate. I also thank my officials in Killarney and in the headquarters of the Department.

Sport is important to this country and its people. This Bill will lead to the amalgamation of two organisations in line with Government policy. There will be no job losses. I reiterate that both of these bodies have very small teams working for them. I intend to look to get more staff into Killarney in the future. I hope to get more staff for the new body as well. I thank everyone who spoke for their passion for sport and for their kind comments. I am delighted this legislation is being supported by all sides. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Sport Ireland Bill 2014: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture and Sport (Deputy Michael Ring): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Sub-committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport 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.

Topical Issue Debate

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Deenihan.

Water Meters Installation

Deputy Terence Flanagan: I congratulate Deputy Farrell on his elevation to the Chair and wish him well in his new role. I am disappointed that the Minister, Deputy Kelly, is not available today. Obviously, it is not always possible for Ministers to be present when certain issues come up in their Departments. I thank the Ceann Comhairle's office for the opportunity to bring my concerns regarding access to water meters to the floor of the Dáil. This important matter has been raised by a substantial number of people throughout the country, particularly in recent times as the installation of water meters has gathered pace. It has become a fairly controversial issue in certain parts of Dublin. Many of the people who are protesting have rejected the contention that meters are needed in the first instance. There is some uncertainty at the moment regarding the actual charge. I understand the regulator will make an announcement on the water charges and the allowances in the next week or so. Obviously, that will bring some certainty to the situation.

There has been some speculation about the allowances that will be provided for, particularly in the cases of people with disabilities who might need to use more water. Equally, many elderly people have become scared and anxious as a consequence of the uncertainty and the lack of information at this time. It is in this context that I am raising the question of access to water meters. We know that the meters are installed at the stopcock at the boundary of a property on the publicly accessible land. A person who wishes to access and look at a water meter will need a flat-headed screwdriver to force up the lid. That is difficult enough for able-bodied people, but those with disabilities will not have any opportunity or any way of measuring the amount of water being used in their households. They will not be able to budge the lid to find out where they stand. People are able to read the electricity and gas meters in their homes to learn where they stand. The difficulty that this uncertainty is posing is very extreme.

When I raised this issue previously with the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, he assured me his Department would conform with all directives, particularly the measuring instruments directive. I am concerned that this might not be the case, however. The European measuring instruments directive provides that “whether or not a measuring instrument intended for utility measurement purposes can be remotely read it shall in any case be fitted with a metrologically controlled display accessible without tools to the consumer”. The most important part of that clause is the provision that the consumer should be able to access a measuring instrument without having to use tools. As I have said, in this case one will have to use a screwdriver to lift the lid of the shore in which the meter is contained. I suggest this demonstrates not only that there was a lack of thought when these meters were being installed, but also that the European directive is not being complied with at present. We have been told by the Department that the meters will be read automatically, that information will be provided directly to customers in their bills and that any unusual usage patterns can be discussed directly with Irish Water. It really worries me that people who do not have a relative or friend to open and read these water meters will have to rely on Irish Water to check the level of water usage independently. Perhaps the Minister of State can respond directly to that concern.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): I am replying on behalf of the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly. I thank Deputy Terence Flanagan for raising this very topical issue. The Water Services Act 2013, which provided for the establishment of Irish Water as an independent subsidiary within the Bord Gáis Éireann group, assigned the company the necessary powers to allow it to undertake the metering programme. The Water Services (No. 2) Act 2013 provides that Irish Water can collect charges from its customers who are in receipt of water services provided by it. Water meters used for domestic billing must comply with the EU measuring instrument directive, which sets standards of accuracy. This directive is implemented in Ireland by means of the 2007 legal metrology regulations. The legal metrology service of the National Standards Authority of Ireland is the statutory body responsible for regulating and supervising weights and measures, including meters, in Ireland.

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Irish Water has confirmed to the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government that all the water meters in use by Irish Water comply with the Measuring Instruments Directive. It has also confirmed that the meters being installed as part of the metering programme are designed so it will be possible for the householder to read the meter.

Most meters for public utilities are located at the point where the connection enters the

household. In the case of water services, under the provisions of the Water Services Act 2007, households' pipes internal to the boundary of a property are considered the responsibility of the householder and thus water meters are generally fitted at the stopcock at the boundary of the property. As this is located on publicly accessible land, it minimises disruption during both the installation and the reading of meters as access to people's homes is not required.

Meters will be read automatically and the information will be provided directly to customers in their bills. Each water meter has a low-power radio unit fixed to the top which enables it to be read periodically from a passing van. This is what is known as automatic meter reading or AMR. The metering technology being employed by Irish Water also includes a constant flow alarm which will alert Irish Water where there appears to be a leak on a property. Irish Water in turn will alert the affected household of the possible leak. Householders with a meter installed will be provided with a reading of their meter as part of their bill and any unusual usage patterns can be discussed with Irish Water if the householder is concerned. As such, it is not anticipated that the householder will need to read the meter. However, as the meter boxes are not sealed it will be possible for a customer to access the meter to verify readings or to monitor consumption.

Irish Water is putting in place a number of facilities for customers who require special or priority services. This includes the compilation of a confidential special services register for customers who prefer to have some of the services adapted to suit their needs and a confidential priority services register for domestic customers who have a critical medical dependency on water. The special arrangements put in place for the visually impaired have been developed in consultation with the National Disability Association. Information on how to read the meter has been included in customer communications. Irish Water has also contacted all of its customers and asked that householders with disability, mobility or medical concerns contact its call centre in advance of the meter installation so any additional support or advice can be arranged.

It is also important to note that the Government has established the Commission for Energy Regulation, the CER, as the independent economic regulator for Irish Water. In addition to approving the charges levied by Irish Water, the CER has a wider role in protecting and representing the interests of Irish Waters' customers. The Water Services (No. 2) Act provides that the CER must perform its functions in a manner that best serves the interests of customers of Irish Water.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I am very concerned that Irish Water may not be fully complying with the EU Measuring Instruments Directive. I ask the Minister of State to confirm that the Department has checked and ensured that we are in full compliance. The aforementioned directive states that no tools should be needed in order to be able to read the meter but one needs a screwdriver to access the meter in the first instance. That is a major concern. It is also worrying that the digits on the meters are very small. I have been reliably informed that one would need a pair of binoculars to read the numbers, particularly the last two digits. These issues are of concern because homeowners will have difficulty determining how much water they are using in order to estimate the size of their bills.

There has been some talk about the possibility of house display units being made available to homeowners, allowing them to read their water meters inside their homes. I ask that such units be provided free of charge to those who have a disability who are not in a position to go outside to interfere with and try to read their water meters. I have been told that the cost of such units could be substantial but I believe that technology should be rolled out and made available to those homeowners who wish to keep an eye on their consumption, particularly in the context

of tight household budgets.

Another issue of concern is the fact that householders are being asked by Irish Water to provide their PPS numbers. Many Deputies have had queries from constituents in that regard. Can the Minister of State tell the House what database is currently being used by Irish Water to contact customers? It has come to my attention that Irish Water has written to the wrong people at the wrong addresses in some instances. I ask for clarification on that question.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Deputy Flanagan has raised a number of logistical, procedural and operational issues which I will convey to the Minister. I will seek clarification for the Deputy on the various issues he has raised. I am sure officials in the Department are listening to the Deputy right now. I will ensure that the matters he raised, which are of concern to all Members in the House, will be clarified. I thank the Deputy again for raising this very topical issue at this time. Water charges will be introduced very soon and for that reason, many people are interested in these issues.

Property Taxation Collection

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I welcome the Minister of State and congratulate him on his new role. I sat beside Deputy Kevin Humphreys on many occasions and engaged in good banter with him on the backbenches. I am delighted to see someone who was up here with me - where the pigeons cannot fly - being elevated to a lower level in the Dáil Chamber. I wish him the best of luck in his new role and hope that he will be able to help me today.

A number of constituents have approached me about this issue and I will relay the story of one such constituent to the Minister of State. This concerns a person who wants to pay the local property tax on a weekly basis. She, like many other citizens, wanted to set up a standing order or have the payment deducted from her social welfare payment. She receives a social welfare payment of €188 per week and her local property tax works out at roughly €4 per week. The Department of Social Protection will not allow her to take the payment out on a weekly basis because her income will then drop below the critical threshold of €186. This is a person who is budgeting on limited funds. She has been asked why she does not pay it on a weekly basis. If she pays it on a weekly basis in cash through the post office, she will be charged a service provider charge of €1, which is an additional €52 per year.

This is a person who would find it difficult to put money aside, as has been suggested. Come the end of the year, in particular last year when only €2 was taken off her on a weekly basis, she has to come up with an additional amount. She gets an additional living alone allowance of €7, which brings her total payment up to €195. If she is allowed pay the €4 off that, she would be above the threshold of €186.

These are situations where recipients are trying to do their best to live within their means and they do not want to be a burden on the State with regard to the local property tax. It is an anomaly within the system. What we should look at is the total payment being given to this person and other such individuals which would bring them way above the threshold of €186 so that they could have a deduction taken directly out of their social welfare payment. They pay their ESB bill and gas bill by direct debit when they come in where none of this seems to come into effect, but social welfare has dictated the €186 threshold. Claimants receive a living alone allowance which brings them way above it. We should look at the total payment from

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a social welfare perspective that they receive rather than the individual payment that may put them in the difficulty that they are in at present. The Minister should allow that supplementary payments be taken into consideration when calculating the supplementary welfare allowance which, in this and other cases, would allow them to pay directly their local property tax from their social welfare payment without having to make alternative arrangements.

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Kevin Humphreys): I thank Deputy Lawlor for his kind words. I am sure we will see him down in these low elevations as well at some stage.

The Deputy will be aware that the Finance (Local Property Tax) Bill 2012 allows for a person who is liable for the local property tax, and who is in receipt of certain social protection payments, to have local property tax deducted from their payments. The Revenue Commissioners have agreed with the Department of Social Protection a number of schemes from which the deduction at source facility for this tax can be made.

Deductions of local property tax, LPT, from social protection payments commenced in July 2013. With effect from 5 September 2014, there are 23,562 customers having deductions for local property tax from social protection schemes.

In order to maintain statutory minimum incomes and in order to ensure that a customer is left with enough resources to live on, the Finance (Local Property Tax) Act 2012 provides that deductions from social welfare payments in relation to the local property tax will not breach the statutory minimum income guarantee as set out in the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005. That rate is currently set at €186 per week. The maximum personal rate of pension for someone under age 66 on a widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner's (contributory) pension is currently €193.50, thus only €7.50 per week can legally be taken from this payment in order not to bring the recipient below the basic social assistance personal rate of €186 per week. For those aged 66 and above, with a maximum pension of €230.30 per week, the total amount that can be deducted is €44.30. This amount is calculated after any deduction is made for recovery of any existing court orders or social protection overpayments and is based on the primary personal rate only.

Secondary payments which cover specific benefits are not taken into account in determining whether a claimant's scheme payment is greater or less than €186 per week. This is provided for in section 92(2) of the Finance (Local Property Tax) Act 2012. Where a customer is not eligible for the deduction at source facility or where the deduction level allowable will not meet the customer's LPT liability in full, he or she will be contacted by the Revenue Commissioners so that an alternative payment arrangement can be made from the payment options available.

The Minister for Social Protection appreciates the convenience for social welfare recipients of having the deduction facility in place but her overriding obligation is to have safeguards which ensure that a customer is not left without sufficient income. The Minister is reviewing the implications of allowing customers to have deductions made from their welfare payment on a voluntary basis which has the effect of bringing their payment below the basic rate in some clearly defined instances. This is a complex area with intertwined policy and legal implications and it requires careful consideration before any final decision is made in this regard.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I reiterate the basic payment that this person and others receive is €188 and from the perspective of the €186

threshold, they are snookered.

I take comfort from a sentence of the Minister of State's reply that, "The Minister is reviewing the implications of allowing customers to have deductions made from their welfare payment on a voluntary basis." If they were allowed to do it on a voluntary basis, and go into the Department of Social Protection and make the case, whether through me or themselves, would the Minister accept that being taken into consideration instead of having to go through legislation? It is commonsense. Where someone goes in there voluntarily to make the payment, would the Minister take that into consideration?

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I thank Deputy Lawlor. I am happy to engage further with him on this after the debate to see if we can come to some resolution. As I outlined in the reply, it is quite complex and there are clear guidelines in relation to it. We will have to look at it extremely carefully because we do not want to push recipients below a minimum rate.

As I stated, the Minister indicated that she will review this. I will certainly take Deputy Lawlor's concerns and suggestions to the Minister and I will talk to him further after the debate to see can we work out a satisfactory resolution. In saying that, I am not making any promises because, as I outlined in the reply, this is extremely complex. I am happy to take this to a further discussion with Deputy Lawlor and I hope he will be happy with that.

Broadband Service Provision

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I welcome that the Minister is here for the debate because this is a reflection on every community, not only those in rural areas.

There has been an issue with the broadband services provided through the Eircom exchange in Banteer in County Cork over the past couple of months and I am dealing with a number of businesses and consumers who are looking for broadband.

At the outset, broadband is as important to the community in Banteer or any other community in north Cork as electricity was in the 1950s. The Government should accept the need to make it a priority to ensure the broadband services are delivered.

There has been an issue in relation to this community over the past number of months and the community council has been active in trying to engage and liaise with Eircom to get a response on the issue. There has been a number of issues. Eircom has come back with issues in relation to the modem and other matters, and the community council has quite clearly come back and stated that on these issues what Eircom has been telling it is completely untrue and that we are without proper broadband services. Everybody within the community is using the Internet no more than those in urban centres and they need it at this stage.

In Banteer, there have been numerous commitments in relation to Eircom's exchange. It simply is not happening there. Back in July, it became apparent that the quality of the service had deteriorated enormously. Several employers in the community have been on to Eircom about the broadband services in the area but have been fobbed off. However, it is now clear Eircom has not taken control of the issue or repaired the service. Will the Minister intervene in this case? It will take a whole-of-government intervention to deal with this broadband crisis in rural areas. Many of the communities with which I deal with tell me their main issue is with the

poor provision of broadband services.

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): Since market liberalisation in 1999, broadband services are delivered through private sector operators. The provision of telecommunications services, including broadband services, is primarily a matter for the service providers concerned which operate in a fully liberalised market regulated by the independent regulator, the Commission for Communications Regulation, ComReg. Details of broadband services available in each county can be found on several websites, including ComReg's website at *www.callcosts.ie*, as well as the websites of individual commercial operators. Decisions by private operators, including Eircom, relating to investment in infrastructure to provide broadband services are taken purely on commercial grounds, having regard to the cost of service provision and the anticipated revenue returns from any such investment.

Eircom has made public announcements concerning its plans for a roll-out of advanced fibre networks in a large number of towns and cities. This is part of a major commercial investment by Eircom in which it intends to roll out an advanced high speed broadband network to almost 1.6 million houses and businesses across the country. In this regard, I would direct the Deputy to the Eircom press announcement on 29 November 2013 when the company listed all the areas it has plans to upgrade.

The area of Banteer, County Cork, is on this published list and Eircom plans to upgrade this exchange in the coming months. Decisions such as this are strictly commercial in nature. The Deputy will, accordingly, appreciate I do not have a statutory authority to direct commercial companies such as Eircom in this regard.

The Government welcomes the investment by the commercial sector of some €2.5 billion in new infrastructure and services and is strongly supportive of a robust and competitive telecoms market. Examples of this significant investment are the accelerated investment by Eircom. In 2012, when we first published the national broadband plan, Eircom was committed to addressing 1 million homes with its e-fibre service. It launched this service just over a year ago and has already passed 1 million premises. It has committed to passing 1.6 million homes by mid-2016. This investment programme represents a major advancement in the availability of high-speed broadband services. The exchange at Banteer is part of this programme.

In 2012, when the national broadband plan was launched, UPC committed to services of 25 Mbps to 100 Mbps. Two years on, over 700,000 homes can already access minimum broadband speeds of 120 Mbps and up to 200 Mbps. Businesses can access speeds of 500 Mbps. The ESB and Vodafone have established a joint venture company which will invest €450 million to deliver fibre-based broadband services off the ESB distribution network offering speeds from 200 Mbps to 1,000 Mbps. The first phase of this project will reach 500,000 premises in 50 towns.

Mobile telephone operators are now rolling out 4G services nationwide, as well as enhancing the quality and availability of 3G services. However, operators have made it clear to the Government that there are large parts of the country which they cannot address commercially. The Government's statement of priorities for 2014 to 2016 reaffirms our commitment to delivering a State-led broadband intervention in the areas where commercial investment is not forthcoming. Through the national broadband plan, the Government aims to ensure high-speed broadband is available to all citizens and businesses. In 2012, we predicted the need for the State to address 1.3 million of Ireland's 2.3 million premises. Thanks to investment by Eircom

and others, that area has now reduced to 900,000 premises, a 30% reduction. This could reduce further with the proposals by the ESB and others in the industry.

My Department, in conjunction with the industry, is finalising a mapping exercise which will identify the precise areas of commercial investment, as well as those areas that require a State-led intervention. The maps will be published later this year for public consultation. They will be dynamic and subject to change as new commercial investments are announced or rolled out in the future. This is an important milestone in the overall project which will feed into the project implementation strategy which we will publish in 2015 for consultation.

Consumers can be assured that through the combination of commercial and State-led investment, the Government intends to ensure everyone can access high-quality broadband services, regardless of where they live or work.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: There is a major issue here with the Government accepting there is a crisis in broadband provision in some rural communities which needs to be addressed forthwith. When will the Banteer exchange be upgraded? What are those reliant on the service who have had a complaint about it for the past several months to do in the meantime? It is high time there was a crisis meeting between the Minister, his Department and ComReg to address this problem because the machinery in place to address complaints about broadband provision is not delivering results.

I understand all the schemes and initiatives for broadband roll-out that have been announced. However, there is a crisis on the ground in broadband provision for rural communities. I fear for their future if nothing is done about it. When will the promised upgrade of the Banteer exchange happen? Will the Minister and his officials explain to Eircom that this issue was raised on the floor of the House and how dissatisfied those affected in Banteer are with the way their complaint has been handled over the past several months? Eircom has claimed it is not its fault but it is high time it accepted there is an issue there. It is making money on the backs of consumers but has not satisfactorily dealt with the complaint by the people of Banteer.

Deputy Alex White: Eircom is a private company and, as I indicated earlier, I do not have the statutory authority, as the Deputy is aware, to direct any commercial company, Eircom or otherwise, in any particular regard. However, I agree with him on the provision of quality broadband service in towns and rural areas. Services have improved immensely in recent years due to the input of several commercial operators, including, in fairness, Eircom. Earlier, I detailed its investment in the system. I also agree with the Deputy that there are areas where the service is still short of what people are entitled to expect. I have no difficulty in communicating to Eircom what the Deputy raised in the House this afternoon.

I would not like anyone to have the impression, however, that the Government does not see the importance of broadband. It does. I am actively engaged in bringing forward the national broadband plan, which I regard as critical. There are parts of the country where the commercial sector will never make money on broadband, which is why the State will have to intervene. That is the reason the State has a critical role in this vital infrastructure to which the Deputy referred. I agree with him that broadband provision is important for businesses, communities, families and in a whole host of different ways to which he alluded.

I will continue to regard the extension of broadband as an absolute priority for me, as a relatively new Minister, and the Department. I hope to work with the Deputy and other Depu-

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ties to advance this important project. I look forward to the support of colleagues across the House for the project. In the meantime, while I do not have any statutory role in respect of any of the individual providers, I will certainly undertake to communicate to Eircom the points the Deputy raised.

The Dáil adjourned at 3.30 p.m. until 2 p.m on Tuesday, 30 September 2014.