



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 26 Márta 2015

Thursday, 26 March 2015

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 9.30 a.m.

*Paidir.
Prayer.*

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Scientific Research

1. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation his policy on capturing the long-term benefits of scientific research, following an open letter by over 900 scientists (details supplied); his strategy for the funding of applied research and basic research; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12182/15]

Deputy Dara Calleary: Over 900 of the country's leading scientists published a very damning letter in *The Irish Times* last week about current Government research policy. They expressed concerns about the commercial focus and highlighted the need to change the balance between basic and applied research. I notice that there has been no response to the letter from the Government. I also notice that submissions are being invited on a new policy in the area.

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): Government policy is focused on building excellence in scientific research and maximising its impact on job creation and economic and social progress. Neither I nor the Government make any apology for putting extra emphasis on research that could help to create more jobs. The Government introduced a number of policy initiatives targeted at accelerating the economic and societal return on our investment in this area. Among them was implementation of the proposals of the research prioritisation group. Following rigorous analysis and intensive engagement with all key stakeholders, this broad-based group which comprised members from industry and academia identified 14 priority areas at which the majority of competitive funding should be targeted. The areas were identified on the basis of existing strengths of the public research system, existing strengths of the enterprise base, opportunities in the global market and those most likely to

deliver an economic and societal impact and employment.

Excellence in scientific research has been and will continue to be a cornerstone of the development of the science base in Ireland. This has been complemented in recent years by a sharper focus on the relevance and impact of research. Whereas research prioritisation saw greater emphasis on the economic and societal impact of research, it did not represent a move away from funding basic research. Policy has been and will continue to be to support research across the full continuum from basic to applied, through to the commercialisation of research. All research supported by Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, is in line with our research prioritisation agenda and must have an impact. This approach has been successful in developing 12 research centres of scale and ambition. This approach will underpin the successor to the strategy for science, technology and innovation which is being formulated by an interdepartmental committee which includes representatives of key Departments and the Higher Education Authority, as well as the chief scientific adviser to the Government. The views of all stakeholders, including the open letter from Irish Scientists for Basic Research, are welcome in this regard.

Evidence from both the European Union and internationally indicates that this strategy is paying off. Globally, Ireland was ranked 11th out of 142 countries in the Global Innovation Index 2014, third in the new EU indicator of innovation output, ninth in the European Commission's 2014 Innovation Union Scoreboard and among the top 20 countries in global rankings for the quality of our scientific research. We rank in the top four in the areas of immunology, animal and dairy, nanotechnology and computer science.

Deputy Dara Calleary: When over 900 of the leading researchers in the world combine and publish a letter such as this, it should surely ring alarm bells. A number of issues arise. We have supported the Minister in the past in his attempts to focus research expenditure on job-related issues but not at the cost of long-term research. For example, in the 14 areas mentioned issues to do with neuroscience are excluded. One of the successes of our foreign direct investment in recent years has been the ability of long-standing companies to use research budgets to reinvent what they had come to do. There are companies working in Ireland with partnerships and investment funds, with research and development dating back ten or 15 years, and this has resulted in hundreds of jobs being retained. The very narrow and short-term focus that is driving science funding will prohibit this from happening in the future. We do not know today what will be the main product in five years time. That is my concern. As long as the Government pursues a short-term project, we will miss out on long-term economic opportunities. More importantly, we will miss out on long-term societal opportunities. For example, in the case of illnesses that have not been researched, how can we encourage such research if we have this focus?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I totally reject the suggestion that the approach adopted is either narrow or short-term. This work was initiated by my predecessor who appointed the group to look at the issue of research prioritisation. Nobody could argue with the make-up of the group. The approach being taken is that a proposal is tested first for scientific excellence by peer groups at the highest standard of international scrutiny to see that the science is excellent. The second element, a "gateway" as described by the research prioritisation group, is an analysis of whether the issue is relevant in an area in which Ireland can hope to develop opportunities. These are not restrictive elements. There is a range of supports in the areas of materials, data, infant care, marine research and solid state pharmaceuticals. There are scientifically peer-reviewed centres of an excellent standard which will have an impact and there will be 1,000 graduates in these areas. They will be winning EU funding and it is estimated that they will attract €100 million

in private funding and €280 million in non-Exchequer funding. There will be 61 spin-outs formed, with 352 commercialisation awards and 284 licence agreements. These are all having a real impact in areas in which we can hope to develop employment opportunities. That is what we must do, but choices must be made in any area. The approach set out by the research prioritisation group is the right one.

Deputy Dara Calleary: If it is so great, how come 900 people came together to write the letter? According to Professor Kevin Mitchell of the Smurfit Institute of Genetics in Trinity College Dublin, if we want to have a knowledge economy, we have to invest in knowledge. The letter indicates that the people concerned are becoming “more and more dismayed” by the change in policy, which shifted all of the funding from science to hoped-for short-term applications. This expresses the frustration of those who will be inventing what we will need economically and, more importantly, societally in the coming years. What were the procedures used in publicising the consultation process for the new policy? Many have said it was a very narrow consultation process and that the information on it and the deadlines were kept to a closed circle. Knowledge of the process and an ability to participate in changing it was, therefore, very limited. I gather the deadline for the receipt of submissions is next week.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I do not accept this at all. It would be very strange if people looking for funding were not complaining that they would like to have more funding. The Deputy knows that there were sharp cutbacks in research funding during his party’s period in government.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The entire infrastructure was put in place during our time in government.

Deputy Richard Bruton: We have stabilised that. Every project that comes forward for consideration is considered first on its scientific excellence. That is done independently with international peer review. The excellence of the science is the first consideration. It also has to show some relevance to areas where we can hope to make an impact on our economy or our society. Such a focus is needed in a time of 10% unemployment. We need employment. We need to bring our research out from the ivory tower to be commercialised. It is no good to anyone to have great ideas that never get applied. That continuum of excellent science and relevance leading to commercialisation is the right approach. Other countries admire us because we are getting a better impact from our budgets than most other countries. That has been demonstrated. We are still top of many ranges in terms of scientific research. We are improving our ranking in terms of scientific research, measured by publications and all of the scientific excellence instruments that are used.

Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership

2. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the number of the estimated 1.3 million jobs that will be lost to worker displacement arising from the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership that will be Irish small and medium-sized enterprise jobs. [12180/15]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The European Commission and the Government have stated over and over again that the transatlantic trade and investment partnership, TTIP, will be advantageous to small and medium sized enterprises, SMEs. Very little evidence of the exact benefits

of TTIP have been provided to date. The Minister has said that businesses will enjoy increased market share, but we have heard very little about the practical elements that will be available to SMEs to allow them to do that. We are very worried about the 1.3 million jobs in Europe which will be displaced when TTIP is enforced. Can the Minister tell us how the Government will deal with that?

Deputy Richard Bruton: It has been estimated that TTIP will have a positive impact on European output, incomes and employment. It is estimated that it will increase the size of the European economy by 0.5% of GDP and increase employment by 400,000. This would mean that a European family of four would see its annual disposable income increase by an average of €545. The suggestion that 1.3 million jobs will be lost is untrue. The EU entered these negotiations to boost jobs and growth. If this were not the case, we would not proceed. A study commissioned by my Department on the same basis as the European estimates suggested that the benefit to Ireland will be proportionally greater than the benefit to the EU. It suggested that Irish exports will grow by almost 4%, investment will increase by 1% and real wages will increase by 1.5%. It estimated that between 5,000 and 10,000 additional export-related jobs will be created. It suggested that Irish SMEs will be particular beneficiaries of TTIP. The impact of this trade agreement, when concluded, will be felt over a long period. It is expected that resources will move to stronger and higher value sectors over time. This is occurring in the economy all the time. The Commission has estimated that as a result of the agreement, approximately seven in every 1,000 workers will move out of some sectors and into other sectors. As the Deputy knows, job creation and job loss is a dynamic process. For example, in the last four years gross job creation in companies supported by the enterprise agencies was 147,000. This was offset by job losses of 102,000, generating net gains of 45,000. This represents a loss of approximately 4% each year. In that context, labour movement of 0.7% over a ten-year period as a result of TTIP would be a modest adjustment.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: A study into the first 12 years of the North American Free Trade Agreement found that more than 1 million jobs were lost in the US during that period, with millions of other people suffering a significant decline in wages and conditions. An assessment by the Centre for Economic Policy Research, which was financed by the European Commission, found that TTIP is likely to result in prolonged and substantial dislocation of EU workers. It suggested that 1.3 million EU workers and 715,000 US workers will be displaced. The Minister suggested that “job loss is a dynamic process”. It is not a dynamic experience for an individual. We have seen examples of jobs in this State being lost *en masse*. It happened in the construction industry. When numbers are that large, it is practically impossible to fully reorient and retrain those individuals to work in new and developing areas of employment. That has not been the practical experience in this State so far. Our discussions with the trade directorate-general of the European Commission have shown us that it is not interested in attending to this problem. It has said that it is up to the national Parliaments and the Council to address this issue. I suppose I am looking for information on the practical steps that will be taken by the Government in advance of this displacement, which the Minister admits is likely to happen, to ensure it will not happen or, if it does happen, it will be dealt with.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I think the Deputy is trying to mislead the House here. The Korea agreement that was signed recently has resulted in Europe’s export sales into Korea growing at 2.5 times the rate of growth of any other market. The net gain that is occurring as a result of that agreement - it is tangible and can be tested - is the addition by European companies of jobs, employment and opportunities. TTIP has the same potential. It will reduce tariff barriers and

non-tariff barriers. It will allow food products in. It will ensure pharmaceutical products have fewer obstacles. It will open opportunities for growth in certain sectors. That is really important. The net benefit when that is analysed will be more jobs for Irish people in the economy. As the Deputy said, there will be a movement towards the stronger sectors. If our dairy sector grows, there will be a decline in the use of land for other agricultural purposes. People will switch from one product to another. That is a dynamic process which happens in the economy all the time. It is certainly within our capacity to adapt to a 0.7% movement over a ten-year period. It will not be like the impact on the construction sector, which was mentioned by the Deputy. There was a 66% collapse in our construction sector over four years because of some very bad policies that had been pursued. I think the Deputy is seeking to mislead by making false comparisons here. This will have a net benefit, particularly for Ireland. We should seek to embrace it, but not naively.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The displacement of 1.3 million jobs in Europe will be an economic shock to 1.3 million families. The Minister has given information on a global scale about the objectives of TTIP with regard to increased trade and business levels, etc. All we are seeking is the detail. There is pressure at the moment for TTIP to be delivered very quickly. We are asking the Government to set out its stall in advance of TTIP being concluded to explain how SMEs will deal with the new transatlantic trade deal. How will we deal with the workers who will be displaced? There are 20 million SMEs across the EU. They account for 99.8% of all enterprises. If we look at the experience of the US with the North American Free Trade Agreement, we will see that the percentage of exports in which SMEs were involved actually declined over the period of experience of the agreement. It is not the case that SMEs generally experience upward motion when these large trade agreements are reached. The truth is that multinationals experience upward movement. Our fear is that TTIP is orientated towards the needs and benefits of multinationals and against the needs and benefits of SMEs and workers.

Deputy Richard Bruton: That is simply untrue. The research being undertaken both at European level and individually in Ireland denies that. The strongest performance of Irish companies is in the US. Enterprise Ireland supports thousands of Irish companies in entering the US market. It has offices across the US. It will take various steps to support any SME that is seeking to expand into that market. It can offer first-time exporter's support and marketing support, for example. If enterprises want to put feet on the ground, they can get support for graduate placement in certain cases and they can access all of Enterprise Ireland's staff in all areas of the US. When those barriers come down, we will be particularly well placed to support Irish SMEs that are seeking to access a very familiar market. We are really well placed to take advantage of this. Enterprise Ireland will be gearing up and working with companies that can penetrate that market. Members will be aware that umpteen companies, including Combilift, McHale Engineering and Keenan of Carlow, are really up and ready. We hope to have a whole new swathe of companies coming in behind them because this is a good market with good contacts for Irish people, not only through Enterprise Ireland but through many other contacts over the years.

Job Creation

3. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation his response to the Nevin Economic Research Institute's recent report that 94% of the 29,000 new jobs created in 2014 were in the eastern part of the country, while full-time equivalent jobs declined in the Border counties; his plans to counteract the decline of jobs growth in counties

such as Donegal before it becomes an established pattern in economic development across the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12187/15]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: This question arises from the recent report by the Nevin Economic Research Institute on the regional imbalance in job creation, which highlighted, in particular, that more than 90% of new jobs in 2014 were created in the Dublin and mid-east regions. What is the Minister's policy to address that imbalance?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Based on the figures published by the CSO, and given any fair and reasonable review of the data, the Nevin institute's presentation of regional employment data in its recent spring report was, at best, highly misleading. In the three years since the Action Plan for Jobs was launched every region has experienced job growth. Over that period more than 50% of the 90,000 jobs created were outside Dublin and the mid-east areas. Indeed the fastest rate of job growth in that period has been in the south east and the midlands.

With regard to the Border region, the number of people at work has increased by 14,300. The equivalent figures are 8,000 in the midlands and 22,700 in the south east.

The same is true of the agency assisted enterprises where 51% of gross employment creation during the period 2011-2014 was outside Dublin and the mid-east. Among agency supported companies there were some strong regional performances. Enterprise Ireland, EI, companies grew net employment in the south west by 27% and in the midlands by 16%, while IDA companies grew net employment by 28% in the west and 21% in the Border region.

However, the Government recognises that some regions are growing faster than others. That is why we are putting in place regional action plans for jobs to accelerate employment in every region. The purpose of these plans is to facilitate each region to achieve its economic potential, building on its existing strengths and opportunities.

The regional action plans will be developed through consultation with key stakeholders in each region. A stakeholder forum to help inform actions for inclusion in the action plan for the Border region will take place later today in Sligo. A further stakeholder forum will take place in Carrickmacross on 13 April.

It is my intention to publish six regional action plans for jobs, including one for the Border region, by July, with a further two in development at that stage.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The Minister's officials in response to the Nevin institute report said 70% of net job creation was in the Dublin and mid-east regions. Statistics have been tweaked to make them look good but job creation in these two regions far exceeds every other region. The figure for the Border region is skewed by the fact that County Louth is included in it. The situation is much worse than it appears in counties Donegal, Sligo and Leitrim and this has to be addressed. I await to see whether the Action Plan for Jobs will address this imbalance. It is vitally important for the north west and for the overall development of the country that this be dealt with. The east region cannot continue to sustain the migration rate into it, which is happening because there are no jobs in the rest of the country. The Department accepts that 70% of net job creation was in the Dublin and mid-east regions rather than 90%. The Minister has to address that.

Deputy Richard Bruton: That is not true. The CSO provides the figures. The highest rate of growth in job creation was in the south east at 12.8%. That was followed by the midlands at

8.5%. Dublin was third and the rate was 6.5% in the Border region and so on. Some regions are not growing as fast as we would like and we need to build on that. Growth is occurring across all regions but we have to start with true figures. The figures I quoted related to the number of jobs created by our agencies together. Some areas find it difficult to win IDA employment and one of the actions we are delivering in the regional action plans is investment in advance facilities. For example, we are building in Letterkenny and we are now committing to build in Sligo. We have identified that for some regions additional magnets are needed to draw overseas investment but it is also important to remember that well in excess of 90% of employment is in Irish owned companies. The strong performance in employment growth in many of our counties relates to EI companies. The highest growth rate is in the south west at 27%. There has been a strong performance among Irish owned companies in a number of counties, including Sligo.

We have to have a balance and we have to look at the figures and the opportunities honestly while working together to drive those opportunities.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The Minister is saying his Department was wrong in its response to the Nevin institute report by saying there was a 70% net increase in job creation in the Dublin and mid-east regions. We have three sets of figures for regional job creation.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I can deal with that but we do not have the time.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will let the Minister back in.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: When will we see the true figures and what they truly reflect? The emigration rate is still high in the north west and job creation is not happening. That regional imbalance has to be addressed. Unfortunately, there is nothing in these figures or in what the Minister said that will address that.

Deputy Richard Bruton: If the Deputy chooses to be blind, he can be blind. He knows that IDA employment in his own county has increased by 40% over the past four years.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: From a low base.

Deputy Richard Bruton: That is an extraordinary performance by any standard but we want more. We are investing in advance facilities in Letterkenny and Sligo. One can distort statistics, which is the oldest trick in the book.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Government parties are good at it themselves.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Job creation is growing in some regions and falling in others. The figures I outlined are for a four year period. The Nevin institute chose one year and chose to ignore the fact that growth was falling in some regions. One could have presented the same figures by saying 75% of job growth in 2014 was in the south east, midlands and mid east. That would have given a different picture. We need to look at each region. The growth rate fell in a number of regions last year and that had an impact on the average rate. We have to look at each region and seek to build its strengths. That is what we are doing and I hope the Deputy will be in Sligo later. He can engage and come up with ideas that he believes will drive change in his region. We want to tap into the people who can make things happen in the region and to provide money for which companies can bid to ensure the best ideas come to fruition. That is the best way to drive opportunities. It is not about quibbling about numbers. There is good performance

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and not so good performance but we need to increase the growth rate in all regions.

Industrial Disputes

4. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the action being taken to address the industrial unrest at Ireland's largest indigenous retailer; the Government policy on job security for those on zero-hour contracts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12183/15]

Deputy Dara Calleary: A week from today, the country's largest indigenous retailer, Dunnes Stores, will be the subject of a strike owing to the frustration of its workers. I had the opportunity last Tuesday to meet some of them to discuss a range of issues relating to the current collective agreement. The company will not engage with the Labour Court. What work is the Government doing? Is anything going on behind the scenes? What are the Minister of State's views on this?

Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Gerald Nash): I understand that the current dispute concerns a range of issues, including the introduction of banded hours contracts, individual and collective representational rights and a review of the use of temporary contracts. The union is seeking to engage with the company on these issues and the matter was referred by the union to the Labour Court under section 20(1) of the Industrial Relations Act 1969 in October last year. It was disappointing that Dunnes Stores was not represented at the court hearing. The court found it regrettable that the company declined to participate in the investigation of the dispute or to put forward its position on the union's claims.

In its recommendation of 14 November 2014, the court reaffirmed earlier recommendations it had made by noting that the company and the union were party to a collective agreement signed in 1996, which provides a procedural framework within which industrial relations disputes and differences arising between the parties can be resolved by negotiation and dialogue. The court pointed out that the dictates of good industrial relations practice require parties to honour their collective agreements in both spirit and intent. I assure the Deputy that I agree that Dunnes Stores should have attended the court.

I regret that the company decided against attending the Labour Court hearing, contrary to good industrial relations practice in that regard. The experience and expertise of the court offer the most appropriate and effective avenue for resolving such issues and I urge both parties to avail of the services of the State's industrial relations machinery which remain available to assist the parties, if requested. Engagement with the State's industrial relations machinery offers the best way whereby the parties involved in this dispute can hope to resolve their differences.

Neither the Labour Court nor the Minister can compel a company to comply with such recommendations, and ultimately, responsibility for the settlement of a trade dispute rests with the parties to the dispute.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Minister of State. I acknowledge we do not have powers of compellability but we have moral powers. The company has benefited from the security of a Labour Court agreement in carrying out its business since 1996 and it has engaged on six occasions with the court on the agreement over the past 19 years. It is particularly disgraceful,

therefore, that it has chosen to ignore it now.

10 o'clock

The meeting the other day was an eye-opener into how zero-hour contracts work. Store managers have the ability to say to any employee that they can do this amount of hours this week and half the number next week. That is what is going on at the moment in terms of planning for next week. Store managers say to employees that if they go on strike they can only get a certain band of hours. I know the Minister of State is doing a lot of work to ensure decent conditions of work. I previously compared what is going on to what happened to the navvies in England, but that is happening in one of our largest, indigenous retail companies. Some parties in this House always condemn our multinational companies but when one of our own companies treats our own people like that, we have a moral obligation in this House to call them out for what they are. The old Labour Relations Commission was ideal for this kind of situation. Is there any mechanism currently available to Government that could be used to bring some sort of decency to the negotiations?

Deputy Gerald Nash: I am pleased the Deputy raised the issue of zero-hour contracts. As he acknowledged, I have been doing work in that area because I am concerned that the recovery we are experiencing should not be characterised by a race to the bottom. We have engaged the University of Limerick to carry out a major study into the prevalence and extent of zero-hour contracts and low-hour contracts in this country. It is timely that we do so. I expect to have that report within a matter of months. I have made it very clear in this House that if it is the case that legislation or regulation is required to address some of the more egregious aspects of those practices then the Government is committed to doing so. We are committed to ensuring that work pays and that we deliver on our dignity of work and dignity at work agenda. It would be remiss of me not to signal my intention to bring forward collective bargaining legislation to the floor of this House very shortly. We wish to enact the legislation by this summer. The collective bargaining legislation can assist in avoiding some of the issues we are experiencing now. If we had that type of legislation in place it certainly could inform the conduct of negotiations and provide a way in which we could address some of the issues that have emerged in the context of this particular dispute.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is it possible to turn up the microphone volume a bit? Perhaps it is my hearing that is the problem but the volume seems to be low.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I wish Dunnes Stores would turn up the volume and listen to the workers. A total of 70% of Dunnes Stores employees are women and 76% of workers are on flexible contracts. Many supermarkets have reached agreement with trade unions on the matter, but Dunnes Stores seem to be unwilling to do so. We have less than a week to go. From listening to the workers the other day it appears there is a lot of pressure on people not to go out on strike. Work hours are being used as part of that pressure. People are being told that if they go on strike they will not be given work hours in the following week. In this day and age it is wrong that such a practice would exist. It is as if the situation that existed in the mills in England in the 19th century is still in place. Surely some mechanism is available to bring the parties around a table along the old-style LRC system that we could initiate over the weekend to try to stop a strike from happening and to try to bring common sense and alleviate the pressure that is now on workers in every Dunnes Stores outlet across the country today.

Deputy Gerald Nash: Nobody likes taking industrial action of any description, in particu-

lar workers who depend on their jobs for their income. It is never in the interests of a business to experience strike action either. I reiterate the call I made in this House just two days ago for all sides to engage and to use the professional expertise of the very well respected professional labour relations institutions in this country to assist them in resolving the dispute at issue in this case. It is very important they would do so if the will exists. I call again on the company to engage in a meaningful fashion with the trade union to address the issues that have been raised on a consistent basis. Deputy Calleary is correct that the trade union has brought the issues at hand to the Labour Court on several occasions recently and I understand how some would conclude that the company is treating the Labour Court in a very cavalier fashion.

Regional Development Initiatives

5. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation if his Department has provided any additional investment for the development of regional enterprise strategies framework; the job creation and investment targets for each of the eight strategic planning areas; the way the strategies for the west and south west will address the fall in employment in both regions, and the stagnation of employment in the border region. [12181/15]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ireland's economic recovery, slow as it is, is almost exclusively located in Dublin and its hinterland while stagnation and decline persist in other parts of the country. The conclusions of the Nevin Economic Research Institute have been discussed. Its last quarterly bulletin basically stated that 94% of the 29,000 new jobs created in the economy last year were in the greater Dublin area. We could argue all day long that my statistics are better than another's statistics but the fact is that people from outside of the Dublin area looking in on this debate will know from their own experience that the recovery is not in their reach. It is important that the Government orientates to make that happen.

Deputy Richard Bruton: First, I welcome the Deputy's question. It is important to state, as I outlined to Deputy Pringle, that the 90,000 extra jobs have been spread throughout the country. Dublin has higher growth. The mid-east, which is Deputy Tóibín's area, is not one of the higher growth areas but the other two areas of high growth are the midlands and the south east. The Deputy correctly pointed out that the west and the south west are areas that need attention. As Deputy Tóibín is aware, we have adopted a policy of introducing regional enterprise strategies. We have already taken action. We are identifying advance facilities that we will put in place in key areas. Where regions are not doing as well as they could we will put in advance facilities, align them to other strengths of the region such as institutes of technology or clusters of a sector in order to attract inward investment.

We are also making available €100 million from Enterprise Ireland which will be allocated by means of competitive calls. It will be designed to encourage regions to come forward with plans for what they could do with the particular competitive strengths they have. There is very much an emphasis on start-ups. We want to see a higher rate of start-up companies, less failure among the start-up community and more scaling. We also want to see individual sub-sectors that have the capacity to grow identified by the stakeholders within the region and actions put in place to drive those opportunities. Competitive funds will be available to bring those opportunities to fruition.

In terms of setting targets, the overall context within which I operate is that we have set a target of full employment by 2018. That is in or around 160,000 additional people at work. We

will seek to get regional balance in the spread of that. We will look at all of the regions. As I indicated to Deputy Thomas Pringle, we must recognise strengths as well as weaknesses. The Opposition will always focus on weaknesses. That may be its job. There have been some very good regional performances by IDA and Enterprise Ireland companies, in particular in the south west, one of the regions Deputy Tóibín identified. The IDA has also performed very strongly in the west, another region the Deputy identified. We have a baseline on which to build. The idea underlying the bottom-up regional strategies is for everyone to get in behind certain strategic objectives for those regions and make them happen.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government's objective for full employment is 6.5% unemployment. Given that Iceland has an unemployment rate of 4% and it is 4% also in Germany, the question arises as to whether they are super full-employment countries. A rate of 6.5% does not seem like-----

Deputy Richard Bruton: No. It is between 5% and 6%. Roughly speaking, it is 5.5%.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The previous response I had on the matter indicated that full employment was 6.5%.

Deputy Richard Bruton: No. That is not the case.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I do not wish to get diverted into a discussion in that regard. We have lopsided development in this country at the moment. That has not happened by accident. In 2011 a total of 27% foreign direct investment went into the regions. Regional FDI investment was worse in 2012 and we have only seen slightly improved figures in recent years. In the third year of the Government's term of office a regional enterprise strategy emerged, which we welcome, but the problem is that we were told it would be rolled out by June 2014. The reality is that it was intended to be only trialled in one region by the specified time. We are already a year late in that regard. My major concern is that the necessary funds are not available to properly implement the strategy.

Deputy Richard Bruton: What we committed to do last year was to develop a framework within which the strategy could happen and we are rolling it out this year. We have committed funds of €150 million from the IDA as part of its five-year strategy, which is specifically for property solutions. Most attention has been devoted to the 12 advance facilities we have planned for the next three years. That only uses up 30% of those solutions. There will be many other IDA Ireland property-based investments to help regions attract inward investment. Up to €100 million has been set aside by Enterprise Ireland for these competitive calls. We are now moving into the implementation phase and doing it in a way with which the Deputies opposite will agree. We must sit down with the stakeholders in each region, get the best ideas and work with the agencies at local level to bring those ideas to fruition. We have ambitious targets in this regard.

There is always the trick of finding a figure that looks the worst possible. I can understand why the Deputy might be tempted to do that. If one looks at it in a balanced way, however, one will see all the regions are growing. Some strong Enterprise Ireland performances are occurring in many regions which were weaker. Some are not doing as well and those are the ones at which we need to look. Why in some areas are our own Irish companies faced with the same opportunities not growing so strongly? I expect Enterprise Ireland to do an audit on those companies and examine the range of policies that could help them grow. That is the benefit of

a regional bottom-up approach.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is no doubt that there are examples that buck the trend in each of the regions trending generally in a negative fashion. We have to measure the trends in those areas to be able to create the proper policies and develop the resources to solve the problems. It is not a case of looking for the worst figure. Anyone with two ears on them who steps outside of the M50 into the rest of the State will tell the Minister that it is not happening outside of the Dublin region. While the Minister referred to IDA Ireland development funds and the competitive calls fund, we are seeking to develop a regional enterprise strategy framework. This will put pressure on those organisations to come up with the goods without them getting the necessary funding to do so. As I said a week ago to the Minister, there are local enterprise offices, LEOs, which are understaffed and finding the transition from county enterprise board to LEO difficult without the necessary resources. If the Minister means business with regional enterprise and development, he needs to put his money where his mouth is.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Will the Deputy look at the numbers? For example, there are 17,000 extra people at work in Enterprise Ireland companies. Of these, 5,600 are based in the south west, 3,000 in the mid-east area, 3,000 in Dublin, 1,700 in the Border areas and 1,400 in the midlands region. That is a good spread.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The minority of jobs are outside Dublin.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I accept with IDA Ireland jobs that more are peaking around the cities. All the cities are doing well and it is harder in some of the regions. That is why we are investing €150 million in property solutions in those other regions to build advanced facilities and strengthen them. The LEOs will have a very important role to play but there will be a specific competitive call targeted at them as to how they can be more innovative in the region and draw down additional resources for new ideas. They are very much included in these competitive calls.

The €100 million fund will be used to develop the assets we have in the regions, whether it is enterprise centres, LEOs, or, hopefully, uniform clusters to grow opportunities in food production or medical devices, for example. There will be money available but it will be competitive. We are not saying there is a little for everyone. We want to see competitive calls and really good projects being brought forward with the best ones getting funding. At the enterprise committee, the Deputy has asked me to show him the results with the KPIs, key performance indicators and so forth. That is the approach we are taking. This is what Deputies have said to me in the committee and I am implementing the approach that they are asking of me.

Other Questions

Trade Missions

6. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation if he will provide an update on his four-day Promote Ireland St. Patrick's Day trade mission to France; the extent to which rural Ireland was promoted as a possible destination for IDA Ireland sponsored companies during the four-day itinerary; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[12080/15]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: This question relates to the Minister's recent trade mission to France on the recent St. Patrick's Day break and to what extent rural Ireland has been promoted as part of that mission.

(Deputy Richard Bruton): I led a four-day Promote Ireland St. Patrick's Day trade mission to France from 14 March to 18 March during which I was involved in meetings and events on behalf of several State agencies including IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Tourism Ireland and Bord Bia.

France is a particularly important market for the development of Ireland's regional economy. Irish food and drink exports to France are worth €750 million. It is our second largest export market in this sector and a particularly important market for seafood, beef and lamb. The programme included a promotion of Irish food and drink products of particular importance to our rural economy.

Almost 500,000 French tourists come to Ireland each year. The mission included special promotion of Ireland as a destination with a heavy emphasis on rural and regional destinations, which have always been particular favourites of French tourists.

There were four deal announcements for Enterprise Ireland, including one for Combilift in Monaghan. A reception held in the Irish embassy was attended by 17 Enterprise Ireland client companies, seven of which are regionally based. France is Ireland's fourth largest source of inward investment. During my visit, I held two meetings with existing IDA Ireland client companies. On St. Patrick's Day, I hosted an event attended by 15 IDA Ireland client companies along with executives from several target companies. These existing clients between them employ in excess of 3,000 people in operations located throughout Ireland with a strong regional presence, particularly in counties Waterford, Galway and Louth.

It was an important opportunity to showcase IDA Ireland's new five-year strategy which has set out ambitious regional targets at its heart. The strategy includes an increased focus on Europe which has accounted for 20% of investments won by IDA since 2010. In light of this, IDA Ireland has invested additional resources across its offices in Paris, London and Frankfurt.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: To what extent does the Minister expect to see growth in investment by France and exports there this year? Will there be growth in tourists from France this year?

Deputy Richard Bruton: It is expected there will be an extra 5%, or 25,000, visitors coming from France this year. At the recent trade mission, we met with key agents who will drive and promote this business.

The ambition for food exports is for double-digit growth into the French market. It is a strong market and a good outlet for seafood exports, in particular, with good margins. IDA Ireland is seeking to increase investment from the European market over the next five years. It has not set a specific target but, overall, its aim is a 40% uplift in the total number of projects won from the European arena, an ambitious target. Trade missions are a part of it but the very dedicated staff in these offices abroad continue to develop these leads and deliver them over time. Despite its economic difficulties, the French market is very good for Irish companies which are well received there.

Research Funding Applications

7. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the steps he plans to take in response to the unprecedented move by over 900 scientists expressing concern regarding the Government's research policy and over-concentration on commercial research. [11965/15]

Deputy Clare Daly: This is essentially the same question that was asked earlier by Deputy Calleary. I listened to the Minister's answer then and I hope he is not going to give the same answer to me now. When he said those looking for funding will always look for more means he is entirely missing the point. Practically the entire scientific community has publicly said the Government's approach to research funding is wrong. It did not say the Government is not putting enough money into research. It is asking the Government to rebalance its distribution. This is a very serious scenario and I am surprised at how dismissive the Minister has been of the opinions of the scientific community.

(Deputy Richard Bruton): Policy is focused on building excellence in scientific research and maximising its impact on jobs, as well as in economic and social progress. Neither I nor the Government make any apology for putting an extra emphasis on research that can help create more jobs. The Government introduced several policy initiatives targeted at accelerating the economic and societal return on our investment in this area. Among these was the implementation of the proposals of the research prioritisation group. It narrowed down to 14 priority areas around which the majority of competitive funding should be targeted. There will be a two gateway approach, namely excellence in science and relevance to what can be delivered. We also have invested considerably in improving that capacity to deliver. We have established a new group in Enterprise Ireland, Knowledge Transfer Ireland, which is seeking to take commercial research and bring it to the point where it can be spun out in licences or new start-ups. We are also investing heavily in commercialisation funds. Close to €100 million is being put into that phase to take and bring forward good ideas in order that they will have an impact on research.

As I said in my earlier reply, we have sustained the budget within Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, which funds roughly €150 million of the total of €700 million. From its very inception, the mandate of SFI has been oriented towards basic research, but it must have relevance to Irish society. That is the approach we are taking. The letter objects to oriented research which is at the core of SFI's mandate. Excellent science and relevance have been in harness from the outset of the strategy. As I sought to illustrate in the earlier answers, it is having an impact. We are recognised as being good at undertaking research and making an impact. I point the Deputy to the 12 research centres which are detailed in really important documents. I can refer the Deputy to them.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will let the Minister back in as his time is up.

Deputy Clare Daly: I am well aware of the Government's approach, but the point the Minister seems to be diminishing is that it is the core of the Government's strategy that is being objected to by the entire scientific community. While the Government is funding basic research, as the Minister notes, it is funding oriented basic research. Best practice tells us that this will not be good enough in the long run. I think the scientists used the very good example of how a cure for diabetes had been discovered. If one undertakes targeted, oriented basic research, one is examining one aspect only, but if scientists are given free rein to take a wide berth, they can come up with something new which can be applied in a different field. The statistics show that

what the scientists are saying is correct. PhD numbers are down and our university ratings are falling. The numbers involved in the scientific area in Trinity College Dublin are down by 50%. We are losing out on the best people precisely because of that approach. On a visit to Ireland the UK Nobel Laureate Sir Paul Nurse was on record as saying we had it the wrong way around and that it was unbalanced. It is not that we are doing everything wrong, but it is unbalanced and we need to co-ordinate the strategy better.

Deputy Richard Bruton: We are opening up the strategy to scrutiny by inviting submissions. If the Deputy reads the scientists' submission, much of their criticism is not directed at SFI's approach but at matters such as pressure on teaching time and other general issues. The founding principle of SFI was to promote oriented research; therefore, it must be connected. There is no point in undertaking ivory tower research that has no relevance to the Irish scene. SFI applies two tests. One is excellent science that is internationally peer reviewed, while the second is relevance. It is up to those bidding for money to demonstrate relevance.

It is instructive that really important areas crucial to our future are being developed. They include big data, software development, pharmaceuticals, the marine, infant health and advanced materials. We are strong in those areas and building on their strengths. If the Deputy would like to submit her own views, we would be happy to take them, but these are examples of excellent science.

Outside the research centres, there are many principal investigators undertaking basic research. What is very interesting is that we have more researchers in industry than we had five years ago. There has been a big increase in the number of people involved in industry who are taking on researchers within their companies to drive their businesses, which is very important for employment creation.

Deputy Clare Daly: There is a contradiction in what the Minister is saying. On the one hand, he is saying he is open to listening, but his comments in response to questions have been really dismissive of what the entire scientific community is saying. At the heart of this is the fact that scientists are not businesspeople or entrepreneurs. Of course, we hope the outcome of their research will lead to job creation, as it often does.

Why is the Government listening to the chief scientific adviser in the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation? There should be an independent scientific adviser to the Government directing in areas of health and education if we are to prioritise societal gain and, ultimately, long-term jobs through it. That is the approach used in Denmark, Germany and Austria, which are ahead of us. This would be better in the long term both in terms of job creation and a societal impact. If the Minister is really saying he is interested in and listening to what the scientists are saying, he should call them in and possibly adapt some of his responses to take account of what they are saying, which is that the long-term benefits would be more preferable in that regard.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I asked the Minister earlier to outline the consultation process and who had been invited to participate, but he did not do so. I also think it is significant that the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, is not here to take this question because he is also attached to the Department of Education and Skills. The fact that the Minister took this question might be proof of what the 900 scientists are taking about.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Minister of State is attending a funeral; that is the reason

why I am taking this question. The consultation period continues to be open.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Who is involved in it?

Deputy Richard Bruton: To return to Deputy Clare Daly's points, the areas we have prioritised are food for health, micro-electronics, bio-refining and bioenergy, IT innovation, applied nanotechnology, composite materials, manufacturing research, energy efficiency, international energy research, learning technologies, financial services, cloud computing, data analytics and pharmaceutical manufacturing. It is not a narrow list but includes many areas that offer potential opportunities. We have 12 excellent research centres in specific areas. They have been competitively chosen by means of an international peer review, not by some individual. The Deputy can read about them because the information on them is very conveniently published. Their ambitions and the research they are conducting are set out. By any description, the research being conducted by the Tyndall National Institute, the National Institute for Bioprocessing Research and Training or INSIGHT, and the Centre for Data Analytics is basic research that will have a fundamental impact on our capacity to grow various sectors.

Choices must be made when funds are being allocated. There will always be a debate about basic versus oriented and applied research. There has been more emphasis in recent times on applied research, but we are delivering internationally benchmarked good results from our research investment. The review must look at the hard numbers and opinions and weigh them up. That is what we are doing. We are engaged in a wide consultation process in which everyone is welcome to participate.

An Ceann Comhairle: The relevant Deputy is not present to take Question No. 8.

Question No. 8 replied to with Written Answers.

Scientific Research

9. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the steps he is taking to ensure Science Foundation Ireland continues to fund basic fundamental scientific research; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11963/15]

Deputy Denis Naughten: This is round three in dealing with this issue. We will take the Minister's response as read. He has said it is no good having ivory tower research - research for the sake of it. That is the fundamental flaw. I put it to him that he needs to take off his economics hat and look at the other aspects because scientific research is not just about producing a clear economic return. It is about building capacity and human capital that can attract new investment to the economy.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I agree. If the Deputy looks at SFI's strategic plan, he will see that they are precisely the things with which it is concerned. It must build human capital within the universities and see to it that 60% of it will transfer to the enterprise base in order that with this capability we can grow the industry base. The 12 science centres are part of the budgeting. They are funding more basic research by principal investigators. This involves building world-class centres of scale and ambition in which the science is internationally robust and they can build connections to our small and medium enterprises, about which Deputy PeadarTóibín was talking earlier. It is really important that we have the spectrum. While some people will

say that what is all-important is the basic research, others will say it is commercialisation. We are making sure we fund the whole spectrum and are trying to improve the connections. We have put in Knowledge Transfer Ireland, improved the IP protocols and built the technology gateways in our institutes of education. We have built the scientific research centres and have a suite of projects.

Returning to Deputy Daly's point, it would be the very same in any other European country. Other countries are struggling with the sort of spectrum they should build and how to do it best. It is hotly contested and I make no apologies for saying jobs are my priority at the moment as we are a job-needy economy. Others will say the priority is basic research and we are trying to strike the balance. We have really good people driving the system and it is working. We are doing well against international measures in excellence of science and in application.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The problem is that all the funding going into basic research is for, as the Minister put it, oriented research. Funding is not being made available for blue-sky research. This is an issue I have raised with the Minister over the last decade or more in government and in opposition. There is a fundamental weakness in Government policy as it should not put all its eggs in one basket as regards applied research.

Taking hurling as an analogy, it is as if the Minister said we will put all the investment into Kilkenny, Cork and Clare hurling from under age right through to the senior teams, but we will forget about the likes of Waterford, Limerick, Offaly and the weaker counties and let them fend for themselves. The Government is putting the investment into basic research, but it is doing so in specialisations that already exist and that is the fundamental flaw.

In the particular correspondence that was signed by 900 scientists, the most damning indictment was that it clearly stated that we are now producing----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry Deputy, you are over time. I will let you back in again. There is a time limit.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Science Foundation Ireland spends €150 million out of the €724 million in research. This oriented research, funded from the enterprise sector and the enterprise policy dimension, is less than a quarter of the overall research spend. As the Deputy knows, the Higher Education Authority allocates substantial moneys to individuals to undertake research in their own fields and they are entirely free in the application of that time.

We have competitive calls for our €150 million budget, which is designed to have maximum impact on the Irish economy and on society. For example, who could not say that advanced materials bioengineering research being carried out at Amber is not an area? Amber's research area is 2D materials and composites, biomaterials, medical devices, semi-conductor and memory devices, polymer nano-composites and membranes. To me, that means all the connected, smart products, the internet of things - that is what they are at and that is the fundamental direction in which we are going.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Richard Bruton: These are some of the best scientists we have - Professor Fergal O'Brien, Professor Michael Morris and so on. They are tied into----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Minister, there is a time limit. There are also Deputies wait-

ing in the Chamber to ask questions.

Deputy Richard Bruton: What we are doing is impactful and it is proving its impact. It is a competitive call----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Minister, the time is up.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The problem is that the next big innovation in the world will probably be when a geologist, a microbiologist and maybe - God forbid - an economist sit down together over a cup of coffee and come up with some big new idea. If they do not have the basic skills they are not going to develop that. We are producing science graduates who have not done real experimental work during their undergraduate years. It is like trying to train doctors and license them as GPs without their having first-hand experience of treating patients. While the approach the Minister is taking will deliver in the short term - I have no difficulty with that and believe substantial investment needs to go into it- if he puts all his eggs into oriented research, whether it be basic or applied, he will end up without the fundamental building blocks to sustain this growth into the future.

Deputy Richard Bruton: We are not putting all our eggs in one basket; €150 million is going into this out of the approximately €725 million that is spent on research. The HEA funds much more than we do and its funds provide the blue-sky freedom to individual researchers to study their own things and do whatever collaborations they wish - indeed those people can collaborate with our centres and data. They are all located in universities and there is a web of them around the country. An academic can plug into our insight and we have developed in a way that there are hubs and spokes, so there can be flexible interaction with these centres.

As the Deputy is aware, Science Foundation Ireland is investing in head-hunting stars who can come to Irish colleges and become a nucleus around which new thinking can occur. We are funding that from our Department, bringing in those stars who can build excellence around them. There is a lot that is exciting happening in this area but it is based on selection. The best projects win. It is not just saying that everyone gets €X and they all go off and we hope that something comes back. We stoutly defend the approach and evolve it all the time.

Question No. 10 replied to with Written Answers.

Economic Competitiveness

11. **Deputy Seán Kyne** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation in recognition of the improvement in Ireland's ranking in terms of international competitiveness, his plans to further improve our ranking in the year ahead. [12082/15]

Deputy Seán Kyne: In light of Ireland's improved international competitiveness rankings, what plans does the Minister have to continue that progression in the years ahead?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Government has undertaken significant structural reforms to improve competitiveness. We have reformed wage setting mechanisms, improved access to finance for business and reduced the administrative burdens on business. Our cost base has improved making Irish firms more competitive internationally and Ireland a more attractive location for overseas firms. Improved competitiveness has facilitated indigenous startups and supported record levels of net job creation by Enterprise Ireland and IDA and jobs growth

across the regions.

By making Ireland more competitive we have facilitated job creation, exports and enterprise. Since 2011, Ireland's international competitiveness rankings have improved. We have moved from 24th to 15th in the International Institute for Management Development, IMD, world competitiveness yearbook and from 29th to 25th in the World Economic Forum global competitiveness report. In addition, we are 13th out of 189 in the World Bank's report on doing business.

This improvement in international competitiveness has been hard won through structural reforms, pay restraint and productivity increases. We must however continue to do more to ensure our competitiveness gains are not eroded as the economy grows. Through the Action Plan for Jobs, the Government is maintaining its focus on measures aimed at improving our competitiveness position and creating a supportive environment for enterprise and sustainable full employment. The 2015 action plan places a particular focus on improving cost competitiveness, supporting competitive regions, aligning skills with enterprise needs and using research and innovation to secure future competitiveness.

The plan has set an ambitious strategic goal to further improve our international competitiveness ranking. Specific measures are being taken in the year ahead to reduce the administrative burden for over half a million business interactions by, for example, greater use of ICT, revoking outdated legislation, and greater awareness and promotion of health and safety best practice. Improvements to be delivered in 2015 include the roll-out of new company law which is reducing the administrative burden of company registration and filing systems, the new workplace commission, trusted partners for the issuing of work permits, and the integrated licensing applications service.

The National Competitiveness Council and the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Jobs will also continue to consider specific initiatives to improve our competitiveness. I am confident that the actions we are taking across the Government through the Action Plan for Jobs will support further improvements in our international competitiveness rankings.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister for his reply and acknowledge that he has a strong record both in opposition and as Minister in terms of highlighting the importance of competitiveness. The National Competitiveness Council has highlighted a number of areas about which it has concerns, including property costs, quality broadband provision and energy costs. What concerns does the Minister have about the cost of property and the shortage of rental property evident in some markets? How important are energy market integration and the European Single Market in increasing energy cost competitiveness in Ireland *vis-à-vis* our competitors in the United States? Energy costs in Europe are much higher than in the United States.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Absolutely all of these factors are crucial. As the Deputy knows, the Government has a construction strategy to address the area of property. After the crash, there have been a number of difficulties in funding new developments. On broadband provision, a call will be issued later in the year to provide for the areas of the country that cannot be reached by commercial operators. The Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Alex White, is working on that issue.

Energy poses particular problems. There is investment in strengthening the grid, but we have a fuel mix that creates competitiveness difficulties. Recently there have been improve-

ments owing to the decline in oil prices. We have been showing improvements in our energy cost competitiveness in recent times. As the Deputy will see, the National Competitiveness Council has put on top of its list objectives such as enhancing the skills base, broadening the tax base, developing the enterprise base and improving access to finance. There is a range of areas in which we can hope to improve and on which we are working to make improvements.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister for the reply. IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland obviously have a strong record in job creation, not least in my constituency. The Minister was there on Monday in regard to IDT911. IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland will be reporting to the Minister on their meetings in the United States and other areas regarding concerns they and those jurisdictions have about competitiveness in Ireland. Will the Minister comment on this?

Deputy Richard Bruton: As the Deputy knows, IDA Ireland has just produced its strategy for the next five years. It is based on consultation in all of our markets. I participated in some of the meetings. The biggest issue is talent and it is in that respect that every country will stand or fall. There is a worldwide war for talent. Ireland is one of the top countries in terms of the availability of skills. That is a really important factor that keeps us right. We have to be very attentive to our capacity to respond to changing skill needs and building scientific capability and STEM subjects. Deputy Denis Naughten wrote an excellent report on these issues some years ago.

Deputy Denis Naughten: It was not listened to; that is the problem.

Deputy Richard Bruton: That is the biggest clarion call. As we develop the ETBs, the apprenticeship model and interaction between colleges and enterprise, these will be really important areas of work.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Minister is not doing a bad job himself either

Public Procurement Contracts

12. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation if the measures in An Action Plan for Jobs 2015 dealing with small and medium enterprise and micro-enterprise access to public procurement of goods and services contracts are sufficiently ambitious to increase both sectors' share of these public contracts within the lifetime of the plan. [12097/15]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Public procurement presents one of the biggest opportunities for SMEs in the State. An Action Plan for Jobs states the ambitions of the Government are merely to increase SME awareness and identify further measures to assist public sector procurement. In other words, in the Government's fourth year in office, its ambition is to look into the matter. I sat with a previous Minister responsible for the OPW in his office and asked him why the Government was rolling up all contracts and making it more difficult for SMEs. All we had was a shrug. Do small businesses not deserve more than a shrug with regard to public procurement?

(Deputy Gerald Nash): They are getting more than a shrug; they are getting contracts. Public procurement provides an opportunity in the domestic market for Irish enterprises, with annual expenditure by the Government sector of €8 billion on goods and services. Policy responsibility for public procurement rests with the Department of Public Expenditure and

Reform. However, my Department and its agencies work closely with the Office of Government Procurement which comes within the remit of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to support SMEs in gaining access to public procurement opportunities. In this regard, Action Plan for Jobs 2015 contains a number of actions aimed at helping SMEs to prepare better for public procurement opportunities as they arise. For example, Enterprise Ireland and InterTradeIreland which come within the remit of my Department are building on their work to date to increase SME awareness of forthcoming public procurement opportunities. The Office of Government Procurement will publish pipelines of procurement activities to inform SMEs of forthcoming procurement opportunities.

Enterprise Ireland and InterTradeIreland will continue to work to grow the capacity and capability of Irish enterprises to tender for public procurement contracts through the delivery of targeted training programmes such as Go-2-Tender, Advanced Go-2-Tender, consortia-building initiatives and nationwide Meet the Buyer events, many of which I have attended. The Meet the Buyer events, run in conjunction with the Office of Government Procurement, provide suppliers with an opportunity to meet public sector buyers and outline their products to them. Other events provide opportunities for suppliers to network and build consortia.

The measures in Action Plan for Jobs 2015 relating to public procurement build on the work undertaken in previous years in this area. Last year the Office of Government Procurement reviewed and updated its guidelines and procedures in an effort to make it easier for SMEs to participate in public procurement. In addition, the Office of Government Procurement chairs a working group which includes small business representatives and officials from my Department and agencies and acts as a key mechanism for engaging with SME representative bodies and identifying further measures to improve access to public procurement.

Earlier this month the Minister, Deputy Brendan Howlin, and the Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Simon Harris, published a report on public procurement expenditure for 2013 that gives an understanding of the breadth of public service procurement spending and its importance to Irish business. The report indicates that, of the €2.74 billion in procurement expenditure that was analysed, 93% remained within the State, while 66% of procurement expenditure was directly with SMEs. This compares very favourably with expenditure in the order of 10% with SMEs in the United Kingdom. My Department will continue to work with the Office of Government Procurement and other stakeholders to assist SMEs and micro enterprises to build their capacity to access public procurement opportunities.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: An Action Plan for Jobs 2015 states with regard to public procurement and SMEs that its ambitions include increasing awareness and looking into further methods to improve it. The Minister of State has said €2.4 billion in public procurement was analysed and referred to expenditure of €8 billion. The truth of the matter is that the Office of Public Procurement simply does not know how much public procurement is through small Irish SMEs. The figure is not available, which is shocking. There is obviously a gulf between our ambition for public procurement and that of the Government. There is a gulf between the ambitions of the Small Firms Association and the Irish School Art Supply Federation which has very clearly highlighted the need to reduce the significant blockages in the State. For example, why will the Minister not commit in An Action Plan for Jobs to use the criterion of the most economically advantageous tender? That would take into account value for money, quality after-sales service, social values and whole-economy benefits. Why will the Government not consider this?

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Deputy Gerald Nash: We are considering all the time how we can improve opportunities for SMEs and micro-enterprises in order that they can engage with the Office of Public Procurement to win public contracts. The evidence from the 2013 figures which represent the first analysis of its kind undertaken shows that the performance of SMEs in winning public contracts is very strong. By comparison with the position in the United Kingdom, it is particularly strong. I am quite surprised that no Government before the current one took the opportunity to examine in a comprehensive way the performance of SMEs in public procurement. We are doing so and will have annual reports. We will be examining the trends. Enterprise Ireland, InterTradeIreland and the Government are very committed to making sure we can facilitate as many SMEs and micro-enterprises as possible to win public contracts so as to sustain and support Irish business and grow the number of Irish jobs.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The enterprise agencies should be focusing on the key issue, that is, getting rid of blockages. There are tenders rolled up into massive tenders that preclude small businesses from competing. There are articles within contracts that state tendering companies must have a massive turnover and profit and be heavily insured. This also precludes small businesses. The State is measuring which tenders are the cheapest. The fact of the matter is that a local tender could have a far greater impact on the economy. This means the creation of more jobs, addressing regional imbalances and fostering innovation. These are real opportunities within the grasp of the Government. As there are only 12 months, at most, remaining in the Government's term in office, I urge it to move beyond increasing awareness of tenders to look further into the matter.

Deputy Gerald Nash: I find in my day-to-day work as a constituency Deputy that it is often the case there is a misunderstanding by SMEs and micro-enterprises about the way in which they might approach public tendering processes. This is why it is so important that our State agencies work with business representative organisations to break down any of those barriers and misconceptions. It is misleading of the Deputy to suggest there is some kind of widespread difficulty with SMEs accessing the public procurement system. It is not the case and the evidence going back to 2013 that we have analysed shows strongly that the figures are high. In terms of the analysis carried out, some 66% of public procurement is directly with SMEs. I would like to see it grow and to see SMEs in this country continue to build their capacity to engage with the Office of Government Procurement and avail of other opportunities in terms of major public projects. It is happening and I believe we would all like it to grow.

Competition and Consumer Protection Commission

13. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation if he will provide an update on the implementation of the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12094/15]

An Ceann Comhairle: As we are about to suspend the sitting, I ask the Minister to just give the reply to question No. 13.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 came into effect on 31 October 2014, which was the implementation day for the new Competition and Consumer Protection Commission. Since its establishment, the commission has been working to develop its first strategy statement for 2015-18, a copy of which I will lay before both Houses of the Oireachtas in accordance with the Act when it is finalised. This work is in parallel with

the statutory work in regard to the dissolution of the legacy organisations - the Competition Authority and the National Consumer Agency - as well as the practical issue of integrating the two bodies. The commission has also undertaken some important work in the competition and consumer area since it was established, including reporting on the findings of the first consumer detriment study ever undertaken in Ireland; issuing guidance for SMEs on public procurement and how they can participate in consortium bids while respecting competition law requirements; launching a gift voucher awareness campaign both before and after Christmas; and, most recently, issuing interesting results, which I am sure the Deputy will have seen, of a survey on motor insurance comparisons.

In respect of the grocery goods provisions of the Act, a set of draft regulations were issued on 22 December 2014 for public consultation with a deadline at the end of February 2015. However, some respondents requested an extension of the deadline into March 2015 for submissions. The content of the submissions received are currently being fully considered before the final regulations are promulgated as soon as possible in 2015.

Since the enactment of the legislation a small number of technical issues arose that needed to be addressed to provide certainty in the interpretation of the media merger provisions. This was achieved through provisions inserted into the Intellectual Property (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 which was enacted on 23 December 2014. As the Deputy is aware, under the Competition and Consumer Protection Act, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources assumed responsibility for the public interest test on media mergers and a final decision on such mergers rests with him.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Will the Minister update the House on the number of staff that are being attached and the division within that staff between the competition side and the consumer protection side of things? There is no doubt that the work on insurance this week was excellent. What will be the follow-up to that work? Who requested more time in respect of the groceries order issue? It is not as if it was bounced upon people that there was going to be a consultation.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I will have to get the staff breakdowns for the Deputy. I do not have the exact numbers. As the Deputy is aware, we expanded the size of the commission and the former director of the National Consumer Agency is now a commissioner. The organisations merged with their existing complements and I would not have expected a huge shift in that since. We are already seeing that having the two elements of the marketplace in the same location is delivering more practical responses and solutions. I will get the figures for the Deputy.

I will also get the Deputy the information on who requested the time extension in respect of the groceries order issue. I do not have that information with me. It was clearly one of the participants. The order will introduce new obligations and new monitoring arrangements. The extension is for just one month and is therefore not being greatly delayed.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Sitting suspended at 10.55 a.m. and resumed at noon.

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Leaders' Questions

Deputy Colm Keaveney: I will cast the Tánaiste's mind back to November 2012, when the people of this country voted in a referendum to amend the Constitution to provide for children's rights. She will remember from some of the rhetoric and Government spin at the time that children were to be front and centre in all public policy. Unfortunately, the actions of the Government in the meantime can be said to have been slack. It has cut the number of guidance counsellors, child benefit and core welfare benefits to under 25 year olds.

Will the Tánaiste acknowledge today's publication of a report into mental health services? Will she acknowledge some of its startling details about the welfare of children who have been waiting for longer than one year to access mental health services? As we speak, 3,000 vulnerable children are waiting, 400 of whom have been waiting for longer than one year. The report is startling and confirms what we have been telling the Government for some time, namely, it has shattered community mental health services for children. Only 42% of the staff complement that is required to protect the most vulnerable in society were *in situ* last year.

One third of vulnerable children who access mental health services are being admitted to adult wards. Will the Tánaiste provide a date by which the Government plans to cease this Dickensian action? Will she confirm whether best practice in terms of child welfare is being followed on those wards? The one third of admissions is due to the Government's policy.

This issue boils down to two questions. When will the Government cease the practice of admitting children to adult wards and is the Tánaiste satisfied that best practice in terms of child welfare guidelines is being followed? Before she answers now, I have submitted a parliamentary question on this matter. I want her to assure the people of this country that the children being admitted to adult wards have the comfort of best practice.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the question. When he was on this side of the House, he often praised the Government for the priority it had given to children-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Is that right?

Deputy Michael Conaghan: Yes.

The Tánaiste: -----in the context of the very difficult situation that was inherited. I can remember him on many occasions commenting on how Fianna Fáil, his current party, had cruelly reduced the supports to families in relation to areas like child benefit.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I remember when the Tánaiste-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Come on. The Tánaiste can do better than that.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Keaveney was very eloquent on that.

Deputy Niall Collins: What happened to the Tánaiste? Tell us what the Government has not cut.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I suppose this is like those post offices that have been closed. There was no basis for that.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Any new baby can be put-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please. The Tánaiste has the floor.

The Tánaiste: Just to remind Deputy Keaveney in relation to his comment on child benefit-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: We remember the Tánaiste when she was in opposition.

Deputy Niall Collins: This is a serious issue.

The Tánaiste: -----I was very happy to increase child benefit by €5 per month in this year's budget.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Government promised not to cut it in the first place.

The Tánaiste: It was not as much as we would like-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: Tell us about the respite care grant.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government rolled right back on-----

The Tánaiste: -----but we have promised to do the same again next year. That was just in the context of Deputy Keaveney's opening comments.

Of course all mental health services are incredibly important, both to adults and specifically to children. I think it has been recognised and agreed by all parties in the House that the practice of children ending up in services intended for adults is not appropriate.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Give us a date.

The Tánaiste: The development of child and adolescent mental health services is a priority, and has been, for my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, and the Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar.

Just to put it in context again, notwithstanding the severe financial difficulties that the country found itself in at the time of the last election and from 2008, an additional €125 million and some 1,150 posts have been provided for mental health services since 2012. The Deputy will also be aware that there has been an ambitious programme of investment in capital resources and improvements, including the opening of new mental health facilities and the opening at a local level right around the country and that people can see at the moment of large numbers of primary health care services. Central to the provision of the primary health care centres has been the actual provision at a local level of mental health services, including mental health services for children and adolescents. That, of course, is the setting in which we would like to see children and adolescents who experience mental health difficulties receiving the care, the counselling and the other services that their conditions may require. In fact, seeing children hospitalised would be, I think, for most professionals in the field the last resort and only in cases where it was possibly the only way of helping a child or an adolescent in very severe difficulties.

Deputy Michael Conaghan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Speaking as the father of three children, the Tánaiste has become a cold-hearted technocrat. Her response was appalling. I simply asked her when the Government would cease the practice of admitting vulnerable children to adult wards. She will be

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aware of high-profile reports last week of inappropriate relationships between staff and service users. Will the Tánaiste give a date? Nothing else, not waffle. Let us pull the curtain back and examine what is happening on the ground. Please give me and the country the date by which the Government intends to stop the practice of admitting children to adult wards. Can she guarantee the people present that best practice prevails with respect to child welfare on adult wards? Is she satisfied that there are child protection officers across adult wards where vulnerable children are admitted? Will she just deal with the two questions asked? She should not take a meandering road and talk about some time in the past. She has been in government for five years - deal with it.

Deputy Tom Hayes: The party opposite was represented here, too.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Just deal with the questions on vulnerable children. The Government botched the referendum.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It misspent the money allocated.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: There is an opportunity to deal with the substantive question this morning. I ask for a date for when the Government will cease the admission of children to adult wards. Will the Tánaiste guarantee the welfare of children with respect to child protection? That is the key question.

The Tánaiste: I am not quite sure why the Deputy speaks about a botched referendum on children's rights.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: The Government mishandled it. The Tánaiste should deal with the question.

The Tánaiste: I think I hear undertones of another conversation Fianna Fáil and others are having, but that is a different issue. The children's rights referendum was passed in an open vote by the citizens of the country. The party opposite may have a different view of it, but its members should respect the will of citizens.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: We do.

The Tánaiste: Then they should not describe it in that way.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Can the Tánaiste give a date?

The Tánaiste: As we are four years in government, the Deputy was out by 20% on that point. As I recognise that he is the father of three children and interested in this issue, I will take his questions seriously. We have invested across the board in children and meeting their needs. The committee and groups which have come together on child and adolescent mental welfare issues have acknowledged the progress that has been made on a number of occasions, including in a report.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: On its report card the Government gets a B minus.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy needs to read the report.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: The Tánaiste needs to read it. The position is getting progressively worse.

The Tánaiste: The report recognises the progress made by the Government. I have read the report, whereas the Deputy has possibly only read the cover.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Is the Tánaiste going to give a date?

The Tánaiste: We will continue, as resources permit, to expand our investment in children and adolescents with mental health difficulties and to make primary care centres which are being rolled out around the country the primary location for dealing with children with mental health problems. The centres will be as close to home as possible and require no more inpatient treatment than is absolutely necessary. The best way to treat a child is to treat the child's family also in order that they can deal with the issues he or she faces. We are investing in an enormous range of additional facilities which are broadening the availability of resources for children. If the Deputy wanted to be honest, he would accept that the people working for organisations in this area have acknowledged it.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: If the Tánaiste wanted to be honest, she would answer the question.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On Saturday up to 80,000 people marched through the streets of Dublin.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: It was 20,000.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They came from every constituency with a clear message, "Scrap the water charges or call a general election." What was the Labour Party's response? One of its Ministers of State said it did not matter how many people marched, the Government was not for turning - what arrogance. This week the Government has shown its true colours by threatening hundreds of thousand of families who simply cannot pay the water charge. The Labour Party, it seems, is to become Irish Water's debt collector, sticking its hands into the pockets of families who are struggling to provide for their children or pay their mortgage or rent. The party sends in the Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, Portroe's own Paulie Walnuts, to put the squeeze on families with nothing left to give. Is this how the party responds to the will of the people? Is this how it helps cash-strapped families? Is this its way? My questions to the Tánaiste are very simple. Does she support the proposal of the Minister to raid people's wages, social welfare and pension payments? Does she support his proposal to hike council rents and force landlords to retain deposits? Since when is it the role of the Labour Party to be Irish Water's and Fine Gael's bagman?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy's party leader, Deputy Gerry Adams, could be described as Uncle Junior in "The Sopranos". More than 1 million people have signed up with Irish Water. What is Deputy Mary Lou McDonald saying to them, people who want to see a proper water system in Ireland and an end to the scandal of more than 40 rivers and lakes being polluted by raw sewage?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Tánaiste needs to change the record.

The Tánaiste: My priority is the people who want to see safe and healthy water. The people who marched on Saturday have a democratic right to do so, but according to Garda reports, there were between 25,000 and 30,000 in attendance.

Deputy Finian McGrath: That is rubbish.

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Deputy Brian Stanley: It is wishful thinking.

The Tánaiste: It is a sizeable number of people, but does Sinn Féin want to deny the will of the 1 million people who want to see a proper water system in this country?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We want to see a proper water system, paid for by a progressive tax.

The Tánaiste: Sinn Féin has tricked and tracked on this issue. At one point it was strongly and prominently in favour of a well managed water utility which would supply safe drinking water. As it is on the record of this House, Deputies opposite need not shake their heads. They have been doing a U-turn on this issue so much that at times they must be dizzy. They were going to pay the charge at one point, but then they thought about it and thought perhaps they would not. Perhaps they will, perhaps they will not - we do not know yet.

I will say something else.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste might answer the question. That would be a novel approach.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy's interest is only in the next general election, but my interest is in the next generation. I want our children and grandchildren to have a clean supply of water for their health, the development of the economy and tourism and agriculture. Only a party in denial such as Sinn Féin, for which the future of the country matters less than its electoral future, would suggest there was no need for a major capital investment programme in the next ten to 20 years to build the water system about which I have spoken.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Government has spent €500 million.

The Tánaiste: There is a major capital cost involved in achieving the goal. I do not want to see Sinn Féin ducking and diving, as it has been on the issue of water charges. It is easy to be populist but it is harder to look after the future of our country and the future of our children and our grandchildren. I support the work of the Minister, Deputy Kelly, in bringing forward a proper plan and structure for water development in this country.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Pickpocketing.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not a proper plan.

The Tánaiste: We as a country should have started this about 30 years ago.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Sure the Tánaiste's party was campaigning against it for the 30 years.

The Tánaiste: We have 34 separate local authorities. We know already in Dublin that Irish Water by changing-----

Deputy Billy Kelleher: So the Tánaiste was wrong for 30 years.

The Tánaiste: -----the work on the Ringsend treatment system will make a saving for the taxpayer of €70 million to €80 million and produce a better water treatment system for Dublin.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It could have been achieved by the council.

The Tánaiste: It is a big undertaking-----

Deputy Billy Kelleher: It is a big U-turn as well.

The Tánaiste: -----to set up a new utility.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is the change in technology that will bring the savings, not Irish Water.

The Tánaiste: I understand that any payments people have to make can be difficult to make but this year I am happy to say that in regard to people on average industrial earnings we have been able to improve their after-tax income by up to €30 a month and in regard to-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Which is wiped out with the water charges.

The Tánaiste: -----people in receipt of social welfare, we have been able to have modest improvements for them and to improve their standard of living. The assessment of the budget shows-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: While the Government was throwing them out of their homes.

The Tánaiste: -----that this has benefited the average family, including in particular people on social welfare, to an amount of roughly, on average, €6 a week, and that is a very significant achievement-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Six whole euro.

The Tánaiste: -----from where we have come.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: We need the investment in Irish Water-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: You have a shower every day.

The Tánaiste: -----we need a proper water system and I want to hear Sinn Féin commit to clean water for the whole country, including the Border areas.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Every time this issue arises here and every time the Tánaiste, in particular, gets to her feet to do a tour around the world, in verbal terms, she confirms yet again just how distant she and her colleagues are from the realities of life for so many people on the ground, certainly the people that I represent. The persons to whom she referred are the net beneficiaries of six whole euro and what she is effectively doing is rendering that null and void. She knows that people in receipt of the €6 are struggling so badly that very many of them are in debt, some of them to debt collectors, and they are in really bad circumstances. Is there a part of the collective brain of the Labour Party that just does not get that or that has forgotten that?

Deputy Robert Dowds: We get it all right.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: With the greatest of respect to the Tánaiste, and it is all the one to me, but all those families do not appreciate her condescending rhetoric suggesting that somehow they do not understand the value of a clean water supply-----

Deputy Derek Nolan: The Deputy does not.

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Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----or suggesting, as some of her other colleagues have, that those who cannot pay are nothing more than scroungers. That is quite something coming from the Labour Party-----

Deputy Emmet Stagg: People like the Deputy are the scroungers.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ----and it is not lost on the people.

Last November, I asked the Tánaiste to confirm whether she was planning to come the heavy with those unable to pay the water charges. She might remember that occasion. She bumbled and blustered and, as usual, she did not answer the question-----

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----but even then she knew what the plan was. She knew and she knows today as we speak that despite all her talk about putting money back in people's pockets that her real intention is to take it straight back out again with attachment orders, council rent increases and deposit retention. That is the reality.

When the Tánaiste takes to her feet, in addition to, no doubt, a very elongated exposition of something, could she do me a favour-----

Deputy James Bannon: This is an elongated question as well.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----and answer, in the clearest of terms, that yes, she supports the Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, in his enterprise to pickpocket wages, social welfare and pensions?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Can the Tánaiste confirm that is the case, that it is her position and the position of the Labour Party?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you. We are on supplementary questions now.

The Tánaiste: That was quite a "Wanderly Wagon" trip, was it not?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Deputy was trying to catch up with the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: I do not know what exactly she had in mind-----

Deputy Martin Ferris: Answer the question put for once.

The Tánaiste: -----but just let me repeat the facts, and I know facts are often awkward for the Deputy to deal with.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, they are not.

Deputy Regina Doherty: The Deputy just ignores them.

The Tánaiste: In the budget for this year we had a social welfare package which provided for, first, an increase in child benefit - that is a fact - and I presume the Deputy noticed it-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Net of the cuts-----

The Tánaiste: -----second, an increase in the living alone allowance and, third, we reinstated, on a partial basis, the Christmas bonus, all of which were strongly welcomed by the people of Dublin Central. Among the 1 million people who have signed up to Irish Water, there are people who live in every part of the country, including in the Deputy's constituency and my constituency. I am sure that has not escaped her attention. What she is suggesting is that there would be one law for Sinn Féin-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No.

The Tánaiste: ----and one law for everybody else.

Deputy Tom Hayes: That is exactly what the Deputy opposite is saying.

The Tánaiste: The people who have signed up want to and are willing to pay for investing in a future clean water supply, and we have to finance it, as-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: They have paid.

The Tánaiste: -----there is not a fairy pot of gold for this country in regard to investment.

Deputy Derek Nolan: That is the Deputy's economic policy.

The Tánaiste: We have to provide-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Tax cuts for the rich.

The Tánaiste: -----a pattern of investment in this country. Deputy McDonald's party is addressing that issue in the North at the moment where it is going to let thousands of civil servants go in order to meet the financial requirements of her party being in government in the North and addressing the financial issues of the North, so we have to address the financial reality. More than 1 million households have signed up to Irish Water.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Pickpocketing

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Have they paid?

The Tánaiste: Just let me say-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: So the people who are struggling are misleading us, are they? That is not true.

The Tánaiste: -----that those people at work, for instance, received reductions in the universal social charge, USC, which I think the Deputy supports, so she must have read about that, and reductions in regard to income tax, so, yes as a country we are in recovery. Last year and this year we will have an extra thousand people - some 40,000 people - at work and that will provide more resources to fund the vital services of the country, but for water we need to invest over a long period of time.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is not happening.

The Tánaiste: If Deputy McDonald is asking me again-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I asked about the attachment orders.

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The Tánaiste: -----do I support the work that the Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, has done to bring in affordable charges of a net of €60 a year for a single individual and a net of €160 for a family of two adults plus children-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I know the Tánaiste would say it is only €3 and what is the big deal.

The Tánaiste: -----and the work he has achieved in reframing-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Does the Tánaiste support his attachment orders? Answer “Yes” or “No” to that.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Minister is making it up as he goes along.

The Tánaiste: -----the charges for Irish Water, yes, I strongly support that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Tánaiste. I call Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, on a point of order-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: There will be repercussions-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are no points of order on Leaders’ Questions.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We went through this drama last November, I hope we do not have to go through it again.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: Have a sit-in.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I just wish the Tánaiste-----

Deputy James Bannon: Yes, a sit-in.

Deputy Tom Hayes: She can stay here because they have nothing on the agenda anyway.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----to answer “Yes or “No”. Does she support the plan for attachment orders-----

Deputy Tom Hayes: On the Deputy’s salary, yes.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----to wages, social welfare and pensions?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not a point of order.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy can afford it on her salary.

Deputy Tom Hayes: She can afford it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste might take to her feet and answer that.

Deputy Tom Hayes: The Deputy can pay the costs as well.

Deputy James Bannon: And first class trips around the world.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You are an absolute disgrace. You are a wimp.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please. Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan has the floor. I call the Deputy and I would like to have some order. Could we have order please for Deputy O'Sullivan?

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: We all know the effects of being unemployed and the feelings it creates in people of being worthless, inadequate and of hopelessness and the mental health issues that follow, and we know the effects of that on relationships and on our communities. When jobs are lost, particularly in rural communities, so much more is lost as well. I know the Tánaiste is going to tell me that unemployment figures are going in the right direction and she will tell me about the various programmes and initiatives for people who are unemployed to educate and retrain them in order to get them back into the workforce, and I know some of them are progressing well. Certain people are not allowed to register on the live register as unemployed and this means they do not have access to various job activation programmes and education and retraining.

The unemployed population is divided into registered unemployed, with all the entitlements that brings, and the unregistered unemployed, who have no legal recognition from the State. They have no real entitlement to job activation and education programmes. The unregistered group comprises two groups, those who are self-employed and the women who opted out of the workforce to rear their families and now want to come back into the workforce. Looking at the material of the advisory committee, I was struck by two quotations. One is that the eligibility criteria for non-income support based training schemes should be modified to allow self-employed people to gain access to such schemes. Recent trends towards greater flexibility and casualisation have resulted in some workers being classified as self-employed whereas they should really be classified as employees. This has led to a minority group in the unemployed population being excluded from registering on the live register. All job activation programmes and measures are not open to all the unemployed. What are those groups entitled to do in order to get back into the workforce? Is there a statutory or constitutional basis for dividing the unemployed into the registered and unregistered?

The Tánaiste: Every person who is unemployed is someone on the live register and has registered with the Intreo services in my Department. I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for her comments on how much this has improved. What the Deputy is saying is that she would like to see more people being able to avail of the activation services. I do not disagree with that but when we came into office we inherited a situation that people may recall, with an employment rate tipping 15%. It was well over 400,000 and I had a lot of sleepless nights that it would go over 500,000 people because of the mess our friends in Fianna Fáil had left behind. The sheer volume of unemployed people means that the Government decided to give priority to getting those on the live register-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Over to Australia.

The Tánaiste: -----back to work. To do so, we turned the Department of Social Protection right around. Previously, the Department paid out income support but it is now running a public employment service where we work with employers in the private and public sector to help people who become unemployed to get jobs. The Deputy's proposal is that we extend it

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to other groups, such as those who have not been on the live register for a variety of reasons as described, which I accept. The latest figures show that the number on the live register has been falling dramatically this year. We are into the third month of the year and it is now approximately 10%. As we get the number of people on the live register down, I look forward to a situation where we can extend activation opportunities to the people described by Deputy O'Sullivan. I refer particularly to opportunities for people to go back to education and training. I want people to get a well-paid job and that we invest in people's skills so that they get a well-paid job that is likely to last.

Deputy Finian McGrath: In the meantime, they need a few bob.

The Tánaiste: During my recent visit to the United States over the St. Patrick's Day period to promote Ireland I noticed a huge number of companies from the US interested in using Ireland as a base for employment. Many of the people described by Deputy O'Sullivan who have not been on the live register for one reason or another would be terrific employees for some of these companies but we must reach out to get more education and training opportunities so that the people the Deputy describes can benefit from the enormous increase in jobs. It is a situation I keep under constant review. As the numbers come down, we should be able to make more opportunities available to the people described.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: If people are unemployed and not on the live register, the unemployed figures on the live register do not give an accurate picture of the unemployed people in the country. With Springboard, preference is given to the long-term unemployed. Why would an employer take on someone who is not on the live register because that deprives the employer of some of the benefits when taking someone from the live register? Last week, a report from the Nevin Economic Research Institute gave a relatively positive picture of recovery-----

Deputy Colm Keaveney: In Dublin.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: -----but it had serious concerns about the low paid. Some 25% of employees, some 345,000 people in the labour force, earn an hourly wage of less than the living wage threshold of €11.45 and 60% of the low paid are women.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Zero-hour contracts.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: The Tánaiste is saying people are coming off the live register but if they are going into employment that does not allow them to live in dignity, it is distorting the picture of the progress made on employment. I am not someone who wants to knock the measures going on but we must be realistic and accurate regarding the overall picture. I hope the Tánaiste will follow through in looking at the groups I mentioned, who are technically self-employed, including young people who cannot get onto the live register, and the women who gave up their careers to rear their families and now want to get back into the workforce.

The Tánaiste: I agree with many of the points made. When I became the leader of the Labour Party, I prioritised something I did after I became the Minister for Social Protection. In the Social Welfare Bill, I reinstated the €1 cut made in the minimum wage by Fianna Fáil and the Green Party.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: And took it out of child benefit.

The Tánaiste: Fianna Fáil decided to cut the minimum wage by €1 an hour. For a woman working in a hotel job on low pay, reinstating the minimum wage was worth €36 or €40 a week.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: It did not apply to an employed person.

The Tánaiste: I met many of them through their trade unions and representative groups. This is a question asked by Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan. At the time, Deputy Colm Keaveney was a strong supporter of the reinstatement.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: The Tánaiste cut the respite care grants.

Deputy Tom Hayes: Deputy Colm Keaveney is the new Haughey.

The Tánaiste: Can I answer the question asked by Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we all settle down?

Deputy Ray Butler: Deputy Timmy Dooley missed the boat.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: How is Deputy Ray Butler's driving?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: The temporary leader of Fianna Fáil is not showing due respect to Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Tánaiste is a temporary Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: Restoring the minimum wage, which was cruelly cut by Fianna Fáil by €1 an hour, was the first thing we did.

Deputy Niall Collins: What did the Tánaiste not cut?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The waffle.

The Tánaiste: When I became the leader of the Labour Party, I asked my colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Gerald Nash, to bring together a low pay commission to deal with the issue of low levels of income. The Minister of State is undertaking, at my request, a study of the kind of conditions described, where people are on a low number of contracted hours. Although they are paid an hourly rate, if a person only receives ten hours a week, it is difficult to have the financial independence and wage levels needed to live a fully independent life and to provide for oneself and one's family. As a Government, we are working on that. I anticipate the Low Pay Commission's report will be brought before the Cabinet at the end of July and that it will form part of our deliberations with regard to the forthcoming budget, by means of which we hope to make further progress. This year we lessened the impact of the USC and removed 80,000 people from the low pay net.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan referred to people who, for one reason or another, are not registered as being unemployed. As the number of those who are unemployed falls dramatically, it is important that we should seek to increase the number of opportunities on offer to people in terms of upskilling and returning to education in order that they might obtain qualifications. The latter is the route to well-paid employment. I will communicate further with the Deputy on this matter.

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Order of Business

The Tánaiste: As the business which was listed for today has already been brought to a conclusion, it is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the sitting shall be suspended immediately after the Order of Business until 2 p.m. and that Topical Issues shall be taken at that time. Friday's fortnightly business shall be No. 72, High Pay and Wealth Commission Bill 2014, and No. 73, Thirty-Fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Peace and Neutrality) Bill 2014.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is one proposal to put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with the suspension of the sitting agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: On the industrial relations (amendment) Bill, the Tánaiste will be aware that next week thousands of workers employed by Dunnes Stores will engage in industrial action as a consequence of the proliferation of zero-hour contracts. Does she agree that, in the context of any employment relationship, no one's efforts are worth zero? Will she condemn the wholesale intimidation which it is suggested has taken place in respect of the mainly female workers involved? Will the Tánaiste confirm whether the line Minister with responsibility in this area has intervened with the employer, Dunnes Stores, and asked it to recognise the authority of the Labour Relations Commission and to engage in discussions with its workers in the interests of reaching a cohesive settlement with them? Does she agree that employees of Dunnes Stores, particularly those on zero-hour contracts, are entitled to better conditions and that rates of pay should be banded? Will she make a statement to the effect that the relevant Minister has contacted the employer in order to ensure that it involves itself in a wholesome and real engagement with the Labour Relations Commission?

The Tánaiste: As I am sure the Deputy is aware, two industrial relations Bills are due to come before the Dáil this session and the Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Nash, has prioritised both.

The Deputy referred to the intimidation of workers. If such intimidation has taken place, then he should report it because I do not know whether what is involved constitutes a criminal offence. Perhaps he might pursue the matter further with the relevant authorities.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: If the Tánaiste still spoke to the trade unions, she would know what is involved.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Has she stopped doing so?

The Tánaiste: If a criminal offence was involved, then the Deputy should report the matter to An Garda Síochána.

In the context of the potential dispute at Dunnes Stores, I certainly hope it will be possible to reach a settlement. I have asked the Minister of State, Deputy Nash, to undertake an examination of zero-hour contracts, particularly as they can lead to people having a very low number of hours of work and correspondingly low pay while needing to remain available to their employers at all times. I hope it will be possible to settle the dispute in a way which is satisfactory to the workers at Dunnes Stores, as well as to the management of the company, in order that the employment and the enterprise might move forward successfully.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tá trí cheist agam. The first involves the water services

Bill and the matter which we debated on Leaders' Questions but in respect of which clarity was not forthcoming. Will the Tánaiste indicate when we might expect the legislation in question to be introduced?

The second question I wish to pose relates to the Construction Contracts Act. It is 18 months since this legislation was signed into law by the President and we are still awaiting a commencement date in respect of it. The legislation in question was originally introduced five years ago and the process relating to it has been extremely drawn out. The Tánaiste is familiar with the consequences experienced by contractors and subcontractors when the construction bubble burst and with the fact that so many SMEs went out of business at that time. The legislation makes provision for dispute resolution mechanisms and protections in respect of the people to whom I refer. Perhaps the Tánaiste will indicate when it is likely to come into effect.

My final question relates to the fact that the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg announced in recent days that it will hear a collective complaint about the appalling state of local authority housing in 20 local authority areas across the State. The estates involved include O'Devaney Gardens, Croke Villas, Dolphin House, Balgaddy-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is no need for the Deputy to provide all of the details involved on the Order of Business.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Local authorities have a case to answer but, ultimately, the buck stops with central government. I remind the Tánaiste that this Administration has cut council housing budgets by 25% since it took office. In light of the seriousness of the issues raised in the complaint to which I refer, will the Tánaiste facilitate a Dáil debate on the matter? More importantly, will she indicate when the funds local authorities need to address the chronic damp and disrepair that are all too common in our public housing stock will be released?

The Tánaiste: I understand that proposals relating to the water services Bill are due to come before the Cabinet in a short period.

The construction contracts legislation to which the Deputy refers has already been enacted. Certain parts of the Act are awaiting the provision of a ministerial order in the context of an implementation date. The relevant Minister has been contacted in respect of this matter.

The complaint that has been made to the European Court of Human Rights in respect of housing is a matter for that body. In the context of renovating and renewing houses, apartments or flats that are in poor condition, the Deputy will be aware that we recently announced the largest housing investment budget in the history of the State which will cover the period up to 2020.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Tánaiste will not be here at that stage.

The Tánaiste: All local authorities have been involved in detailed discussions with the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government with a view to drawing down the appropriate allocations.

Deputy Brian Stanley: However, they are still awaiting their allocations.

The Tánaiste: Dublin City Council has been given a significant allocation in order that it might deal with the issue of boarded up and voided apartments. We want the practice of boarding up or voiding dwellings to be brought to an end. Obviously, however, this is a matter for local authority members. Local authorities have received significant amounts of funding

in recent years to assist them in dealing with these issues. Local authorities and the elected members thereof must get on with it and ensure that the money which has been allocated will be drawn down and spent. It can take a disappointingly long time for the latter to happen. A number of the people sitting opposite formerly served as members of local authorities. Some local authorities have received funding and we want them to take action in the context of using it as quickly as possible.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Does the Tánaiste have an opinion on the Minister for Justice and Equality attending the launch of a document by the Irish Family Planning Association on Tuesday evening last?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not believe that is relevant to the Order of Business.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: In 2012 the organisation in question was found to be disseminating life-endangering information to women with crisis pregnancies. A proper investigation was not carried out into that matter.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is no legislation promised in respect of that issue.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am raising this matter in the context of the health information Bill. Does the Tánaiste approve of the Minister's attendance at the event to which I refer?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does the Tánaiste wish to comment?

The Tánaiste: That matter will be dealt with in the context of the health information Bill, for which we do not yet have a publication date.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Mar is eol don Tánaiste, tá sé ceithre bliana anois ó foilsíodh clár reachtaíochta an Rialtais, the Government's legislative programme. Sa chlár reachtaíochta sin, bhí geallúint tugtha go dtabharfaí isteach Bille le leasú a dhéanamh ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003. Fuaireamar geallúintí go leor sa Dáil le bliain nó dhó anuas go mbeadh an Bille seo ag teacht isteach. Táimid ag druidim le deireadh téarma eile Dála an tseachtain seo chugainn. An bhféadfadh an Tánaiste insint dom agus don Teach cén uair gur féidir linn a bheith ag súil go dtabharfar isteach an Bille seo is é sin leasú ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla?

The Tánaiste: Beidh an Bille os comhair na Dála an seisiún seo.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome the progress made to date in the removal of children from the prison system. I ask about No. 126 in the legislative programme, St. Patrick's Institution (closing) Bill. When will the Bill be published and when is it expected to be brought before the House?

The Tánaiste: I do not have a date as yet.

Deputy Ray Butler: Another couple of tonnes of diesel sludge was dumped on a roadside in County Louth the other night, costing the taxpayer and the local authority hundreds of thousands of euro to clean up. When is it expected to publish a Bill to strengthen the powers of the Criminal Assets Bureau in forfeiting the proceeds of crime? I refer to No. 124, proceeds of crime (amendment) Bill.

The Tánaiste: The consultation process on the Bill is under way with the Criminal Assets Bureau. Therefore, I do not yet have a date.

Deputy James Bannon: As a result of bad planning decisions and Fianna Fáil being in cahoots with big builders and developers during the boom-----

Deputy Niall Collins: Members of the Deputy's party zoned all of the land, with the Labour Party.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy James Bannon has the floor.

Deputy James Bannon: They zoned the land in local authority areas.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to put a question about legislation.

Deputy James Bannon: We all remember-----

Deputy Niall Collins: They zoned all of the land.

Deputy James Bannon: They all visited the Galway tent. That is what tarnished them. They were part of the Galway tent regime.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Deputy cannot handle the truth.

Deputy James Bannon: That element of Fianna Fáil has not yet left this House and the people have reflected this in every opinion poll for several years.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Deputy does not know what he is speaking about.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy James Bannon should put his question.

Deputy James Bannon: When are we going to have-----

Deputy Niall Collins: The Labour Party zoned the land, with Fine Gael.

Deputy James Bannon: The way Fianna Fáil wrecked the country hurts its Deputies every time they mention it.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: No, it does not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy James Bannon: I know from contacts in County Longford that the new leader of Fianna Fáil skirted around the Galway tent in his younger days. I know that for a fact.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, speak through the Chair.

Deputy James Bannon: I will when I get my chance. Please control the Deputies opposite. They are out of control.

Deputy Brendan Smith: The Deputy's colleagues were involved in rezoning for many years.

Deputy James Bannon: I ask the Tánaiste when we will have the building control Bill to place the construction industry on a proper footing. This is very important.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: That did not go so well.

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The Tánaiste: The Oireachtas Library has all of the reports of the tribunals.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Including the Moriarty report.

The Tánaiste: My recollection is that Fianna Fáil had a starring role in all of them.

Deputy Brendan Smith: What about the telephone licences?

The Tánaiste: The Deputies opposite can read their own history whenever they feel like doing so, as well as that of other parties.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy James Bannon asked a question.

Deputy Niall Collins: Tell us about the Moriarty tribunal.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Not on the Order of Business.

The Tánaiste: In regard to the legislation-----

Deputy Niall Collins: The Deputies opposite were very quiet about that report when it was published.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The mental health services are under huge strain and Ireland has one of the highest rates of suicide in Europe. People are still being turned away from accident and emergency departments and last year's reports on the recruitment of nurses revealed that only one third of the numbers required had been recruited from the funds provided by the Minister for Health. A Vision for Change which was part of the programme for Government promised a new beginning. Hundreds of nurses are about to retire, the majority from mental health services. We have received warnings from senior personnel in mental health services that a huge problem is coming down the road. It is even bigger than the problems we are dealing with. Will the Tánaiste seek to address this issue, as promised in the programme for Government?

The Tánaiste: I understand a mental health Bill due to be brought before the Oireachtas in the next few weeks will address some of the issues raised by the Deputy.

Deputy Brendan Smith: In view of the disastrous decision by European Union Communications Ministers to defer abolition of mobile phone roaming charges, will the Government pursue urgently at European Council level implementation of the decision to abolish roaming charges this year? It has been deferred until an assessment is carried out in 2018. Mobile phone roaming charges are a huge issue in the counties I represent in the Border region, both for people in going about their daily activities and for businesses which depend on the mobile network. That European Union's decision has put the needs of major international mobile phone companies ahead of the interest of consumers.

The Tánaiste: I will ask the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources to address that issue in the context of the European meetings he is attending. It is a very important issue.

Deputy Niall Collins: The sitting was suspended several times yesterday and will be suspended again today without any business having been transacted. The Tánaiste will be aware that a number of Bills are ready and could be brought before the House. For example, why can we not debate Report and Final Stages of the Spent Convictions Bill 2012 today? It does not make any sense and says a lot about Dáil reform.

On the report on the configuration and development of post-primary schools in Limerick city, Croom and Pallaskenry, there is a farcical situation in the city and its environs. Students who get on a bus in County Clare will pass approximately 15 post-primary schools in Limerick city on their way to their school in Croom, in my constituency. We are still awaiting publication of that report. I thought the Minister for Education and Skills would have remained in the House for this part of our proceedings.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is not in order.

Deputy Niall Collins: Can we have a debate on the configuration of post-primary schools in Limerick city and the greater mid-west area? The position is far from satisfactory because many pupils travel past several post-primary schools to attend schools in different counties. It is not acceptable and I think the Tánaiste will agree that we need to debate the issue at the earliest opportunity.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should raise it in some other way.

The Tánaiste: On the business of the day, at the request of the House, a debate was arranged on the significance of the dairy industry, but, unfortunately, there was nobody from Sinn Féin or Fianna Fáil on the Opposition benches. I would have thought these parties had some interest in the future of the dairy industry.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: I spoke last week.

Deputy Niall Collins: On a point of order, Fianna Fáil Members spoke in that debate last week.

The Tánaiste: They were unable to attend.

Deputy Niall Collins: If Deputies on the Tánaiste's side of the House were not offering to speak, she should not put the blame on this side.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is fine. Please allow the Tánaiste to conclude.

Deputy Niall Collins: She should at least have the decency to get the facts right.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív did not even bother to speak.

Deputy Niall Collins: On a point of order, the Tánaiste is entitled to her opinion and her own spin, but she is not entitled to her own facts. The fact is that Fianna Fáil contributed to the debate.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have heard the Deputy's point.

Deputy Niall Collins: It is a point of order.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Sit down.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is not a point of order.

Deputy Niall Collins: Stick to the facts for a change.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy clarified the issue.

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Deputy Joe Carey: Where was the Deputy yesterday?

Deputy Niall Collins: When did Deputy Joe Carey ever speak in any debate?

The Tánaiste: The only fact to which I referred was that, unfortunately, nobody was present. I did not refer to the Deputy. There was nobody from Fianna Fáil or Sinn Féin present. With regard to the proposals on the legislation to which the Deputy referred, amendments are still being drafted. I anticipate that when the drafting of amendments has been completed, the legislation will come back before the House. I will ask the Minister for Education and Skills when the schools report is likely to be published.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I was impressed by the speed and expediency with which the Government had the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill 2015 passed.

1 o'clock

This begs the question as to why the Government cannot address bigger problems we have been discussing here on and off, at Leaders' Questions and at other times, such as the Private Members' Bill put forward by the Tánaiste's colleague, Deputy Penrose, for a one year bankruptcy. This would stop much of the pain being suffered by people in this country. Why does the Government not grasp the ball Deputy Penrose has passed to it and fast-forward his Bill through the Dáil?

The intensity and frequency of advertising for online betting and gambling has increased. This is unacceptable. If the Tánaiste were to go to the Rutland Centre, which is supported by many of her colleagues, she would be told about the existence of a gambling addiction problem, as a result of accessibility through iPhones, iPads, laptops etc. This advertising should be stopped. I call on the Government to fast-forward a Bill to deal with this, as it did with the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill. That Bill provided for the listing of drugs for a technical reason. The Government could do this. It can show brilliance when it wants to.

The Tánaiste: On the betting legislation, I am happy to tell the Deputy that a Bill dealing with this was enacted on 15 March. Therefore, it is now in the process of implementation. The Deputy's points in respect of the problems associated with gambling in all forms, including online, are well made.

In regard to a reduction in the term of bankruptcy, the Government is currently examining a series of proposals and is awaiting a report on the operation of the Insolvency Service of Ireland. I anticipate we will report to the House on that shortly after Easter.

Protection of the Environment (Criminal Activity) (Amendment) Bill 2015: Leave to Withdraw

Deputy Brendan Smith: I move:

That, notwithstanding Standing Order 124, leave be given to withdraw the Protection of the Environment (Criminal Activity) (Amendment) Bill 2015.

Question put and agreed to.

Protection of the Environment (Criminal Activity) Bill 2015: First Stage

Deputy Brendan Smith: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled Protection of the Environment (Criminal Activity) Bill 2015.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Deputy Joe Carey: We have no objection to the taking of this Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Firearms (Amendment) Bill 2015: First Stage

Deputy Robert Dowds: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled Firearms (Amendment) Bill 2015.

This Bill is about illegal firearms, not legal firearms. Some time ago I had sad cause to visit the family of a man who had been shot and left in a vegetative state. He had been shot by somebody wielding an illegal firearm, in a case of mistaken identity. This type of incident happens far too frequently in this country.

Less than 4 weeks ago, on 28 February, an 11 year old child was shot in his own home in Tallaght. Two days later, a six year old girl riding on a motorcycle narrowly avoided being killed when a bullet struck her helmet. Three weeks ago today, on 5 March, a pregnant woman in my constituency and her partner were both shot, and last June, a six year old boy was shot in Ballyfermot. Sadly, I understand that he is paralysed and will never walk again. I could list dozens more examples of shootings and murders. The streets of Dublin or any other town or city must not become a hunting ground for violent criminals. We must not allow innocent children to become gangland victims. However, it is clear from these examples that the State and the criminal justice system are failing these children and other innocent victims of gun crime. It is vital that we in this Chamber and people across the wider society do not become desensitised to these atrocities just because they have become so frequent.

Gun crime and gangland murders are a serious issue for the people of this country. Entire neighbourhoods across the State, including in my constituency, are living in fear of gangland criminals. Decent, hard-working people living in communities across this country are under the constant threat of falling foul of ruthless criminals. The most serious crime in our society is to deliberately take the life of another human being. This crime carries a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment. However, even if a successful conviction is brought, it is of little consolation to the victim or their family. Gardaí are genuinely doing their best to tackle this problem,

but we need to be proactive about preventing these shootings before they occur.

After two men were shot dead within the space of six days of each other in my constituency some time ago, I spoke to detective gardaí working on the front line about what I could do. The response was that while there is nothing we can do after the fact to prevent these murders, we need to make it riskier and more difficult for criminals to possess, store, transport and hold guns. If we increase the severity of the punishment for being caught with illegal weapons and ammunition, it will make it riskier and more difficult for gangs to find people who are willing to store and transport these weapons for them and will make it riskier for these weapons to be transported before they are used for murder. This would be a direct way of confronting the support system that is used for these murders. The more pressure that is put on gangland criminals who use firearms, the more difficult it will be for them to plan and carry out murderous gun attacks.

I believe we need to send a message to all criminals who engage in gun crime. The message from the Dáil needs to be that the State is going to come after people who hold guns illegally and that they will go to prison for a considerable amount of time if they are caught with a gun. That message must go to every community and every person who would consider using guns illegally. I believe the current criminal system is not acting as an effective deterrent to people possessing illegal firearms. For example, when I researched this issue, I came across the case of an individual who was caught red-handed in possession of an AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifle and the relevant ammunition. The presumptive minimum sentence for holding any type of illegal firearm, never mind an AK-47, is five years. However, the judge in this case handed down a sentence of four years. The DPP was forced to appeal this sentence on the grounds of undue leniency - costing the State money - and successfully had the sentence increased, but only to the minimum of five years. If we are serious about tackling gun crime in Ireland, we need laws that reflect this commitment.

As a legislator, I am rightly barred from any interference in the operation of the criminal justice system. However, I am in a position to propose changes. That is why I am introducing the Firearms (Amendment) Bill 2015. My Bill aims to increase the presumptive minimum sentencing guidelines for gun crimes, so that any person who considers purchasing, possessing or having anything to do with illegal firearms knows that if convicted, he or she will face serious penalties. As the law stands currently, a number of offences attract a five year minimum sentence, such as possession of a firearm or ammunition in suspicious circumstances, carrying a firearm or imitation firearm with intent to commit an indictable offence or resist arrest and other similar offences. However, the minimum five years is almost never served in prison by the person convicted. My Bill would increase the presumptive minimum sentence for these crimes from five to seven years, while keeping the maximum sentence at 14 years. Currently, the offences of possession of firearms with intent to endanger life and using a firearm to assist or aid in an escape attract a ten year presumptive minimum sentence. Under my Bill, this presumptive minimum sentence is increased to 13 years. The maximum sentence for life imprisonment remains as it is.

The Bill will still allow judges some discretion. We need to take every step possible to tackle organised crime in Ireland. The Bill aims to deter people from engaging in any activity that involves unlicensed firearms. The message must go out loud and clear that the possession of an illegally held firearm will lead to a lengthy time behind bars.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Robert Dowds: At 11 a.m. this morning, two men were shot in Drumcondra, one of whom is now dead. This is an issue right across the State which we must deal with.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Deputy Joe Carey: No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Garda Síochána (Amendment) Bill 2015: First Stage

Deputy Niall Collins: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to establish a Public Order Unit for Dublin City Centre charged with improving and maintaining public order and safety in the Dublin City Centre area as set out by the Garda Commissioner.

It is fair to say that crime in Dublin city centre and the Dublin area in particular, has been out of control for some time. Deputy Dowds has informed us of shootings in Drumcondra this morning which further proves the point about the crime situation that my party colleagues and I have been making for many weeks and months. The situation is out of control on a number of levels, from the highly organised gangland criminality down to the low level petty crime to which some people are being subjected. The statistics for all crime categories in Dublin are going the wrong way and, unfortunately, the Government response and reaction has been far from adequate to deal with this scourge in our capital city. The response to date has included measures such as the closure of Garda stations in Whitehall and in Stepside, for example, in addition to many other Garda stations around the country and in the Dublin commuter belt which have been closed. The public are very angry and annoyed that the Government has not prioritised this issue. Throughout the lifetime of this Government, from 2011 up to 2014, it maintained the moratorium on recruitment to the Garda Síochána. What drives people crazy is that at the same time the Government allowed recruitment to the Defence Forces. The situation in An Garda Síochána is critical and the current membership is 12,799. On any given day, 500 gardaí are out sick, either long-term or short-term, for various reasons. Today, 1,498 members of An Garda Síochána are eligible to retire. To be added to the mix are 235 members who are on incentivised career breaks, yet only 299 are in training in Templemore. The situation is moving in a very critical direction.

The Garda Commissioner appeared before the justice committee yesterday. She informed the committee that Templemore has the capacity to deal comfortably with 500 recruits per annum. We are moving towards a critical stage. Manpower is the Garda Síochána's main resource and members need to be out on the streets dealing with criminality in our communities. The Garda Commissioner has to deal with a dwindling resource of manpower.

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There is no recruitment to the Garda Síochána Reserve. Hundreds of people are offering to give of their time to the State freely and voluntarily to act as Garda reserves in order to help protect people's lives and property. The Government is failing in this regard also.

Yesterday we heard from the Irish Tourist Assistance Service that up to 700 tourists experienced crime in the capital city last year. Seven hundred people were mugged, had their pockets picked, were assaulted, had their luggage stolen or were engaged by a criminal in a criminal act. That is 700 people in one calendar year. On behalf of my party I have been calling for a dedicated public order unit to be established for Dublin city centre in recognition of the rising crime statistics and to address the issues raised at meetings of the justice committee by the representative associations, including the organisation, Dublin Town, the Dublin City Business Association, the Irish Hotels Federation, the Licensed Vintners Association, the Restaurant Association of Ireland and the Temple Bar Company. They told the justice committee about their experiences of crime in Dublin city centre. The obvious solution is to establish a dedicated public order unit. This Bill proposes to establish a public order unit for Dublin city centre charged with improving and maintaining public order and safety in the Dublin city centre area as set out by the Garda Commissioner and charged with liaising with Dublin City Council, the Dublin Business Improvement District and other city centre bodies, as may be designated by the Minister for Justice and Equality.

The Bill proposes that the Assistant Commissioner for the Dublin metropolitan region would be charged with reporting quarterly to Dublin City Council on the impact of the public order unit. The Garda Commissioner and Assistant Commissioner would report to the Oireachtas annually on the work of this dedicated public order unit.

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for giving me the opportunity to present this Bill.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Deputy Joe Carey: No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Sub-Committee on Education and Skills has completed its consideration of the Teaching Council (Amendment) Bill 2015 and has made amendments thereto.

Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Joan Collins - the Private Residential Tenancy Board report on the increased cost of private rented accommodation nationally; (2) Deputy Pat Breen - the need to support the GAA in seeking UNESCO intangible cultural heritage status for hurling; (3) Deputy Robert Troy - the need to address concerns over the proposed full producer responsibility initiative for waste tyres; (4) Deputy Anthony Lawlor - the appointment of valuations arbitrators and the resulting delays to the development of Naas town centre; (5) Deputy Eamonn Maloney - the need for Central Bank flexibility in allowing credit unions to provide mortgage lending; (6) Deputy Willie Penrose - the need to restructure and expand the mortgage-to-rent scheme to include an increase in the income eligibility criteria; (7) Deputy Joe Costello - the need to ensure that insurance companies comply with the insurance and cover terms where work has been carried out under the auspices of the OPW or local authorities; (8) Deputy Clare Daly - the need to address the inability of homeowners whose dwellings have pyrite to access their local property tax exemption due to the infill testing requirement; (9) Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil - the need to provide clarity to those organisations in receipt of bridging funding under the scheme to support national organisations; (10) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the rising costs of life assurance plans and its effects on policy holders and consumers; (11) Deputy Róisín Shortall - the reduction in the number of SICAP lots covering Dublin City Council and to restore the level of funding to services in areas of Dublin North-West; and (12) Deputy Gabrielle McFadden - the need to ensure that persons with neurological conditions will not face the loss of vital services after June 2015 and that charity funding scheme issues are resolved before then.

The matters raised by Deputies Robert Troy, Willie Penrose and Róisín Shortall, have been selected for discussion.

Sitting suspended at 1.15 p.m. and resumed at 2 p.m.

Topical Issue Debate

Waste Disposal

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome the opportunity to raise this extremely important issue. The tyre industry accepts that it must comply with duty of care obligations and protect the environment. All tyres collected, recycled or repossessed should be disposed of or reused in an environmentally friendly manner using acceptable methods, whether recycled or used as fuel in cement kilns. The proposal by the Department will have serious consequences for the tyre industry, including potential job losses. Contrary to the Department's ambition for the new scheme, it could be destructive to the environment because it will drive suppliers to stockpile used tyres before illegally dumping them.

Under the proposal, the cost of disposing of tyres will increase by in excess of 200%. Under the current self-compliant system, tyre wholesalers and retailers are required to dispose of waste tyres via licensed collectors. The average cost of disposing of a tyre is €1, which is not passed on to customers. Under the new scheme, a full producer responsible initiative will ap-

ply and Repak and WEEE Ireland will be appointed as the monopoly collectors and recyclers for the entire industry and an across-the-board green tax will be imposed on tyres to cover the costs of recycling.

The Minister circulated a letter to the industry in which he referred to the “formalisation” of the existing charge. This is factually incorrect because the current charge of €1 is dictated by market forces and competition for the collection and disposal of used tyres. Under the new scheme, the charge will increase to €3 for a car tyre, €15 for a truck tyre and €20 for a tyre used in agricultural vehicles. The trebling of the cost of disposing of tyre waste amounts to another stealth tax on hard-pressed families. Moreover, the charges are only fixed for a period of two years, after which the European average will dictate the charge.

Given the nature of the haulage industry, businesses which dispatch vehicles across the Border or to the United Kingdom and other European countries will have tyres replaced in other jurisdictions where the charge does not apply. The tyre industry informs me that, under the new scheme, it will cost an additional €200 to change a set of truck tyres. It will be just as convenient for haulage companies to purchase tyres in Britain or on the Continent as it will be to replace them here. This will have a detrimental impact on tyre retailers who employ in excess of 200 people in my home town. This is a good industry providing good employment and it will be detrimentally affected by the new measures.

The new scheme will also have a detrimental impact on the environment as the substantial increase in the cost of tyre disposal will result in service providers stockpiling tyres. They will then be transferred to people who will not dispose of them in an environmentally friendly manner. The Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Humphreys, alluded to one such example, the burning of tyres at Hallowe'en, in an earlier conversation with me.

The tyre industry acknowledges that the current system is not fit for purpose and needs to be strengthened. If the Minister had been present - I acknowledge that I received a call from his office to apologise in advance for his absence - I would have asked him to engage with the industry to ensure any new scheme was fit for purpose, would not have a detrimental effect on the industry and would not cost consumers more or place jobs at risk.

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Kevin Humphreys): The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, is overseas and the Minister of State at the Department, Deputy Paudie Coffey, was unable to come to the House owing to a family bereavement. I apologise on behalf of both Ministers for their absence.

I am pleased to provide an update on the establishment of a producer responsibility initiative, PRI, for waste tyres. As part of the review of the producer responsibility initiative, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government commissioned a major review of the waste tyre sector. Published in November 2013, this report concluded that the current system is not functioning as intended, with a lack of basic information, poor structure and poor environmental outcomes in the form of large stockpiles of waste tyres, and a substantial proportion of waste tyres unaccounted for. In addition, the taxpayer often pays twice for the treatment of waste tyres, first, through the application of an existing fee at the point of purchase and, second, to support local authority clean-up operations when waste tyres are dumped. The report also identified significant non-compliance among those with responsibilities under the current waste tyre regulations.

To address these significant shortcomings, the Department has been working, in full consultation with all parts of the tyre industry, to assist it in putting in place a system of producer responsibility, in line with similar systems that apply to other sectors, to provide for the collection, sorting and management of the waste they produce in an environmentally sound and effective manner. This is in line with the polluter pays principle, a firmly established feature of both European and domestic waste policy and legislation. The implementation of the new scheme will require an overhaul of existing structures, which the Government believes can be achieved without either distorting the tyre market in Ireland, encouraging customers to buy tyres outside the jurisdiction or causing widespread job losses in the sector. Moreover, such a scheme can be established without introducing new costs and instead by effectively formalising the existing charge that is already applied to almost all tyre purchases.

Arising from the work of the tyres working group, the Department received proposals for the future management of waste tyres from the Independent Tyre Wholesalers & Retailers Association, ITWRA, and the Irish Tyre Industry Association, ITIA. Having considered these proposals in detail, the Minister recently informed all sections of the tyre industry of his decision to establish a full producer responsibility initiative scheme for waste tyres.

The initiative will comprise a number of features. There will be single compliance scheme for end-of-life tyres to be operated by Repak, the option to “self-comply” under the regulations will be ended and the existing recycling charge will be formalised into a visible environmental management charge to protect the consumer and to put an end to the taxpayer being obliged to pay on the double. The level of this charge will be set by the Department and reviewed in two years. As part of the detailed design of the scheme, the Department is considering, in consultation with the tyre and waste industry, whether the funding model is predicated upon a front-loaded or back-loaded model. In addition, there will be a full audit, registration and reporting component, a so-called “black box”, with a role for the WEEE Register Society. The new regime, including enforcement and compliance measures, is to be underpinned by a robust legislative base, including fixed penalty notices for certain breaches.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Minister of State. While I accept this is not his direct responsibility, I ask him to bring back to the Minister the points I intend to raise. The Minister of State referred to the extensive consultation the Department is having with the industry. However, the representative body that represents more than 90% of the service providers, the Independent Tyre Wholesalers and Retailers Association, has pulled out of the negotiations. The association has pulled out of the consultation agreement because it believes it is mere window-dressing and the Department is not listening to any of the proposals it is making. The association itself acknowledges and recognises there are shortcomings within the existing system. However, the association does not believe that it is necessary to throw out the baby with the bath-water. It does not believe that one must give a monopoly to one particular group, namely, Repak and WEEE, to look after the disposal of tyres. Ultimately, all Members are aware that where there is a monopoly and where prices are guaranteed, what happens is that the price rises continually. Moreover, it will have a devastating impact on and consequences for employment within the sector.

As I already have stated, there may be compliance problems with the system that is in place at present but they arise more from the lack of enforcement of the current legislation than from a problem with the system itself. The monitoring of tyres can be improved without giving a market monopoly to Repak. The Minister should give consideration to strengthening the current system to allow competition among licensed contractors and to imposing stronger sanctions for

non-compliance. In the case of people who do not comply with the existing system, sanctions should be introduced because at present, there are none and there is no incentive for people to comply. The introduction of sanctions would ensure that people who were non-compliant would be obliged to shape up fairly quickly or else they no longer would be in business. Moreover, mandatory registration should be introduced to ensure compliance by having all collectors monitored. This system is in place in the United Kingdom and Germany. Germany possibly has the largest tyre industry in Europe and if it is good enough there, it can be good enough here in Ireland.

Other Members of the House have requested the Minister, Deputy Kelly, to reopen engagement with the largest representative of the tyre industry and I ask the Minister of State to revert to the Minister, Deputy Kelly, and ask him to consider this again. Members do not wish to see the imposition of a further stealth tax on already hard-pressed consumers. They do not wish to have people forced into the shadow economy or the black market, in which tyres will be stockpiled and disposed of irregularly. They certainly do not seek to have an industry that currently is providing good employment lose those jobs within a number of years because people no longer get their tyres in Ireland but instead get them in Northern Ireland or across the sea in the United Kingdom, where cheaper tyres can be acquired.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I will bring back the points made by the Deputy to the Minister, Deputy Kelly. I should point out that the tyre working group met on 2 March last to begin the process of the implementation of the tyre producer responsibility initiative. All parts of the tyre industry, including retailers, wholesalers, manufacturers and importers, are represented at the group, which also includes representatives of the National Transfrontier Shipment Office, the Environmental Protection Agency, local authorities and the Department of Environment in Northern Ireland, where similar arrangements ultimately may be introduced. While the Independent Tyre Wholesalers and Retailers Association chose not to attend recent meetings, it is hoped it will attend future meetings of the group, as well as various subgroups, and make its contribution to the important detailed design stage now reached. The tyre working group is conscious of the need to keep the wider sector informed of its work and of the charges that are planned to address some misleading and inaccurate information circulating within the sector that is exaggerating significantly the impact of the proposed change. It is the intention of the group to issue a regular newsletter to the sector giving updates on the current position. The first such newsletter was published on 11 March and was circulated to approximately 2,500 subscribers through its e-newsletter. There will be ongoing consultation with the sector and once the new tyre tariff regulations are available, there also will be further consultation with the sector.

Twenty of the 28 member states manage tyres through a system based on the principle of producers' responsibility. The Government intends to build on the learning experience of those schemes. The tyre industry in Europe has been highly successful in dealing with the problem of waste tyres and currently is achieving a recovery rate of 95%. This should be Ireland's aim to be part of the overall transition to a more resource-efficient circular economy. I thank Deputy Troy for raising the matter.

Mortgage to Rent Scheme Eligibility

Deputy Willie Penrose: While the Minister, Deputy Kelly, is unavoidably absent, the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Humphreys, has intimate knowledge of this problem with social housing issues and arrears. Young Irish families throughout the country have suffered the disastrous effects of what has been a perfect financial storm. First, there was a massive banking collapse and the deepest recession in living memory, which was savage by any standards. It has ruined many lives and businesses and has wrought terrible devastation. Uniquely to Ireland's situation, we have a pooled currency, which means the natural process of inflation eating away at debt was not available to help the people. People borrowed in euro and must repay in the same currency, which has the lowest inflation rates in the world. To make matters worse, we have had the harshest laws in the western world in respect of debt. The result was and is that hundreds of thousands of people had no way out other than emigration or begging for mercy from banks and creditors. This begging has gone on for almost eight years now and still, the entire economy is shackled by unsustainable debts. This has not been not good for people or the banks and certainly has not been good for Ireland. All this was due to change in 2012 with the enactment of the new insolvency laws but only a tiny number of deals have been done. The process needs an injection of reality and it needs it quickly.

Two weeks ago, I introduced draft legislation before the Oireachtas proposing that the bankruptcy period be reduced to one year. There is a misconception abroad that the period is three years but one should consider section 157 of the Personal Insolvency Act 2012 and its insertion of section 85D(1), section 85D(2) and section 85D(3) into the Bankruptcy Act 1988. In law, at any time during the term of adjudication of three years, the credit institution can apply to the courts for an instalment order by way of variation for a period not greater than five years. As a result, if a person earns an additional €10, that enables banks to act. Consequently, it can go on for eight years and Members should not fool themselves in that regard. This is why I proposed that reduction.

I believe that after eight years, people have the right to move on. How it is justifiable to keep people tied up with debts they can never repay for so long? It does not happen in the jurisdictions of our nearest neighbours in England or Northern Ireland or in the United States. Moreover, I note the United Kingdom and United States were two of the economies that rebounded fastest from the recession. They have not collapsed, the sky has not fallen in because they have had in place a one-year bankruptcy rule. A quick bankruptcy term will give thousands of citizens a way in which to be free of unmanageable debt and will give them the opportunity to get on with their lives. More importantly, however, it will force the banks to do deals they should have done years ago. This will be good for everybody, including the banks. I also proposed that if the official assignee does not dispose of the family home in a bankruptcy case within three years of adjudication, ownership of such a home would revert back to the bankrupt. This is in line with the position in the North of Ireland and stops the official assignee from seeking money from people who simply wish to pay their mortgage and get on with their lives. The assignee has stated that he or she does not wish to sell the family home and that is proper. If people have all their unsecured debt written off and can pay even a restructured mortgage, then I believe they should be given every chance to get on with their lives.

However, what about the 50,000 people who have no solution? My colleague Ross Maguire has frequently stated the mortgage debt crisis in Ireland can be divided into three categories. The first category is comprised of the self-fixers, that is, those people who now are getting

back on their feet as the economy improves. They have the time and the income to be able to meet their debts without need for outside intervention. The second category is comprised of people who need help. The insolvency system, driven on by a new bankruptcy term meaning that people can be out of bankruptcy within a single year, should mean that tens of thousands of citizens can be helped back to recovery. The banks have a role here to offer long-term and sustainable deals. However, there is a third category for which there is no obvious solution. I refer to the up to 50,000 homes where there is not enough income to sustain a mortgage and where the debt is too much to be repaid. As Minister of State with responsibility for housing, I introduced a mortgage-to-rent scheme that was designed for those people who could not afford either the mortgage or a restructured mortgage. The idea was that the owner would surrender the home to the bank, which the bank would then sell to a housing association, which in turn would lease it back to the former owner.

However, only a very small number of deals have been done under the scheme and quite simply, an industrial solution to the problem is needed. Fiddling around at the edges cannot solve this problem because the scale is far too big. Two ways of doing this can be explored - first, through a refocused and recast mortgage-to-rent scheme involving local authorities or, second, through approved housing bodies. Both ways would ensure that families with unsustainable loans or mortgages remain in the home and continue to pay the appropriate rent. All those would have their mortgages deemed unsustainable under the mortgage arrears resolution process or MARP process, and would clearly have agreed to surrender the house.

It is also good for social stability and would ensure that no major disruption is inflicted through families having to move elsewhere. Family life, including schools, would be disrupted by relocation. Currently, the home must be in negative equity and a householder be deemed eligible for social housing in accordance with the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. There is also a limitation on the valuation of property in Dublin and across the country. It is clear that those conditions must be changed. The income threshold must be increased to a realistic level, by at least 20%, and likewise with the valuation threshold in order to accommodate the maximum number of people and protect people in their homes.

The mortgage-to-lease programme might also be a solution.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joanna Tuffy): The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Willie Penrose: Under such a programme, a public private partnership could provide social housing throughout the country. A pension fund or other investors seeking a safe, long-term investment would purchase these non-performing loans from banks, leaving the banks free to get on with future lending to first-time buyers and small businesses.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joanna Tuffy): I must ask the Deputy to wrap up.

Deputy Willie Penrose: Yes, I am just finishing.

The new programme would mean that people would surrender their homes to the new owners in exchange for an immediate and unconditional debt write-off. The former owners would then be offered long-term leases should they wish to stay in their homes. The State can help people to pay their rent if their income is not enough and gradually people could recover knowing that their homes are safe.

It is time we re-examined this whole scheme to ensure that people who are meant to be

looked after are accommodated in an appropriate fashion.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The work he has done on the Private Members' Bill concerning bankruptcy has much merit. I look forward to the Government's proposals being published shortly after Easter. I always appreciate Deputy Penrose's insight on housing because he obviously has quite an amount of experience in this area.

There are currently two mortgage-to-rent schemes in operation through the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. A scheme exists whereby a local authority can acquire ownership of properties with unsustainable local authority mortgages, thus enabling the household to remain in their home as a social housing tenant - that is, the local authority mortgage-to-rent scheme.

The other scheme provides for an approved housing body, AHB, to acquire ownership of a property with an unsustainable private mortgage, which also enables the householder to remain in their home as a social housing tenant. It is the latter scheme, AHB mortgage-to-rent, to which the Deputy is referring. This scheme is designed to assist families with income difficulties whose mortgages are unsustainable, and where there is little or no prospect of a significant change in circumstances in the foreseeable future.

To be eligible for the approved housing body mortgage-to-rent scheme, a householder must have had their mortgage position deemed unsustainable under the mortgage arrears resolution process, agree to the voluntary surrender of their home, be in negative equity, and be deemed eligible for social housing in accordance with section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. The Deputy has already outlined those conditions.

In addition, in order for a property to be considered under the AHB mortgage-to-rent scheme it must be purchased by an approved housing body for less than €220,000 per property in the greater Dublin area and €180,000 per property in the rest of the country. These limits were determined by a working group taking account of available market data, including the current social housing acquisition limits. The Minister, Deputy Kelly, considers that they continue to be reasonable in respect of the income bracket that is targeted by the scheme.

While progress is now being made on this scheme, it has been acknowledged that take-up of the scheme overall has been slow. In recognition of this, and in an effort to increase the numbers delivered under the scheme, a new protocol between all parties in the process has already been agreed and came into operation in 2014.

The protocol includes such measures as the provision of a single independent valuation for the purpose of agreeing the purchase price. The valuation and condition surveys are now carried out earlier in the process to give more certainty to all parties in the process including the borrower. The new protocol is endeavouring to ensure that as much certainty is being provided as early as possible in the process to minimise uncertainty and late withdrawals from the scheme.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. The problem, however, is the resource limitation by the Government and that is why the mortgage-to-rent scheme might not work. That is also why the mortgage-to-lease scheme might be a solution, not as an alternative but by operating in tandem with a mortgage-to-rent scheme. We would hope that, in time, many people in the mortgage-to-lease scheme may be able to repurchase their homes.

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They should be given a share in any price increase during the programme. For example, a couple might have a mortgage of €300,000 which they cannot pay, while the property is now only worth €100,000. If they agree to surrender their home and have the right to rent the property back at a controlled rent over seven years or more, in that time hopefully people's circumstances will improve. They can then exercise an option to repurchase the property at the current market price in seven years time at €200,000. The cost to those people would be €150,000 as the price increased by 50% during the programme.

The bottom line is that such people would then have a sustainable mortgage, which they could afford. They would not have to leave their homes. If they had to leave their homes, they would need social housing, yet we know there is a huge shortage of social housing throughout the country. For those who cannot afford the entire rent, there will be a rent supplement so the programme works for them also.

There are also people whose circumstances are so impaired that they cannot afford to rent at all, so they will need social housing. That is where the significant social housing programme, promised by the Minister, can play a role. The Labour Party has always played a role in the provision of social housing.

In the mortgage-to-lease programme, the new owners would create a social fund by leasing the properties to local authorities on long-term or perpetual leases. Local authorities can then house those people in their own homes. The new owners would get long-term, low-yielding returns backed by local authorities. There would be a huge demand for this scheme.

This week, Irish Government bonds were issued at negative equity, meaning that one has to pay the Irish State to have them take one's money. At this time of ultra-low interest rates, there is a great opportunity to develop a massive public private social housing model. In time, this can be expanded. There has never been a better time to roll out a massive social housing programme nationwide.

If people's circumstances improve they should be given an opportunity to exit the social programme, pay their own rent and go on to re-acquire the property. It is about feeding into a positive cycle and accepting the universal truth that where people are given a real chance, they will step up to the plate and succeed.

For too long Irish families have had to bear the burdens of past mistakes made by others. Those self-same families put their shoulders to the wheel during our darkest economic days and especially for the past seven years. Now is the time to give them a break so that they too can enjoy recovery and, by their own efforts, expand and enhance the recovery for the nation as a whole. Things can only grow when they are allowed to grow. We must give our people the opportunity to recover. That is our challenge. It is time to move on, be innovative and to recast and remodel those schemes, so as to ensure that the maximum number of people can avail of them. In that way, they can ensure the security of their own homes in an affordable way, so they will not have to be relocated. By way of rent or lease, they can thus continue seamlessly in the same environment where their children can attend school. It is good for society and the morale of those concerned. We must grasp this nettle once and for all in order to offer a solution. This is the last piece of the jigsaw that must be addressed so that people can be put on the road to sustainability.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: The operation of the scheme is closely monitored on an ongo-

ing basis by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. Housing agencies are regularly contacted by the approved housing bodies and financial institutions. To date, a total of 2,762 cases have been submitted under the approved housing body mortgage to rent scheme. Of these, 1,897 were deemed ineligible or terminated during the process. Of the remaining 865 cases submitted, 88 have now been completed. In a further 42 cases, agreement on the sale could not be agreed. Some 169 are currently with the lenders, while the remaining 566 are being actively progressed.

The Minister has said that he is keeping the scheme under constant review. Any improvements within the scheme should be moved forward speedily.

I thank the Deputy for having raised this issue today.

Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme

Deputy Róisín Shortall: At the outset, I want to express my dissatisfaction with the shambles that today's sitting is turning out to be. Given that this Parliament sits for so few days in the year, and only three days per week, it really is a disgrace that the Government could not organise itself to have business today. Effectively, the House went into recess this morning and there is this minor session this afternoon which will be finishing up in the next few minutes. That does nothing at all to improve the standing of politics. It seriously undermines it. It is a very far cry from the new politics we were promised. In addition, it is really disappointing that, when matters are raised in the Topical Issues debate, a Minister does not come to respond. Given the fact that there are three Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, it is not acceptable that not one of them is available to come this afternoon.

The matter I am raising relates to the decision to reverse a lot of the progress made at community level in recent years. I am asking that consideration be given to rethinking the recent decisions in respect of the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, scheme. It is clear that the scheme is a continuation of the general squeezing of the community sector that has been happening in an unrelenting way in recent years. I know that the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Humphreys, will be very familiar with this, given the constituency he represents. In recent years there has been a positively hostile attitude on the part of the Government to the community sector. It is most pronounced in the case of Fine Gael Members in the constant undermining, cutting of the funding for and talking down of the community sector. In the context of all the cuts in people's incomes, local and child care services, the community sector is the glue that keeps disadvantaged communities together. When that sector is being undermined by the Government, it is a recipe for disaster and huge social alienation of large numbers of people. That is what I believe we are seeing. It is unfortunate that the Labour Party has not been prepared to stand up to that attitude within the Government or stand up for the communities it is supposed to protect.

The SICAP process has reduced the number of partnerships in the Dublin area. There were seven and the proposal is to reduce that number to five, with no rationale for doing so. Most particularly, I am concerned about the implications of that decision in my constituency where, effectively, the Ballymun-Whitehall area partnership is being abolished. Some of the work it did is being taken over by the Tolka area partnership. Ballymun includes two of the top most disadvantaged electoral divisions, which gives a flavour of the issue. We all know that Ballymun is a huge area with a huge population of 16,000 and very significant social problems. On

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no level does it make any sense to close down the partnership that is doing so much important work in the area, in working with other agencies, in terms of community development, enterprise and child care. It has done a fantastic job in the past 24 years and now the Government, it seems for inexplicable reasons, is closing it down with no regard to the implications for the community or the staff concerned who have not been told anything about where they stand or whether they will have jobs in a few months time. The decision has been taken and it is very damaging and will have significant implications. At this late stage, I am asking the Minister to give some consideration to restoring the separate partnership which served the Ballymun-Whitehall area so well for so long.

The decision to cut overall funding by over 11% - it represents about €200,000 being taken away from a very disadvantaged area - having regard to all of the cuts that have taken place in recent years, will inevitably lead to huge problems in the area and exacerbate existing ones. I ask the Minister to reconsider this decision and restore the much-needed funding that has been taken away.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: At the beginning of taking these three Topical Issues matters, I outlined that the Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly was abroad on business. The Minister of State, Deputy Paudie Coffey, could not make it because of a family bereavement. The option was available under Standing Orders for the Deputy to defer the Topical Issue until the Minister was available and it would have been taken next week as the first Topical Issue to be discussed. I do not accept the Deputy's criticism of the Ministers. She is much wiser when it comes to the Standing Orders of the House than I am, but as a backbencher, I often exercised the opportunity to defer when I wanted to debate a particular issue with the Minister responsible. Nor do I take for one minute the criticism about what happened on the Order of Business this week. The debate had been organised with the agreement of the Whips and the time slots were not filled by Opposition party speakers. The Government did what was it was requested to do by the Opposition. Unfortunately, we cannot control whether Members will take time slots.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: On a point of order, may I have a reply to the matter raised?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joanna Tuffy): Is there a reply?

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Did the Deputy raise the first three issues or not? Do I not have a right to respond to them? I have done so.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joanna Tuffy): The Minister of State should reply to the item raised.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I replied to the Deputy. Sometimes she accuses people of not replying, but I have.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joanna Tuffy): The Minister of State only has four minutes in which to reply.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: The proposals outlined in Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government seek to position local government as:

The primary vehicle of governance and public service at local level — leading economic, social and community development, delivering efficient and good value services, and representing citizens and local communities effectively and accountably.

As part of the programme of reform of local government, local community development committees, LCDCs, have been established in all local authority areas.

These committees, comprising public-private socioeconomic interests, will have responsibility for local and community development programmes on an area basis, including the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP. They will develop, co-ordinate and implement a more coherent and integrated approach to local and community development than heretofore, with the aim of reducing duplication and overlap and optimising the use of available resources for the benefit of citizens and communities.

In accordance with the public spending code, legal advice, good practice internationally and in order to ensure the optimum delivery of services to all clients, the SICAP programme was subject to a public procurement process which is in its final stages. In stage one joint applications were encouraged and organisations of varying sizes, for example, smaller organisations working in consortiums with larger organisations, were invited to submit joint applications. The closing date for stage two, invitation to tender, was 19 December 2014. Tenderers have been informed of the outcome of their tender and local and community development committees are in the process of establishing contracts with the successful tenderers.

Following contract signature, Pobal will publish a contract award notice in the *Official Journal of the EU* and on the eTenders website. LCDCs have managed and implemented stage two of the SICAP tendering process. In some areas the decision was taken by the LCDC to divide the lot into smaller units; that was a decision of the LCDC in each case. The LCDC is independent of the local authority in the performance of its functions. This independence is provided for explicitly in sections 49A(2) and 128B(8) of the Local Government Act 2001. Any decision made by an LCDC when carrying out its functions is solely a matter for that LCDC.

The primary focus of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government is to ensure the front-line services being supported, particularly those focused on the needs of the most socially deprived communities, are protected, given the need to ensure best value from the scarce resources available. The Department is confident that the new programme will continue to provide key supports for those most in need in communities in all local authority areas throughout the country, including those in the Dublin City Council area.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I thank the Minister of State. I was not prepared to defer this matter to some indefinite future date as there is urgency attached to it.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: It would not have been indefinite; it would actually be the first item to be taken next week.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It would have been indefinite.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: It would not have been.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am asking the Minister of State to do three things. Will he relay my concerns to the Minister? Everybody representing the Ballymun area, those involved there at community level and I are shocked and dismayed by this decision and cannot understand why it was made. It makes no sense on any level. I ask the Minister of State to convey these views to the Minister.

I also ask the Minister of State to meet the three Deputies from Dublin North-West and

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representatives of the Ballymun Whitehall Area Partnership next week for a short meeting. It could be held in Leinster House at any point to facilitate the Minister. In addition, I ask the Minister of State to request the Minister to reverse for this year the cut of €200,000, which affects an area of considerable deprivation that has already suffered very significant cuts in recent years. It is only if this happens that we will have any hope of repairing the damage that could be done by the move to eliminate the partnership and of ensuring some of the activities will continue.

I have made three specific requests and I ask the Minister of State to convey them to the Minister. The first concerns the significant dissatisfaction and dismay locally over the decision. The second is for a meeting with the Minister next week and the third is to restore the funding that has been cut for this year and without which there will be devastating effects in the Ballymun-Whitehall area.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I am confident that the Minister will be reviewing the debate on this issue. I will convey to him the three points the Deputy has outlined as soon as he returns from business overseas. The primary aim is to ensure that resources are allocated in the fairest possible way and to make the maximum contribution to tackle disadvantage, create jobs and promote economic recovery. Coming from an area that has partnerships, I believe it is important that resources be targeted in the fairest possible way. I thank the Deputy for raising the issue.

The Dáil adjourned at 2.45 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Friday, 27 March 2015.