



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 14 Bealtaine 2015

Thursday, 14 May 2015

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

GLAS Data

1. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress made in the roll-out of the green low carbon agri-environment scheme; the number of completed applications likely to be received by the closing date of 22 May 2015; the likely commencement date for the scheme in 2015; the projected spending on the scheme by his Department this year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18720/15]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As the Minister will admit, as far as he is concerned, GLAS is a flagship scheme. People are anxious to find out how many completed applications have been submitted for the scheme. Now that the Minister has announced GLAS for 2016, farmers are curious to learn the date from which they will be able to participate. What is the effect of the change in the rule to require applicants to obtain 16.3 points to access tier 3? How many completed applications has the Department received as a result of this change?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I thank the Deputy for giving me an opportunity to clarify this issue. GLAS is a large, flagship scheme which has been open for some time and for which the deadline for the receipt of applications is one week from now.

Following successful negotiations with the European Commission, I opened the GLAS on-line application system on 23 February for the preparation of applications, with the intention

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of activating the submit facility once formal approval of the rural development programme as a whole had been notified. Approval has since been received in the form of a letter of comfort from the Commission. The submit facility was activated last week and applications can now be formally submitted.

The initial response to GLAS is positive and I am pleased to note that, as of this morning, 29,406 applications had been created on the GLAS online application system. Of this number, more than 20,000 applicants selected actions and are, therefore, well on the way to submitting a completed application. This is a remarkable achievement by all involved, including farmers, planners and the departmental officials working to implement the scheme.

On the basis of progress to date, I anticipate that in the region of 25,000 completed applications will be submitted before the closing date of 22 May. This figure is very much in line with earlier projections. After the closing date, my Department will begin validating, ranking and selecting GLAS applications. As set out in the scheme's terms and conditions, candidates from tier 1 will receive priority access to the scheme, followed by tier 2 and, in turn, tier 3 candidates who undergo a separate selection process, as required under the terms of the approved rural development programme. However, as commonage farmers have until the end of August to submit their completed commonage management plans which are a prerequisite for approval to participate in GLAS, notification of approvals will not take place until after that date. All applicants will be notified in writing of the outcome of their application.

I anticipate that GLAS contracts will commence from 1 October, with estimated expenditure on the scheme of €20 million in 2015. In the case of those who are unable to submit an application before the deadline, as sometimes occurs for good reason, we plan to reopen GLAS for submissions in September. This means, for example, that if we take 25,000-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time for the Minister's reply has concluded.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The more information he provides the better.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am only trying to be helpful.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am aware of that.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister did not provide the figure I sought. This is not the first time he failed to provide a figure. Last week, only a number of hours after the online facility for submitting applications had opened, he was able to indicate how many had availed of this facility. How many farmers have submitted completed applications? Will the Minister confirm that only approximately 20% of the 14,800 commonage farmers have gone as far as the action stage of the application process? Will he accept that such a figure equates to a low take-up of the scheme? He stated his intention was to attract 30,000 applicants to GLAS this year. He now hopes 25,000 completed applications will be received under the scheme this year, yet he still intends to spend the full allocation of €20 million for the scheme. Will he explain this discrepancy?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is important that people understand the process. We opened GLAS early in order that planners could get applications onto the system. All of the preparatory work for the scheme takes time. A plan must be put together and planners must work with farmers to ensure they consider all of the options available to them. Planners are involved in GLAS because it is a complex scheme. The farmer and the planner agree a GLAS plan, includ-

ing for commonage areas. As commonage plans will take a little more time to implement, we have provided that commonage farmers need only indicate that they will commit to a commonage GLAS plan before the deadline of 22 May. Their plans must then be finalised before the end of August.

We have taken a practical approach that has allowed planners, since February, to get on with the job of acquiring all of the information they need to have a full commonage plan. Farmers can now submit their applications online before the closing date of 22 May. The Department anticipates that we will receive approximately 25,000 completed applications by the closing date, whereas the Deputy stated we would not receive 10,000 applications, which reflects his usual pessimism. If the final figure is slightly below 25,000, so be it and if it is slightly more than 25,000, all the better.

Many farmers who are concerned they may not be able to submit an application before the deadline have asked me whether I will reopen GLAS in the autumn. The Department has indicated it will do so to allow farmers to participate in the scheme from 1 January 2016.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Will the Minister answer my simple question by indicating how many farmers have used the online facility to submit a completed application? He stated many times previously that 30,000 farmers would join GLAS, with participants receiving an average payment of €5,000 and those participating in GLAS plus receiving an average payment of €7,000. Is he sticking to his revised estimate that 25,000 farmers will participate in the scheme? Will participants in GLAS and GLAS plus receive average payments of €5,000 and €7,000, respectively? Can the Minister confirm that this is still what he expects to happen? He gives out about me being pessimistic, but we will see who is nearer to the figure. I never said it would be beneath €15,000.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I think the Deputy said it would be €10,000.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I did not.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Okay. I am happy to be corrected.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister said that all the commonage farmers would join. Currently, 30% of them have gone as far as the action stage.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is important that we stick to the facts here. I never said the average payment for people in GLAS would be €5,000 and the average payment for people in GLAS plus would be €7,000. They are the maximum payments, as the Deputy knows. Many farmers will be on the maximum. Of course there will be some farmers who will be on less than the maximum. Therefore, the average will be slightly below the maximum.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: By how much will it be below the maximum?

Deputy Simon Coveney: We should not try to create something that is based on misleading people. Everybody knows the maximum payment in GLAS is €5,000 and-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Good.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----the maximum payment in GLAS plus is €7,000. We want to try to get as many farmers as possible up to those maximums. They have to apply the rules. They get payments for certain actions they do. More than 50% of this is European money. The

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European Commission will come and audit GLAS to make sure it gets value for money. The scheme we have put together will allow many farmers, if not most farmers, to get close to the maximum. Certainly, the average will be slightly below that. Some farmers will receive GLAS payments of less than €5,000 because they have a lack of land or do not want to choose some of the actions. We still plan to spend €20 million on GLAS this year. We hope to accept a further 10,000 applicants, in addition to the 25,000 applicants in this round, in the application process that will start in September with payments to be made from 1 January. The plan is that by next year, there will be approximately 35,000 farmers in GLAS. Obviously, there is flexibility either side of those numbers.

GLAS Applications

2. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will confirm that over 2,000 letters were sent to farmers by Teagasc this week, informing them that their applications under the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme will not be processed by the closing date of 22 May 2015; and his plans to deal with the matter. [18718/15]

Deputy Martin Ferris: In recent weeks, there has been a great deal of commentary regarding a letter that Teagasc sent to 2,000 farmers, informing them that their GLAS applications will not be processed by the closing date of 22 May. I would like the Minister to comment on that. If it is the case that there will be such a delay, how does he intend to deal with it?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am aware that Teagasc has written to some of its clients to advise them that it does not have the capacity to submit their GLAS plans. As this is a matter between Teagasc and its client base, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on it. As a third party, it is not appropriate for me to become involved in matters which are of a contractual nature between the parties involved. The involvement of trained advisers in the preparation of GLAS plans has been central to the implementation of GLAS since its inception. In view of this, the preparation for the roll-out of GLAS involved my Department organising specific training to ensure an adequate number of advisers would be available to prepare and submit applications on behalf of farmers. Following the completion of this training between November 2014 and February 2015, those who attended the training sessions were required to submit approved forms and details of their educational qualifications to the Department. They were separately required to submit completed registration forms and professional indemnity insurance details to the Department before they could be entered on the register of approved advisers. Some 528 people are approved on the register as GLAS advisers. This gives them access to the GLAS online application system to prepare applications for their farmer clients.

While Teagasc has indicated to some of its clients that it cannot submit applications for them at this stage, it is always open to farmers to approach another adviser. I can understand why that would not be the preference for many farmers who are working with Teagasc. I have announced that a second tranche of GLAS applications will open in the autumn. Any farmers who are unable to apply in the current tranche for whatever reason, for example, it might be taking too long to put the plan in place, will have an opportunity to apply in this second tranche. I ask farmers to understand that it is not such a big deal if they cannot meet the 22 May deadline because GLAS will be opening again three and a half or four months from now. The whole point of our current approach is to accept a tranche of applications now so that we have some time to deal with plans and applications. We will reopen the scheme to applications in September so

that the next round of farmers can come in from January. Teagasc will have to work with those deadlines.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I thank the Minister for his clarification. It will not escape me or anybody else that a number of planners, including a Monaghan man and a Mr. McQuinn from my own county, are quoted this week in the *Irish Farmers' Journal* and the farming section of the *Irish Independent* as saying they believe there is a massive shortage of planners to assist those who are trying to get their applications in. Thousands of people have had to change their applications for various reasons. The planners are concerned that there will be such a surge of online applications between now and 22 May that it could cause the system to collapse. We are aware of Teagasc's position and we know the planners are now saying something similar. It all suggests that the number of applications coming through in advance of the 22 May deadline cannot be realised. I appreciate that a second tranche of applications will be accepted later in the year.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I remind the Deputy that the 22 May deadline already represents an extension of three weeks on what the original date was planned to be. We have already provided some extra space. We do not necessarily have a principled reason for not extending the deadline. I am going to be under a great deal of pressure from the Opposition to make sure we get the GLAS payments out this year. The sooner we get the applications in, the sooner we can process them and the sooner we can start paying. We anticipate that we can get in approximately 25,000 applications in the first round. That would actually be a pretty good result. Farmers who do not manage to get in under the first tranche, for various reasons, will be able to get accepted anyway in September and will essentially start their payments from 1 January 2016, as opposed to 1 October 2015. That is a gap of just three months. When there are 30,000 people wanting to get into a scheme, there will always be people at the deadline who are not quite ready and there will always be planners who would like a little more time. If I were to push this back by another week, I guarantee the Deputy that we would have the same thing at the end of the week after 22 May. The problem is that we would have a week less to assess all of these applications and to get payments out. I am really anxious to ensure we stick to the original timeframe I have been setting out for the last 18 months, or certainly the last 12 months. All of our timescales are drawn up with the aim of getting payments out in the last three months of this year in mind.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I understand the Minister's position on sticking to the deadline so that the processing criteria are adhered to. Some planners have had to withdraw a sizeable number of applications as a result of the change in the criteria. I have to say the Department's decision to issue a booklet setting out the criteria was a very welcome development. In many instances, it has helped people to focus on what is and what is not available. I take it from what the Minister has said that he is ruling out an extension. As we get closer to the date, perhaps he will revisit that by providing for an extension of a week or a fortnight to get this over the hill.

Deputy Simon Coveney: People need to understand a very important consideration here. We set 22 May as a deadline because it is a week before people's basic payment applications have to be in.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I know that.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Farmers will refer to them as their single farm payment applications. The deadline for applications under the basic payment scheme, as it is now called, is

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29 May, which is a week later than the deadline under this scheme. We do not want the same closing date for both GLAS and the basic payment. That would really drive planners over the edge because they would have to try to do everything at the same time. We have tried to stagger these deadlines by leaving a week between the two. We want to get all the GLAS applications in before all the final basic payment applications come in the following week. If we pushed the GLAS deadline back by a week, we would push it on top of the basic payment deadline. In such circumstances, I would have to put that back by a week as well. This is putting even more pressure on the Department to get basic payments out as early as we can in October. I am trying to ensure the vast majority of farmers get payments as early as they can. We will reopen GLAS in September so people who for whatever reason, such as not accessing planners, planners having difficulties or problems with eligibility, will have a bit more time to do it and will be able to enter the scheme in September. I want to give the signal we do not plan to extend the deadlines for either the basic payment or GLAS at this stage.

Fishing Industry

3. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider the abolition of the sub-segmentation of tonnage and kilowatts to allow for improvements in safety at sea and better quality of fish landings in the pelagic sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18717/15]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: This question is on the sub-segmentation of tonnage and kilowatts in the fishing industry and the potential to improve safety and the quality of fish landings in the small pelagic sector if there were a change in policy to allow them upgrade their vessels.

(Deputy Simon Coveney): It is great to see a fishing question among Priority Questions. The Irish fishing fleet is divided into five segments in accordance with ministerial policy directive 2 of 2003, as amended. The segments are the refrigerated seawater, RSW, pelagic segment which people from Donegal know very well, the polyvalent segment; the beam trawler segment, the specific segment and the aquaculture segment.

In addition, the policy sets out a number of sub-segments of the fleet, including a sub-segment for vessels exclusively using pots, vessels targeting scallops and polyvalent vessels under 18 m in length. The transfer of capacity between the segments and sub-segments is not permitted, and equivalent replacement capacity must be taken out of the segment or sub-segment into which a vessel is being introduced.

For vessels to qualify for either a mackerel and-or herring authorisation, vessels must be licensed with 100% capacity having the required track record as stipulated under the individual mackerel and herring fleet policies.

Fishing capacity is privately owned and is traded commercially, bought and sold independently of the Department and the licensing authority.

A change in licensing policy involving the removal or amalgamation of segments or sub-segments would have a substantial impact on the Irish fishing fleet. The current fleet policy allows operators to introduce new or replacement vessels and to modify existing vessels subject to the operator providing replacement capacity from the relevant segment and sub-segment. The current policy has been put in place over many years and a change, as requested, would

impact many elements of the fishing fleet and would require much consultation. It could potentially have significant impacts on access to fishing resources and the management of quotas.

Where the industry, through the recognised representative structure of producer organisations, makes a business case for changes to the licensing policy on the basis of changed circumstance, I would examine any such case. Any amendments to licensing policy that I propose to bring forward will be subject to a public consultation with stakeholders. The Deputy is perhaps speaking about safety tonnage which is not provided for under the new Common Fisheries Policy. If he has specific questions I will try to answer them.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The issue is not increasing capacity or quotas. The vessel owners concerned already have quota allocations and they are not looking for an increase. This is about allowing some of the vessels the ability to go to sea in less favourable weather and enabling them to catch and land better quality fish, which would have an impact on earning capacity.

Will the Minister outline what impact it could have? Is he willing to enter a consultation process on it? Why must it come through the producer organisations? What is the basis for this? A number of vessel owners have requested the Department examine this also.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We try to have ongoing consultation between the Department, the Minister and the industry. It would be very difficult to do this with individual vessel owners because there are so many competing interests in the fishing industry. This is why it is always very difficult to manage politically. If something is given to one boat another boat will lose because this is a finite resource. The gross tonnage and engine power kilowatt figures are as they are for our entire fleet. For many years as part of the Common Fisheries Policy countries have been required to stay within these limits, so the capacity of their fleet to catch fish does not increase and their quota is limited on an annual basis. The Commission's fear is if boat owners state they will not catch any more fish but want to put in a more powerful engine to make the boat safer it would create increased power capacity to tow larger nets which would create the capacity to catch more fish which is a concern for the Commission. It is trying to insist we match the catching capacity from a power, size and tonnage point of view with the appropriate amount of fish a country should be catching for sustainable catches. The case has been made to me by many owners that if they must steam for long distances this has implications for safety.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I know there is a trade-off and a balance must be struck, but this proposal would not increase capacity because capacity is already there with regard to tonnage and kilowatts in the national fleet. It is a question of how it is used to maximise quality and safety at sea. The Minister has placed much emphasis on safety, and rightly so, but this could and would improve safety for those fishermen already fishing, who have a quota and are not looking to increase it through this measure. I understand the Commission is concerned that a more powerful engine might lead to demand for an additional quota, but everybody knows it will not be available. This is about boats being able to catch and land good quality fish to maximise their income. With a finite quota it is vital for the sustainability of their businesses that they can maximise their income. There have been instances where boats, because of their size and the weather conditions this year, have only recently completed their mackerel quota. The weather did not allow them to get out when the fish were right beside them. They had to steam further to get them. These issues could be addressed with balance, improving safety and earnings without impacting on quota or capacity of the overall fleet.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It would impact on the gross tonnage and engine power kilowatt

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issue. I am happy to listen to new ideas and new approaches if it can be done within the confines of the Common Fisheries Policy. I tell farming organisations if we can do things better within the rules they should speak to me about it and we will happily look at it. We are also trying to do this with the inshore fleet at present. Many new initiatives are coming from the new regional forums on supporting the inshore fishing fleet. I suggest this is done through the producer organisations, but if suggestions are made outside of them by all means send them in and I will look at them. I do not want to create an expectation we can go down the road of safety tonnage, which is what was proposed in the past, because safety tonnage is specifically not facilitated in the new Common Fisheries Policy. There are many smart people in the fishing industry who know the rules and parameters because they are frustrated by them a lot of the time. If there are proposals whereby we can make sensible changes that do not involve increasing overall capacity or gross tonnage let me see them. We would certainly look at them and either respond to them or explain why we cannot do so.

Land Parcel Identification System

4. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress made in discussions with the European Union on achieving a reduction in the fine imposed on Ireland over claims on the land parcel identification system; the amount of the fine imposed on Ireland by the European Union; when this matter will be brought to a conclusion; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18721/15]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: A fine, or as it is called in the jargon a flat rate financial correction for Ireland which is a fine by any other name, of €181.5 million was imposed on Ireland by the European Union over the land parcel identification system, which was totally disproportionate, ridiculous and outrageous. The Minister has been in negotiations. When will we have the white smoke and good news that it has been reduced, as it should be, to nothing?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy was a Minister and knows well it will not be reduced to nothing because there is an issue. We are in negotiations on it. The EU has not imposed the fine, it has made a claim this is what should be paid. To be clear, we have not paid anything yet.

10 o'clock

The Deputy will be aware that the EU Commission, in its letter dated 14 May 2014, proposed a 2% flat rate financial correction for Ireland of €181.5 million arising from its conformity clearance audits in 2009, 2010 and 2012. The payments audited covered the period from 2008 to 2012, inclusive, during which over €9 billion was paid to farmers in Ireland under the direct payment schemes. I have always been opposed to the imposition of a flat-rate penalty, particularly in this case. I have strongly refuted the application of this proposed correction as disproportionate to the true level of risk involved and my Department accordingly sought a hearing with the conciliation body at European level.

The conciliation body met the Commission and officials from my Department on 9 December and 10 December, respectively. The Commission held its position on the 2% flat rate correction before and during its meeting and advised that it was still reviewing the information received from my Department in advance of the hearing. During their meeting, officials from my Department outlined Ireland's fundamental objection to the flat-rate correction and argued that the risk to the fund should be a calculated amount. My officials informed the conciliation

body regarding the amount of work undertaken by my Department to identify and remove all ineligible features from the land parcel identification system, LPIS, database, the technical improvement in the LPIS system and the time and resources used by my Department to address all issues raised by the Commission. The conciliation body acknowledged the amount of work done by my Department in the calculation of the risk and stated that it was of the opinion that the issue hinged on only a few, though important, elements of the calculations.

The report of the conciliation body concluded that conciliation seemed within reach and that the Commission and my Department should continue discussing the matter with a view to an agreed settlement. On foot of this advice, my Department has maintained regular contact with the Commission with a view to bringing the matter to a conclusion. Further work has recently been carried out to quantify the level of risk to EU funds and this information is currently with the Commission for consideration and will be the subject of a Commission visit shortly. It is expected that the matter will be concluded in the near future.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Can the Minister tell me how much was clawed back from farmers as a result of the LPIS review for the five years, 2008 to 2012, inclusive? It is actually up to 2013. In other words, how much money was overpaid?

Has the Minister any idea how soon this matter will come to a close? My understanding, in simple English, is that this fine or financial correction - call it what one wishes - will come out of the Department's budget and if the Commission wants €100 million or, as it wants at present, €181 million, that will come out of the Department's budget and would have to be repaid that way. Could the Minister confirm that such is the position, how much money was clawed back from farmers or how much were farmers overpaid having gone through the LPIS, and how many outstanding cases are there?

Deputy Simon Coveney: First, that was not the question Deputy Ó Cuív asked in writing and I do not have all those numbers, but I can certainly share some of them with him.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: They used to prepare supplementaries for all eventualities.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank farming organisations and the Opposition spokesperson for being reasonable on this issue. This is an issue we cannot ignore. If one gets a €181 million proposed fine from the Commission, one cannot simply put one's head in the sand and say that we refuse to pay.

We have gone through a tortuous process of assessing 900,000 land parcels across Ireland to ascertain what the appropriate level of reimbursement to the Commission should be. I refer to what was the level of overpayment over a five-year period. The issue is not so much whether that was by mistake or whether it was deliberate. The Commission looks at this from an audit perspective and asks what public money was spent that should not have been spent because it did not quality, how much should it get back and what fines should be imposed to go with that.

Our calculations are that this figure should be approximately €50 million. We will have to look at how that gets paid. Some of it will be paid back by farmers and some may well be paid by the Department over a period of time. We first need to conclude with the Commission what is the figure. The Commission strongly disagrees with that figure because otherwise it would not be asking for €181 million. We have a credible case here and we have worked hard to make it. I would be hopeful that we will reach a conclusion on it in the next month to six weeks. That is a guesstimate but I would be hopeful that it would be done within that timeframe.

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An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputies and Ministers to look at the clock because if we go over time on these questions, Other Questions for backbenchers will not be reached.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Will the Minister send me the figures of how much he will through this process have sought to reclaim from farmers and then give me some estimate of the outstanding cases that still have not been resolved because it is important that we understand that? In measuring what Europe is claiming to do, it gives us an understanding of the measure of how much this was a finicky exercise, which in most cases it was.

The Minister lost €200 million in terms of underspend in his first year in Government. With this €181 million over our heads at present, we have a significant superlevy taken out of farmers' pockets. It is running to hundreds of millions of euro. Has the Minister any idea when this matter will be brought to a conclusion and when we will have some certainty as to how much money is being taken out of farmers' pockets?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The superlevy is not hundreds of millions of euro.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As to whether it is taken from the Department or taken directly from the farmers, if taken out of the Department it is indirectly taken off the farmers as well. Perhaps the Minister could give us some indication.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I wish Deputy Ó Cuív would not try to paint a difficult issue into something that it is not. This is not connected with the superlevy. The superlevy is not hundreds of millions of euro either-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I never said that.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----and farmers have the option to repay the superlevy over a three-year period in interest-free instalments. By and large, farmers understand that.

This is a separate issue. It is an issue we cannot avoid. It is an issue of public money being spent on land, some of which was not eligible. It is a relatively small amount. In percentage terms, it is a small percentage of farmers who are involved, but obviously, for those farmers, it is a big issue.

I cannot send Deputy Ó Cuív the figures on what portion of the end figure farmers will pay until we know what the end figure is and until we make decisions around penalties, etc., but what I can send him is the amount of money that farmers have been asked to pay already. Where farmers have a small amount to repay, we have taken that from their single farm payment to get those farmers out of the problem area, which is what they wanted - we spoke to farming organisations about this. There is a relatively small percentage of farmers who have an issue here and we will try to deal with them in a way that manages cash flow and that certainly does not put farmers out of business.

Poultry Industry

5. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider the allocation of €25 million over five years, under the rural development programme targeted agricultural scheme, for the poultry sector to aid energy efficiency; if he will implement a system for dispensing medication, and for other supports, to the poultry industry. [18719/15]

Deputy Martin Ferris: Would the Minister consider allocating €25 million over five years, that is, at €5 million a year, under the rural development targeted agricultural scheme for the poultry sector which is the poor relation when it comes to the wider agricultural schemes, and also in light of the type of farming sector concerned, with its contribution to local economies because it is family orientated?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank Deputy Ferris. I met representatives from the poultry sector recently and they make a strong case. The rural development programme, RDP, for the period 2014-20 was submitted to the EU Commission for approval in July 2014. The programme includes provision for a new targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS II. Under TAMS II, there will be a dedicated scheme for investment in the pig and poultry sectors, focusing in the case of poultry operations on a range of energy and water efficiency measures. This will include a system for dispensing medication. The standard rate of aid under this scheme will be 40%, but the investment items will also be available for selection under the young farmers' capital investment scheme, where a rate of 60% will apply.

The total allocation for TAMS II in the 2014-20 RDP is €395 million. As a tranche system will be in place for each scheme and farmers have three years to complete the investment works concerned, very limited funding will be required in 2015 to ensure that the schemes can be opened. Now that the required letter of comfort has been received from the Commission, we are in a position to start the roll-out of the various TAMS schemes. The first scheme to be launched will be the young farmer scheme, including poultry elements, followed by dairy equipment, low emission slurry spreaders and organic capital investments. The remaining schemes, including the general pig and poultry measure, will be launched later in the summer and I will announce the relevant allocation at that stage.

I have told the poultry industry that we need to try to calculate how much money we have for TAMS II and when it is likely to be drawn down. That will determine how much money I can commit to the pigs and poultry sector. We have committed to a scheme for pigs and poultry. The question is whether we confine it to heating, ventilation, lighting systems and energy management or whether it will be something more substantial to allow for expansion of the sector. This is an ongoing discussion. I suspect the scheme will be launched before the end of July.

Deputy Martin Ferris: Approximately 800 people are involved in the poultry sector, at least 800 poultry farmers in the Irish Republic. These are all family farms run by family farmers and they are reasonably sized enterprises. They contribute significantly to their local economy and their value to local economies should not be under-estimated. The Minister has been in consultation with the poultry farmers and along with the IFA they would like to see a ring-fenced funding of €25 million over five years not for extending developments but to fund safer and energy-efficient use, improved systems for dispensing medication and for bio-security. Those are the areas they wish to have funded. It is essential for the survival of that type of enterprise that funding be made available and €5 million per annum would be money well spent and would provide good value.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I agree with the Deputy. We will make money available but I cannot give a figure today as to how much that will be. A scheme for pigs and poultry will be launched towards the end of July. The only question is how much will we have available to spend. The items outlined by the Deputy will be covered. Whether there will be a more extensive scheme for the pig sector in particular, where there is ambition for expansion, will be dependent on whether we believe we have enough money in the overall envelope of nearly

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€400 million, or €395 million to be exact.

I wish to reassure poultry farmers who have raised these issues with the Deputy that there will be a scheme for them which I suspect will be open by mid-summer but I cannot give an exact figure today as to how much will be provided under that scheme. I will be able to do so in due course.

Deputy Martin Ferris: It is encouraging that the Minister plans to open the scheme in mid-July. He indicates that he will look favourably on the suggestions from the industry as well as from the farming organisations. I stress that as the Minister is aware, this sector is very community orientated. The value of the sector and the employment it creates goes back into the local communities. It is a different type of farming. I welcome that the Minister is going to open the scheme in July and that he has indicated he will try to ensure that the funding of €25 million will be ring-fenced.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I have a lot of time for the pigs and poultry sector, a sector which does not get the benefit of single farm payment nor the benefits of most of the rural development programmes although we are trying to change that, in particular with regard to slurry management. We want to be helpful to the sector and the only question is how much we can afford to spend. There are competing demands. If I spend more on this scheme I will need to spend less on something else. It is a case of trying to measure how we can get best value for money from that TAMS II programme. We are trying to spread what is a lot of money across quite a large number of areas, from dairy expansion to pigs and poultry to beef and sheep handling, to farm safety, to young farmers, to the organic sector and so on. The money needs to be divided among all those sectors. I agree with the Deputy's request which I regard as a very reasonable request by the poultry sector to update and modernise its housing from an energy management point of view but it will be necessary to wait for the details of the scheme which will be launched in a few months time.

Other Questions

Food Harvest 2020 Strategy

6. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he remains satisfied that sufficient room for manoeuvre exists to ensure that the agrifood sector will not be negatively affected by European or global carbon reduction requirements, with particular reference to expected increased food production arising from Food Harvest 2020, and in the aftermath of the abolition of milk quotas; if he is satisfied he can take adequate steps to ensure the future of the industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18645/15]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question relates to the extent to which the Minister remains satisfied that the agrifood sector can develop and expand in line with the Food Harvest 2020 projections and in the aftermath of the abolition of dairy quotas and keeping in mind the extent to which he can secure that carbon penalties do not negatively impact on the sector.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank Deputy Durkan for raising this very important issue. As

our sector grows and expands this issue will become even more significant. We need to respond to the questions regarding the sustainability of the growth of Irish agriculture. I contend that we will have a very impressive growth period in agriculture but this will be managed in a sustainable way.

It is vital that in terms of setting EU climate change policy to 2030 there is coherence with EU agriculture and food security policy. The October 2014 European Council conclusions accepted some critical principles for the multiple objectives of agriculture and the land use sector, including recognition of the limited cost-effective mitigation options available. I met with Commissioner Cañete, the Spanish climate change Commissioner, last month, with a view to building upon the October conclusions. I reiterated the reality of the challenges faced by the Irish agriculture sector and which need to be recognised in future EU climate and food policies. Officials from my Department and other Departments are applying a whole-of-government approach to engagement with the Commission in order to seek an appropriate framework for agriculture within EU climate policy. My Department has also established an agriculture climate change committee, which includes Teagasc, EPA and Bord Bia, which is informing the development of national and EU policy on agriculture and climate change.

As our largest indigenous industry, it is hugely important that we ensure the continued development of our agrifood sector. The Deputy will have heard me say previously that the real challenge is to produce more while mitigating our emissions. This can be achieved by sustainable intensification where the focus is on the emissions intensity of our production systems. We have an excellent record in this regard and it is independently and internationally recognised that ours is one of the most climate and resource-efficient agrifood production systems in the world.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for his reply. Is he satisfied that he will achieve common cause with his EU agriculture ministerial colleagues in this regard, particularly from some countries? Will he indicate the extent and degree to which in an overall European scenario Ireland can benefit *vis-à-vis* those countries who do not have the major issue of developing an agricultural sector and market, while at the same time keeping within the climate change guidelines?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am satisfied that Ireland is on course to comply with the annual mitigation targets under the 2009 EU effort-sharing decision in the first half of the 2013 to 2020 compliance period. However, there will be significant compliance challenges in the years 2017 to 2020, if the economy continues to grow as it is. The first iteration of the national mitigation plan, which is being prepared under the planned legislation, will not only focus on addressing this challenge but will also look to 2030 and beyond. My Department is developing the sectoral mitigation plan for agriculture and this will examine how the sector can play its part. I intend that it will play a significant role in that challenge.

Looking to the future and a further development of the agrifood industry over the next decade, a high-level committee which I established towards the end of last year is in the process of developing a ten-year strategy to 2025. This will include the impact of milk quota removal. While I cannot pre-empt the outcome of this important work, the emphasis must be placed on encouraging sustainable production of food in light of the growing global demand, to reduce the carbon intensity of production and to contribute to both food security and greenhouse gas mitigation objectives. There is also a really important framing of target setting at European level in terms of the targets set for 2030 that needs to involve land use as a whole. The carbon

sink value of afforestation is part of the overall agriculture story.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Can the Minister rely on support from various European Union countries in this context? For example, is it possible to identify the countries on which he can most rely for support that might have common cause with Ireland in terms of agricultural food production in general?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The key issue in terms of the 2030 targets is that agricultural land use as a whole be taken into account. Rather than simply measuring the emissions from agricultural production systems, we would also have the benefit of the tree planting programme for which the Minister of State, Deputy Tom Hayes, is responsible, which has been ongoing since 1990 and is quite impressive. We have planted a lot of trees on agricultural land, which essentially are a very valuable carbon sink. That needs to be the plus if we are to get the minuses in terms of the increased mitigation that may come from increasing output. That is what the Taoiseach managed to have agreed at the European Council before Christmas and we now need to protect that aspect of the agreement. There are countries that would like to take afforestation out of the target setting process, which is unhelpful. We have fought against this and ensured that agenda has not been successful to date, but we need to be vigilant and must build a partnership with other countries. Most countries recognise that Ireland has a problem because 40% of our emissions come from agriculture. We are looking for fair treatment and if we have made significant progress in terms of afforestation, as we have, and if it has a significant carbon sink value, of course, that should be part of the calculation of our targets.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Sandra McLellan is not present to take Question No. 7.

Question No. 7 replied to with Written Answers.

Beef Industry

8. **Deputy Seán Kyne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine based on 2015 birth rates on dairy and suckler farms, the outlook for the beef market in the next two years; if a veal market needs to be further developed, in view of the expected increase in births in the dairy herd; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18673/15]

Deputy Seán Kyne: This question relates to 2015 birth rates in the dairy and suckler herds and what the implications will be for the market in the next two years and whether the Minister sees any role for veal exports, in particular red veal, the production of which is regarded as being more humane,

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy for raising this question.

The forecasted increase in the size of the dairy herd will, undoubtedly, have an impact on the beef sector and, specifically, the number and type of animals entering the supply chain. Dairy breed animals will require different farm management systems and would typically not achieve the same conformation scores as animals from the suckler herd. This will be reflected in the price achievable for finished product and farmers deciding to fatten these animals for slaughter should take account of all of these factors when making their production decisions. Most farmers will understand this.

According to the data available on my Department's animal identification and movements

database, the number of calf births registered so far this year has increased by about 130,000 or 9% compared to 2014. The number of calves registered in the dairy herd is just over 100,000 higher than last year. It is a significant change. The suckler herd is also showing an increased number of births, with about 30,000 more calves registered to date in 2015. It is a positive story in the suckler sector which it is important to recognise. The increase follows two years of declining numbers in the suckler herd and while the outturn for the rest of the year remains to be seen, the figures reflect the return of some confidence to the sector in recent months. The increased output across both production systems should be seen as a positive development and the challenge for all of the sector is to deliver a solid return on the animals through continued market development and adding value to our beef output.

Traditionally, male dairy breed calves have been prime candidates for live export to continental markets and my Department has facilitated this trade to ensure it provides an alternative market outlet for Irish farmers. The veal market is important for a growing dairy sector. Advances in sexed semen technology may ultimately have an impact on the production of beef from the dairy herd and we must continue to endeavour to maximise this element of beef output.

Deputy Seán Kyne: It is interesting to see an increase of 130,000 in the number of calf births this year in both the beef and dairy sectors. That will have consequences for the market which, as the Minister is well aware, is a cyclical one. Much concern was evident in that regard in 2014. Given the figures, one would expect concerns to arise in the future also. That is the reason for the question on veal. I accept that the new beef data and genomics programme which the Minister launched this month has had a positive and stimulating effect on the beef sector. It was well flagged that such a package would be put in place. Does the Minister believe there is an export market for red or rose veal? Live exports are very important to the country. We do not want to develop a sector that will be in competition with prime beef from the suckler herd. Is there an opportunity to explore an export market for the red veal sector?

Deputy Simon Coveney: While we must look at every opportunity to add value to our beef production, I am not convinced that targeting large-scale veal production would be the best use of our resources. Irish steer and heifer beef is recognised all over the world for its excellent quality and green credentials and we need to concentrate on leveraging this position even further and increasing the efficiency of our production systems, whether from the suckler or dairy herd. We think we can put production systems in place that will allow us to add value, grow the animals here and produce more beef, but, obviously, that means we will need more markets and competition to ensure a price drop will not ensue, which is what happened last year. To date this year, on average, the price is up by approximately 10% on last year. It is 14% and 15% higher than at the low point last year. Farmers are concerned that once we go above a certain number in terms of production, there is arguably overproduction, which drives prices down. The challenge for me and the industry is to develop new markets, including in the United States, China, Japan, other parts of Europe and North Africa in order that we will have enough competition to ensure we can grow volume, as well as maintain strong value. I am pleased to state that so far this year we are at 107% of the EU 15 price for beef, which means that we are in the premium space. We are getting more money for farmers for Irish beef than most farmers in Europe are getting, which is good news.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I accept the Minister's position. Obviously, adding value within the country is what we should be doing. Farmers want a fair price for the work and investment they put into their business. The live trade is equally important in terms of the competition it provides. Is the Minister confident that, for example, the work he has done in the US market

will sustain prices in the years ahead, notwithstanding the increase in the number of calf births?

Deputy Simon Coveney: In case I am being misunderstood, live cattle exports are really important and calf exports are part of that story, too. Work has been ongoing at an industry level to ensure we have the connections and the routes to markets that we need through France to access the market for calves. That work is active and will continue to be so. However, our strategic thinking as a country, where possible, should be concerned with growing animals in Ireland. That is where the jobs are and the value is added. In that way we will build a bigger industry. We must always maintain a certain amount of live exports to keep the home market honest, if one likes, in terms of what the factories pay for animals. We will pursue both aspects. We will facilitate live exports, but we will also try to put the case together to ensure farmers can also make money in growing, finishing and slaughtering animals in Ireland in order that we build the biggest business we can.

Dairy Sector

9. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the milk superlevy bill imposed on Ireland; the arrangements made for paying this superlevy on a phased basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18459/15]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: This question is about the superlevy. The Minister might let us know the extent of the superlevy fine imposed on Ireland. Farmers are very anxious to know when the so-called three year scheme for repayment will be put in place. How will it operate? Has the door been absolutely closed to amelioration in respect of the outrageous superlevy being imposed on this country at the point of abolition of milk quotas?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The preliminary output estimate for the end of the final milk quota year, based on returns to my Department by the milk purchasers and taking into account the relevant butterfat adjustment, is that Ireland will finish 4.34% over quota. This represents a superlevy bill in the region of €69 million. While the confirmed final position will not be available until August, when all flexi-milk is distributed and all returns have been received, the figure is not likely to deviate much from that estimate.

As in previous years, responsibility for collecting the superlevy liability rests with the milk purchaser. The milk purchaser must remit the collected moneys to my Department before 1 October in order that it will be in a position to pay the European Commission before 30 November. However, new arrangements recently introduced by the Commission allow member states to facilitate the payment by milk producers of the superlevy liability in three annual instalments, without interest. The first instalment must be collected by the milk purchaser and paid to my Department by 1 October and the two subsequent payments must be paid by similar dates in 2016 and 2017. I certainly see that this facility will be of immense value to the dairy sector in helping to lift the cash flow burden of having to pay the superlevy bill in full this year.

Officials in my Department are putting procedures in place for the collection of the first instalment before end of September and the introduction of a scheme to collect the remaining instalments in September 2016 and September 2017. I expect to be announcing the details of the scheme in the very near future. Under the proposed scheme, the Department will, on receipt of a formal application from a milk producer wishing to participate, raise a debt against that milk producer for the outstanding amount of superlevy due and facilitate the payment in three an-

nual instalments. Milk producers wishing to avail of the scheme will be asked to apply through their milk purchaser and the scheme will, at the outset, involve the establishment of a contract between the milk producer and the Department, where the value of the debt being raised and the conditions that must be complied with are set out. I am satisfied that this approach strikes the balance between offering flexibility to farmers, while also safeguarding the Exchequer.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am glad that we are getting some clarification on the issue. Bearing in mind the raising of the debt and the question of liability, would it be possible for the milk purchaser to take the money in 12 equal instalments between this year and next year and forward-pay part of the debt by 1 October to the Department? In other words, the purchasers, particularly if they are co-operatives, would give a free loan for six months. Thus, rather than the farmer having to come up with all of the money between now and 1 October, the purchaser could allow a period of year. Would this be allowable under the rules, as long as the Department received the money from the purchaser?

Deputy Simon Coveney: To be clear, many farmers have already paid the money. It has been taken out of their milk cheque. They asked for it to be taken out and have paid on a monthly basis. Some farmers, depending on the arrangement between them and the purchaser, will have to pay a lump sum, or a lump sum will have to come out of their milk cheque. Others have been calculating their liability.

We all hate the superlevy. I hate it and the fact that we have to pay it. It is a nonsense that when the objective is to wean countries off the quota, there is actually a date before which there is a full quota and after which there is no quota and in respect of which people are punished by superlevy fines when quotas have actually been removed. It makes no sense and we did our best to change it. We got a majority of countries in the European Union to support us, but we did not have a qualified majority. Some of the bigger countries blocked our proposal. We appealed to the new Commissioner arguing that, although there had to be a superlevy because we could not change it, we should at least examine repayment options that would allow for the making of payments over a three year period. Farmers and co-operatives were anticipating this and had started deducting payments in anticipation of a superlevy fine. Many farmers, therefore, will not have a big lump sum cash flow problem. If they do, we have allowed purchasers, or co-operatives in most cases, to put repayment mechanisms in place. As long as my Department receives the lump sums it needs by each appointed date in the next three years, we can finance it after this.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Let me outline what seems sensible to me. I accept that some people, particularly those who do not have a big superlevy bill, will pay in full, but it depends on cash flow. Young farmers, for example, might be under pressure. People's circumstances vary. What I am saying is that if purchasers and producers wanted it, they could say they would take the money in 36 equal instalments, starting from 1 May, and that as long as the Department received the money from them on 1 October every year, it would be happy. Is that correct?

Deputy Simon Coveney: Absolutely. The arrangements between farmer and purchaser are flexible. As long as we receive the lump sum each year, we will be repaid. Let us be clear: my Department has to pay the Commission in full this year, but we are to get our money back in the next three years. Co-operatives should be talking to their members, as they are, about how best to manage cash flow so as not to cause difficulties for foreigners. There is the flexibility about which the Deputy is talking.

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An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Martin Ferris who submitted Question No. 10 is not present.

Question No. 10 replied to with Written Answers.

Agriculture Scheme Payments

11. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of rural environment protection scheme and agri-environment options scheme payments made this year or held up owing to inspections and queries; when it is hoped all payments for 2014 will be fully made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18460/15]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: A large number of queries are being received now that payments are due under both the REPS and AEOS. The Minister might give us an update on how many farmers have been paid, how many remain to be paid and when we hope to have clarity on all REPS and AEOS payments for 2014 which will be paid in 2015.

Deputy Simon Coveney: With regard to the REPS, total payments of €23.53 million have been made in 2015 to date. The vast majority relate to 2014, while payments for 2015 have not yet commenced. A total of 3,371 REPS 4 applicants have received payments this year to date in respect of their 2014 contracts, while 157 applicants have received payments in respect of their 2013 contracts.

In 2014 there were 865 REPS 4 cases selected for on-the-spot inspections. Almost 96% of these inspections have been fully completed, leaving a further 38 cases to be finalised. In many cases, further documentation is awaited from the REPS participant. Once the outstanding documentation has been furnished, processing of the remaining cases will be completed as quickly as possible.

Under the terms and conditions of REPS 4, all payments are made following initial administrative checks and, where appropriate, following an on-farm inspection. In second and subsequent years annual payments under the scheme also become subject to the participant providing an annual declaration of compliance with his or her agri-environmental plan. Under the terms and conditions of the scheme, it is the farmer's responsibility to ensure required documentation for the release of payments for all years is submitted on time.

On the AEOS, total payments amounting to €25.67 million have been made to date in 2015. In 2014 there were 1,010 AEOS on-the-spot inspections undertaken. Almost 95% have been fully finalised, leaving just 5% outstanding. Payments for the finalised 2014 inspection cases commenced this week and every effort will be made to issue all outstanding payments for finalised inspection cases in the next few weeks. In many of the outstanding cases further documentation is awaited from the AEOS participant. Other outstanding 2014 inspection cases which have not received payments for the 2014 scheme year relate to administration issues with payments for previous years, which must be resolved before the 2014 inspection results can be finalised.

There is another issue I want to raise, but I will return to it when the Deputy has spoken.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It probably relates to trees. The Minister can take it that this question has been raised by me with him. He might provide further clarification on that issue.

Does he agree that it is vital that all outstanding cases are resolved? I hear what he is saying about outstanding documentation which obviously has to be submitted, but we need to finalise this issue because farmers are waiting for their cheques which are badly needed. Once there is clearance it is important that the cheque issues within a week. If a PAYE worker was left waiting for his or her wages for months on end we would hear about it. It is the same for farmers; they need the money.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy will see from those figures that the vast majority of cases have actually been paid and sorted out and that clarification is needed in about 5% or 6% of cases. Approximately 870 AEOS files are currently held for 2014 payment pending further processing due to a range of issues. Of those, approximately 400 have been subject to a Department review of the non-productive capital investment claims submitted by the applicants in 2014. That is the issue to which the Deputy has referred. This review identified irregularities with documentation submitted for reimbursement in some of these claims. A full Department investigation was then initiated which in turn led to the matter being referred to An Garda Síochána. Payments to applicants under review have been deferred pending the outcome of that investigation. My Department will be writing to all affected participants very shortly seeking further evidence to support their claim for payment in the amounts declared. Where satisfactory proofs are provided, payments will then be processed.

We have an awkward issue here where it looks as if people, essentially, were making claims that they were planting trees for which they were seeking payment. It looks as if some of those trees might not have been planted and that documentation was put in place that should not have been put in place. We have referred that issue to the Garda Síochána for a full investigation. As soon as that investigation is completed we will try to ensure that people who need to get paid are paid provided they have been compliant with the rules.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I have always taken a very different view where clearly there are misunderstandings and inadvertent mistakes made by people. I think we are over-strict on those. It would appear to me from what the Minister has said, in respect of 400 applicants in regard to some planting issue, that a high number of people have been involved in that type of error because I presume that not all that planting took place given the total number of AEOS applications. Is the Minister surprised that this question is so widespread and is affecting 400 farmers? Is there some explanation as to how it could affect so many farmers given that the Minister has said there may be some question that they did not do the planting which they said they did and for which they submitted documentation? I take it now that the matter has been referred to An Garda Síochána, there are serious concerns about the issue and that something systematic may be going on? Is that correct?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am reluctant to put details on the record when a Garda investigation is taking place. In essence, it is pretty close, I think, to what the Deputy is suggesting. I do not want to assume that anybody is guilty of anything-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: No, I did not say that.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----until we get the results of a full investigation. Clearly, we are sufficiently concerned that we referred the file to An Garda Síochána. Unfortunately for farmers, some have probably got caught up in this unfairly but it is very difficult for me to distinguish who they are. We will shortly write to the 400 people whose payments have been held up due to this investigation and if they can provide the proof that what they have claimed they

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have done has actually been done, payment will be made straightaway. We will deal with the Garda investigation when we get the results of it.

Bovine Disease Controls

12. **Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in view of a report (details supplied) and the findings of the study that badgers avoid fields of cattle and farm buildings containing cattle, if he will acknowledge that badgers have been wrongfully vilified; if he will accordingly suspend his Department’s practice of badger cull, which to date has resulted in the snaring and killing of a large number of badgers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18538/15]

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: The question relates to a recent report after a four year study which indicates that badgers do not seek out cattle and actively avoid them. In that case is there not a justifiable reason to suspend the culling of badgers?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. She and I have spoken about badgers many times and I know where she is coming from.

The badger removal strategy, which has been part of our TB eradication programme for some years, has been developed in response to research which has demonstrated that the eradication of the disease in cattle is not a practicable proposition until the reservoir of infection in badgers, with which it has also been found they share localised TB strains, is addressed. This is based on a number of studies which showed that badger removal had a significant beneficial impact on the risk of future breakdowns, with areas where badgers were not removed being some 14 times at greater risk than in areas where badgers were removed.

It is also notable that there has been a significant improvement in the disease situation in Ireland both in the cattle and badger populations since the badger removal programme was put on a more structured footing in 2004. The incidence of TB in cattle has fallen by almost 40% since 2008 and is currently at record low levels. It is particularly interesting that the incidence of TB in Northern Ireland, where badger removal is not prioritised, is approximately twice as high as on this side of the Border.

The study referred to by the Deputy is ongoing and is designed to find out how exactly the disease transmission between badgers and cattle takes place with a view to building up a comprehensive picture of badger movements and helping to design a viable vaccination programme for badgers, which is my Department’s preferred way of addressing the issue, if we can make it work. The fact that badgers tend to avoid buildings does not mean that they do not transmit disease to cattle. The position is that badgers can and do transmit TB to cattle via faeces, urine or latrines, and strain-typing has shown that badgers and cattle share the same strain of TB which is prevalent in the locality. Apart from this, research has shown that, as I have stated above, the removal of badgers from a locality has resulted in a significant reduction in the incidence of TB in cattle.

My Department endeavours to ensure that the badger culling programme takes place as humanely as possible. The restraints used in the capture of badgers are approved under section 34 of the Wildlife Act 1976 and research conducted within UCD has shown that damage or injury to captured badgers is minimal and is lower than with other capture methodologies. The badger

removal programme is based on research, is conducted humanely and only to the extent where it has been found to assist in reducing disease levels and, through the evidence of the sustained reductions in disease levels, both in cattle and badgers, has demonstrated its effectiveness. I am confident it can be replaced by a badger vaccination programme in due course and, as far as I am concerned, the sooner the better but I need to do it on the basis of science.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: I suggest there could be other reasons for the improvement in the reduction in the levels of bovine TB apart from the cull of the badgers. There is no doubt that everybody wants a cattle herd free of bovine TB. It was interesting to read this report which was carried out by the Minister’s Department, Trinity College and the National Parks and Wildlife Service over four years. What it discovered was that badgers actively avoid areas where there are cattle, whether in a yard or out in the wild. They have been observed on their nightly wanderings and if they come into a field where there are cattle they divert somewhere else. In the meantime, 80% of the badgers being culled are perfectly healthy animals. We are aware that even though there are licences to shoot them, they are culled in most horrific circumstances. We have seen badgers caught in the trap where they are shot. Poison has been laid. Slurry has been left in some of the traps in order to further intensify the cruelty. This is being carried out under licences issued by the Department.

There is a need for a more holistic approach to bovine TB rather than blaming the badger for everything. I hope the Minister will look at the report which provides interesting findings and see the impetus for the vaccine.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We will look at the report. It would be dishonest of me to say that I do not think that the badger targeted cull programme is being done in as humane a way as we can do it. If there are other suggestions as to how we can do it better, we would happily take them on board but to suggest it is not working would be wrong. This has been a hugely successful programme where we have virtually halved bovine TB in Ireland. We have less bovine TB in Ireland now than at any time since 1954 when records began. The UK has not had success in reducing the incidence of bovine TB. I suggest this is partly because it has not been able to take the same approach towards a targeted culling programme where it is aware of a localised bovine TB problem and outbreak.

I want to move to a vaccination programme where we vaccinate badgers against TB. We will do that when we feel we can do it and maintain the approach that we have at the moment, which is driving down TB numbers. I do not think we can do that purely on animal welfare grounds without having negative consequences for the spread of TB. However, as soon as we feel we can do that, we will do it. I will happily look at the report to which the Deputy referred. If she knows of instances where badgers were trapped inappropriately, I would like to hear about it. We have an approach which insists that traps are set in the most humane way possible. However, the idea that badgers actively avoid cattle because they are shy animals, which they are, and therefore there is no connection between the two does not stack up when one looks at how TB is actually spread, through urine, faeces and so forth.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: There must be other reasons for the reduction in the levels of bovine TB. This cull of badgers has been called slaughter masquerading as science.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is not slaughter.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: A farmer who gave a presentation recently before the Com-

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mittee of Public Accounts acknowledged that he had been responsible, along with an official from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, for inhumanely slaughtering 4,000 pigs. This is the type of thing that is going on. We had lots of discussion on the Animal Health and Welfare Bill and there was so much expected of that legislation, which has gone a long way but it is disappointing that inhumane treatment continues.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is also inhumane that we have to slaughter cattle because they have TB when we know that we can get the incidence of TB down. That is no more humane than the badger cull. What is humane for me is to get TB out of the herd, which is what we are trying to do, and out of the badger population too. In that way, we will not have to target cattle and badgers. We have other questions with regard to deer in Wicklow, for example. Are they spreading TB and if they are, how can we manage that in a practical way? Can we have a targeted, humane cull to try to deal with killing off a disease that has bedevilled Irish agriculture for more than 50 years? We want to stop killing animals because they are carrying or spreading TB. The way to do that is to eradicate TB, which is what we are trying to do. That is in the welfare interests of animals as well as the interests of farming.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Statute Law Revision Bill 2015: Order for Report Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I move: “That Report Stage be taken now”.

Question put and agreed to.

Statute Law Revision Bill 2015: Report and Final Stages

An Ceann Comhairle: I understand that the Minister of State wishes to draw the attention of the House to a technical correction to be made to the legislation before we proceed.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I would like to mention one typographical correction which does not require formal amendment to the Bill and which relates to the subject matter of instrument No. 1,741 in Schedule 2. It relates to a reward for the apprehension of the murderers of Lieutenant John Hume in 1738. I would be obliged if, in accordance with Standing Order 140, the Ceann Comhairle would direct the Clerk of the Dáil to make the following minor drafting correction to the text of the Bill: On page 114, line 35, to insert “the murderers of” after “apprehension of”. This correction is being made to rectify a typographical error and has no substantive effect.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): No amendments have been tabled on Report Stage.

Bill reported without amendment and received for final consideration.

Question proposed: “That the Bill do now pass”.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank Deputies for their consideration and for their considered views expressed during this debate. As leg-

islators and custodians of the Statute Book, we should see our obligations as extending beyond the creation of new legislation to also include the review and removal of that which is no longer necessary. I was pleased to see so many speakers from all sides of the House during the Second Stage and Committee Stage debates recognising the importance of this process and the work of the statute law revision programme. This Bill will revoke all Government orders or secondary instruments made prior to 1821, apart from a specific list of 43 instruments being preserved. In total the Bill expressly revokes 5,782 secondary instruments and implicitly repeals thousands of others, making it the largest ever repealing measure by express repeals in this or any other jurisdiction. The Bill is part of a broader series of measures which have been enacted since the establishment of the statute law revision programme 13 years ago. This Bill is clearly not the end of the process but constitutes a further milestone in the creation of a modern and accessible Statute Book and paves the way for further legislative clarity measures including the assessment of more recent legislation. I assure the House that the statute law revision programme will be continuing its work, both on later instruments and also on reviewing Acts passed since independence in 1922. I hope to be in a position to bring further proposals to the House in due course once that work is further advanced. I wish to pay tribute to all of the people who have been working in the Department on the statute law revision programme over a sustained number of years and thank them for their work.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I have had a particular interest in this process which a Fianna Fáil-led government began 13 years so. Quite a considerable amount of work has already been done in this area but it is very tedious. I hope this Government will keep up the momentum to eliminate all pre-independence legislation from our Statute Book so that we are totally governed by laws brought in since independence. I agree with the Minister of State that there is also a need to constantly update laws introduced since then. Time and again we have found in this House that provisions set out in legislation are outdated and in need of replacement. There were some absolutely extraordinary laws in place in this country. There was one such law that I had a particular fetish about but I am not sure if it has been fully repealed, that is, the one requiring the wearing of wigs in courts, which is totally anachronistic in a republic. The sooner “my Lords” and “my Ladies” down in the Four Courts realise that this belongs to another era, that we are now in a republic and get rid of all of the paraphernalia of 18th and 19th century imperialism, the better. They should dress in a way that is appropriate in the twenty-first century. I am glad that the Supreme Court gave the lead and did away with wigs. I hope that on my next visit - which I hope will not be any time soon - to the Four Courts, I will not see anybody wearing a 19th century-style wig. I would ask the Minister of State to ensure that this provision is finally taken off the Statute Book.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): The Bill will now be sent to Seanad Éireann.

National Dementia Strategy Implementation: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): I thank the Ceann Comhairle and his office for giving me the opportunity to address the House on the Irish national dementia strategy and its implementation.

Irish people are living longer now than ever before and thankfully the signs are that this

trend will continue into the future. Better health care, better nutrition and greater awareness of how we are managing our own health have all contributed to this and it is something to be celebrated. Not only are we living longer but a great many Irish people are staying healthy. We are enjoying full and busy lives for longer than our parents or grandparents could ever have contemplated. However, while this is something to be celebrated, longer life will unfortunately mean that more people will live long enough to develop dementia. It is estimated that there are approximately 50,000 people with dementia in Ireland today. These numbers are expected to increase to over 140,000 by 2041 as the number of older people in Ireland increases. For this reason, in our programme for Government we committed to developing a national Alzheimer's and other dementias strategy to increase awareness, ensure timely diagnosis and intervention and ensure development of enhanced community-based services.

11 o'clock

A research review funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies, entitled *Creating Excellence in Dementia Care - A Research Review for Ireland's National Dementia Strategy*, was published in January 2012. A public consultation process to inform the development of the strategy was also conducted in 2012 and a report on the consultation was published in February 2013. A working group representing of key stakeholders from the Department of Health, the HSE, the medical professions and the community and voluntary sectors was convened to advise on the publication of the strategy. The working group faced a challenging task in that there was little prospect of significant additional resources becoming available. However, an extremely generous offer by Atlantic Philanthropies to fund the implementation of key elements of the strategy has allowed us to put together a concrete implementation programme.

In December 2014, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and I launched the Irish national dementia strategy, which sets out a number of principles to underpin the provision of care and supports for people with dementia. It advises that we take account of dementia in the development and implementation of existing and future health policies. People with dementia should be encouraged to participate in society and in their own communities as fully as possible for as long as possible. End of life care for those with dementia should be prioritised and provided in the most appropriate setting. All those caring for or providing services to people with dementia should be appropriately trained and supervised. Resources should be directed to provide the best possible outcome for those with dementia, as well as for their families and carers.

The strategy emphasises that most people with dementia live in their own communities and can continue to live well and to participate in those communities for far longer than many people appreciate. A number of actions have been identified for early implementation. Clear responsibility for dementia is to be assigned in the HSE with the establishment of a national dementia office. Clear descriptions of care pathways and better information and guidance on services are to be made available to GPs and to people with dementia and their families and carers. A better understanding of dementia, including modifiable risk factors, is to be promoted. The use of existing resources is to be reviewed to ensure that they are used in the best way possible. Research to inform the design and delivery of dementia services in Ireland should be supported and given appropriate priority.

While the initial emphasis was on doing things better within existing resources, I have already mentioned the timely and very welcome boost provided by Atlantic Philanthropies which has agreed a joint initiative with the Department of Health and the HSE to implement key elements of the strategy over the period from 2014 to 2017. The national dementia strat-

egy implementation programme will represent a combined investment of €27.5 million, with Atlantic Philanthropies contributing €12 million and the HSE contributing €15.5 million. The programme will promote a greater focus on timely diagnosis of dementia and on the value of early intervention, along with the long-term objective of making people in Ireland generally more aware and understanding of the needs of people with dementia and of the contribution that those with dementia continue to make to our society.

The initiative includes the following three key elements. First, a programme will be rolled out to provide intensive home supports and home care packages for people with dementia. Second, additional dementia specific resources will be provided for GPs, who are the critical initial point of contact with the health system for those with dementia. This resource material will include training materials and guidance on local services and contact points that are relevant. The GP programme is being led by Dr. Tony Foley in Kinsale and training will be delivered in the nine community health organisations commencing in October 2015. Third, a campaign will be pursued to raise public awareness about the issue of stigma and to promote the inclusion and involvement in society of those with dementia. The involvement of Atlantic Philanthropies will allow us to do more of what we want to do sooner than would otherwise have been the case. Our agreement with that organisation provides for robust monitoring, evaluation and accountability. It will also facilitate the development of a strong evidence base to inform future policies and service design.

A monitoring group chaired by the Department of Health has been established to assist with and advise on implementation of the national dementia strategy, including the national dementia strategy implementation programme. This group includes health professionals, administrators, researchers and advocates. In addition, the group includes a person living with dementia and a representative of those who care for people with dementia. A draft implementation plan has been developed and was presented for discussion at the first meeting of the monitoring group on 1 April 2015. Feedback on the plan will be considered at the group's next meeting in June 2015.

The strategy acknowledges that while current health and social policy is focused on caring for people with dementia in their own homes, there will come a time for many when home care is no longer feasible or appropriate and long-term residential care is the best option. This can be particularly acute where 24-hour care is needed or where the person with dementia is living alone. As highlighted in the dementia services information and development centre report, A National Survey of Dementia in Long-Term Residential Care, some people need dementia-specific facilities, particularly where the dementia is accompanied by behavioural and psychological symptoms such as agitation, aggression, disinhibition, wandering and sleep disturbance. These behaviours can occur at any stage of the illness but they can pose significant challenges for staff and other patients, as well as being potentially dangerous and distressing for the person with dementia. However, the majority of people with dementia currently reside in generic residential care facilities and a high proportion of existing nursing home residents are considered to be affected by dementia. The national quality standards for residential care settings for older people in Ireland, which apply to nursing homes generally, were developed from this perspective. The national dementia strategy therefore stresses the importance of residential standards generally being designed to accommodate the needs of people with dementia. The standards require service providers to deliver a person-centred and comprehensive service that promotes health, well-being and quality of life. The nursing home resident must be the key stakeholder in service design from the outset. Each individual should be assessed immediately before or on admission to a nursing home so that an individualised care plan can be developed and reviewed

on an ongoing basis. The care plan will set out how care is to be provided in a way that provides for the individual's wishes and health needs. The service provider must meet residents' needs, including the needs of those with dementia.

The review of the nursing home support scheme, which is due to be completed shortly, includes a general consideration of how services for the elderly are to be provided. This will include a consideration of whether pricing for residential care can better reflect the differences in care needs that inevitably arise. The current waiting time for people on the national placement list for funding under the nursing home support scheme improved significantly following the allocation of additional funding in two tranches this year. The first tranche of €10 million was part of an overall €25 million allocated to the HSE to relieve the problem of delayed discharges from acute hospitals. More recently the Government approved additional funding of €74 million, of which €44 million has been allocated to the nursing home support scheme to provide an additional 1,600 places and reduce the waiting time for approved applicants from the current 11 weeks to the previous norm of four weeks for the rest of the year. The remaining €30 million will cover the cost of additional transitional care beds through June and additional community, convalescence and district hospital beds on a permanent basis.

In addition to the nursing home support scheme, the HSE supports people to leave hospital with home care services such as home help and home care packages. Over the past number of months there has been a specific focus on the provision of home care to those in hospital requiring discharge in a timely manner. The recipients of these home supports include many people with dementia.

I regret to say that we have no cure for most forms of dementia and a diagnosis of dementia remains a challenge. However, most people can enjoy productive, fulfilling and happy lives even after a diagnosis of dementia. The aim of this strategy is to make sure that life is as good as possible for as long as possible for those affected by this condition. I am determined that the strategy will be effectively implemented and that the monitoring group I have appointed will oversee this implementation to its successful completion.

As I have often been told, we in this country are very good at strategy. Our weakness is implementation. Developing implementation alongside strategy is key to how we do things in future.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement on the national dementia strategy.

Dementia is a deeply distressing condition, both for those suffering from it and for their families. It presents a significant and growing challenge for the Government, the State and health and social services. As our population ages, the number of people with dementia increases and in response to ongoing calls for action, late last year the Government published its first national dementia strategy. Fianna Fáil welcomes that strategy as it has the potential to change people's lives and help those vulnerable to dementia. For the strategy to become a reality, it must be implemented and must be positioned at the centre of politics and of how we approach our health service.

Fianna Fáil welcomed the publication of the national dementia strategy in 2014 and is committed to supporting and helping the implementation of that policy. The Department of Health is to conduct a mid-term review of progress in 2016 and we support the call for the findings

from this midterm review to be utilised to develop a revised dementia plan. Such a revised plan must address the gaps in the current strategy, specifically, the needs of people with younger onset dementia. The revised plan must ensure it addresses the commitment to remove age discrimination as a barrier to accessing the health system. The strategy purports to be for everyone with dementia, but in its detail highlights services which will not apply to those under the age of 65 who suffer early onset dementia. Similarly, there has been little focus on residential care. A recent report from Trinity College Dublin and St. James's Hospital found that only 11% of long-term residential care homes have dedicated dementia units. It is also important that we give priority to new social and community approach to how we handle dementia and to the development of a dementia friendly community.

There are just under 50,000 people currently living with dementia in Ireland. The majority of people living with dementia are women, approximately 30,000 and just under 20,000 are men. If current trends continue, this number is expected to rise to just under 70,000 by 2021 and to 132,000 by 2041. An estimated 3,583 people - 8.6% of people with dementia - have early onset dementia, and most of these are men. These figures do not include an additional circa 700 people who have Alzheimer type dementia associated with Down's syndrome. Approximately 4,000 new cases of dementia arise in Ireland every year. Local health office areas in the HSE west have the highest prevalence rates of the nine areas estimated. Roscommon has the highest share of people with dementia, at 1.4%.

The major increase in numbers of people with dementia in this country is likely to occur after the year 2020, with the numbers growing to between 141,000 and 147,000 by 2041. It is estimated that the overall cost of dementia in Ireland will be in the region of €1.69 billion per annum. Some 48% of these costs are attributable to the opportunity cost of informal, mostly family support, care to those living with dementia in the community. A further 43% of costs are accounted for by residential long-stay care, while formal health and social care services contribute to only 9% of the total costs of dementia. A significant proportion of people with dementia are aged under 65. It is estimated there are approximately 4,000 of these, many of whom are in their 30s or 40s. There are 50,000 family carers in Ireland providing care to someone with dementia.

I acknowledge the dedication, commitment and work of the Alzheimer Society of Ireland. The society makes the important point that the majority of people with dementia, over 63%, live in the community and wish to continue living in the community as a first option. It points out that research has found that the two strongest predictors of admission to care homes are whether the older person has dementia and whether or not the family is in a position to cope and care for the onset of dementia. The society has found that dementia-specific home care is a critical component to ensuring that people with dementia can live in the community. It is important this House takes every step possible to ensure people with dementia can remain in their homes.

Experts in the field of dementia have also pointed out that the right information, support, resources and investment can help families with a member with dementia. Timely diagnosis is identified internationally as best practice. However, we have a shocking rate of identifying dementia and much dementia remains undiagnosed until at quite a late stage. As the Alzheimer Society of Ireland has pointed out, without diagnosis people cannot get the information they need, cannot access the services to which they are entitled and cannot make a decision as a family about the future in respect to the dementia. Community based dementia advisers are critical for early intervention and for helping promote the dementia awareness required in communities. This is critical in regard to how this House and society approach the onset of demen-

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tia. Since the middle of last year, the Alzheimer Society of Ireland has funded seven dementia advisers to cover specific parts of the country. However, this is not enough. We need to see a greater investment and a better network set up across the country.

It is important that dementia friendly community initiatives are developed across all communities. I welcome the fact that in my home county of Galway, the Galway city dementia friendly initiative will see the development of key local agencies that will implement a programme of training and awareness raising actions at local level and of an initiative that will ensure we have timely claiming of supports across the community. The initiative will provide dementia awareness training that can be rolled out across communities. These communities will have support from resource centres, active age groups and various other community groups. The dementia friendly initiative provides a new layer of support. The type of supports dementia friends will provide will include supports that will ensure people with dementia get involved in community activities and organisations. We as a society have a responsibility to take on ownership and awareness of such initiatives.

Fianna Fáil is alarmed by the findings reported that only 11% of long-term residential care homes have dedicated dementia units. The research on this area highlights the fact that at least six counties have no dementia provision whatsoever and that there are capacity issues in many of the units that cater for people with dementia. The private sector provides the majority of residential support services. This leaves thousands of dementia patients and their families with no option but to seek care in our hospitals. This is inappropriate. It is unacceptable that we rely heavily on our acute setting. Dementia is an issue that will escalate as time goes on, because people are living longer. The problem already exists and it is clear it will grow.

I was saddened by the fact the Government did not see fit to send a representative to the WHO ministerial conference on dementia. For the first time, last March health Ministers from across the world gathered in Geneva to share policies and best practice on dealing with the increasing prevalence of dementia in our ageing population. Ireland lost out significantly by failing to send a single representative to this gathering which addressed this important issue. The fact that the Minister, Deputy Leo Varadkar, did not think it important enough to attend or to send a Government representative exposes the Government's priority in this area.

A recent *Sunday Independent* article on 15 May confirmed that just one in 60 families would win with the State's new dementia strategy. We do not have enough focused funding in this area. I encourage the Minister to secure additional resources to roll out a more comprehensive community infrastructure in this area. The burden of dementia is deeply distressing for those who are suffering with it and their families. It presents a significant and growing challenge for the health system which will require best practice in terms of social and public policies and must be underpinned by resources.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Cuirim an-fháilte roimh an deis cainte ar an ábhar fiorthábhachtach seo. Is galair iad galar Alzheimer agus na cinn atá gaolta leis a chuireann as do suas nó anuas le 48,000 duine sa tír seo. An bealach is fearr le dul i ngleic leis ná cinntiú gur féidir le daoine fanacht ina dtithe féin. Cinntíonn seo gur féidir leo saol níos iomláine a chaitheamh chomh maith le costas níos lú a bheith ar an Stát. Tá buairt orm nach bhfuil straitéis á cur i bhfeidhm i gceart go fóill, áfach.

I hosted a briefing by the Alzheimer Society of Ireland at the end of March which afforded those of us who attended a chance to engage with both the overarching national dementia strat-

egy and the personal experience of caring. I thank all those who came before Deputies, Senators and support staff on that day. Their stories, insights and personal experiences were hugely illuminating across all of these areas. As I said at that event, we listen today in order that we can plan for tomorrow. That is still the case.

There are almost 48,000 people living with dementia in Ireland today and over 60% of these individuals live in their own homes. The concept of dementia needs to be understood as a road, as a journey, rather than just a static point, a destination. The strategy was published in December 2014 and identifies a number of priority action areas, including better awareness and understanding; timely diagnosis and intervention; integrated services, supports and care; research and information systems; and training and education. The strategy was published on foot of a consultative process that involved various stakeholders across the sector, including clinical and patient groups. While it acknowledges that most people with dementia live in their communities and wish to continue to do so, more must be done to allow them to make adjustments to their homes. Support schemes for these renovations should be extended and run beyond 2015. Hospitals are often used to care, in the short or even the medium term, for elderly patients with dementia, despite being ill-equipped and poorly designed to provide that necessary care.

I recognise that awareness of the condition has increased. The number of calls to the national helpline which is run by the Alzheimer Society of Ireland increased by 20% last year. A monitoring group, chaired by the Department of Health, is being established to assist with and advise on implementation of the strategy, including the national dementia strategy implementation programme. Its remit is to monitor and assess progress in the implementation of the strategy. Membership of the group includes many of the members of the advisory group established to support the development of the strategy, as well as four other members, including a representative of those living with dementia, a general practitioner, a representative of Atlantic Philanthropies and a representative of the HSE's national dementia strategy implementation office. There is a particular focus on people under 65 years with dementia and the need to make hospitals dementia-friendly from admission to discharge. This is to be welcomed. The strategy has matched funding from the Department of Health, the HSE and Atlantic Philanthropies, with the final organisation contributing €12 million of the overall €27.5 million set aside.

The national dementia strategy implementation programme will include an allocation of approximately €22.1 million for the provision of intensive home supports, roughly €2.7 million for a dementia awareness programme, with funding for an education programme for GPs and primary care teams consisting of €1.2 million and €1.5 million for the national dementia strategy implementation office.

Let us look at some of the facts. January 2015 saw the first national survey of provision for people with dementia in long-term care by the dementia services information and development centre. Some of the areas it highlighted were as follows: 54 units, some 11%, had specialist care units for people with dementia; only 66 respite beds were available in the 54 units to cater for the needs of the 30,000 people known to be living with dementia in the community; and in HSE operated facilities only one third of nursing staff and health care attendants had been specially trained. The Minister and I will both acknowledge how absolutely unacceptable these facts are. Their exposure is welcome, but the fact that they reflect the current state of affairs is most concerning.

It has been estimated that the annual cost of dementia could be in the region of €1.69 billion and the average annual cost per person with dementia is some €40,500. We know that we

must do the best possible for individual patients and also realise that in order to control the State spend we must support as many individuals as possible in their wish to stay in their own homes.

I am concerned about implementation of some of the elements of the strategy. There have been reports that suggest that as few as one in 60 families who are caring for someone in their home will benefit from the national dementia strategy. While significant sums have been pledged, most of the funds will be spent on those in need of intensive care at home. The measures include additional home help, nursing and therapy services, house adaptations, where necessary, aids and respite care, both in the home and nursing homes. Not everybody who has a need in this regard will benefit substantially.

I understand Professor Suzanne Cahill, director of the dementia services centre at St. James's Hospital, Dublin, believes these services are linked with areas with "well-known hospital overcrowding problems." This, if it is the case, is a sensible approach to deal with overcrowded hospitals, but it also means that families with similar need levels are being discriminated against owing to a postcode lottery. We also know that those with the disease at earlier ages in life are often left in the ha'penny place. There are no specialist services or supports for the estimated 4,000 people under 65 years with dementia in Ireland. This issue must be addressed. I am mindful of the recent briefing in the audiovisual room and the most wonderful insight given by a young man who is his mother's carer, a dementia sufferer in her 50s.

The Alzheimer Society of Ireland has been very active on the strategy and has requested that all parties, and all opinion in the House commit to the implementation of the national dementia strategy; provide ring-fenced funding for dementia; develop a follow-up strategy for dementia based on the review of the current strategy; ensure every person with dementia who requires home care has access to dementia specific care in his or her home; and ensure that everyone with dementia has access to a timely diagnosis and appropriate post-diagnosis support including, but not limited to, a dementia adviser as a minimum standard of follow-up support. Sinn Féin fully endorses and supports these recommendations, either in opposition or in government.

We need to plan effectively for the growing number suffering from dementia. The strategy must be implemented in full. We must examine how best to fund care and support for families and individuals affected and we must plan a follow-up strategy based on how well the current strategy has been implemented. What is the Government planning for 2018 when the strategy will end? We must also ensure the upskilling of GPs and reduce any stigma around the disease. Perhaps the Minister of State has indicated what will happen after 2018, and if not, perhaps she might like to illuminate us on it in her concluding statement.

The Government must continue to fund dementia research and to improve investment in care. Carers need to be rewarded and given every support so they can help their loved one stay in familiar surroundings, if that is their choice or the safest and a manageable option. Demographic changes and an ageing population will further challenge us to come up with better treatments and care pathways to help the predicted trebling of those with dementia in the coming years. As I have said before, we must remember, it is not just about our older loved ones. In the years that come, it might very well be about any of us.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: Over the years, there has been great progress in the prevention, medication and treatment of many physical and mental illnesses. However, two illnesses - motor neuron disease and dementia including Alzheimer's disease - have not shared in this, and they present great challenges. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia.

Like motor neuron disease, it is progressive and irreversible, although we hope that we will see progress on this. It means a loss of intellectual function, chronic memory loss, language deterioration and personality change. Like many others here, I have experienced it in my family. I know exactly what the four aspects I mentioned mean, and I have vivid memories of my aunt, who suffered from them, and my uncle and the immediate family who were caring for her.

The number of people living with dementia has been estimated variously at 38,000, 42,000 and 47,000. It is scary that the female sufferers outnumber the male by two to one. A vast majority of sufferers are cared for at home by a family member. All too often, we see the most difficult cases, and it is reassuring to know that many people suffering from dementia continue to live well, socialise and be involved in their communities. At events organised by the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, it is reassuring to hear people with Alzheimer's disease or some form of dementia speaking of their illness and living with it. A year or two ago, I listened to Helen Rochford Brennan from Tubbercurry talking about how she was living with dementia and making the very poignant point that memories are precious and are lost to Alzheimer's disease every day.

I acknowledge the work of the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, particularly the cafés. I have been to two in Dublin Central, one on the Navan Road and the other in Clareville, Glasnevin, and have seen the benefit for the carers. The society also provides social clubs and dementia advisers. I am sure others received the letter about the scheme to support national organisations. In June last year, the Alzheimer Society of Ireland was one of 23 disability organisations which lost funding. Because of intense lobbying, a bridging scheme was put in place until the end of this June, which is approaching quickly. On another occasion here, I referred to the need for intellectual disability nurses to be available at accident and emergency departments for those who present with intellectual difficulties including autism, Asperger's syndrome, dementia and Alzheimer's disease. At the best of times, accident and emergency is a very difficult and disturbing place, and it must be a nightmare for people with intellectual difficulties unless there is support for them.

Ireland must up the tempo, given that many European countries, including Britain and France, are ahead of us. A year ago, David Cameron said he was making dementia a priority and allocated €300 million for research. We are told that Alzheimer's disease will reach epidemic proportions within 40 years unless new therapies can be developed. Professor Brian Lawlor, consultant psychiatrist, recently told a conference of the need to increase awareness of the illness and for more research on the cause, care and cure. Otherwise, we will have a global health crisis. We need to know more about how to delay the onset and progress of the illness. We are told keeping brain, body and heart healthy and active can help to reduce the development of dementia. There is a role for medication in delaying the progression of the illness and early detection is vital. In my family, early detection and medication was immensely beneficial and prevented the onslaught of the illness, although there were many difficulties with the memory loss.

It is alarming that 25% of carers are elderly, 75% are under financial strain and many find caring for somebody who suffers from Alzheimer's disease or dementia overwhelming at times. This is where the vital respite care comes in. I have met carers who found interaction with the HSE to be a frustrating, box-ticking exercise, for example watching television was ticked off as activity. To spend six hours watching television is not an activity. Others have found their engagement with the HSE much more positive.

VHI cover for Alzheimer related illnesses, or the lack thereof, has been brought to my attention. Sufferers are generally of advanced years and, in the majority of cases, have been paying for health cover for 40 or 50 years and have probably never made a claim. At the point in their lives when they need it, they discover the exclusion of Alzheimer's disease. Surely this is age discrimination. Health insurance is a public policy matter and is subject to Government influence in general. Given that the Minister for Health appoints the directors of the VHI, the Department of Health should have an input on this aspect.

The home care package is much more appropriate than admitting people too early into residential care. We accept the need for mental stimulation, which slows the rate of deterioration. In the majority of cases, the best place for a person is at home in familiar surroundings. I have read the criticism of the strategy's narrow focus, that it will benefit 500 particular families, and the Minister of State can take us up on this. We know how many families need support. The publication of the strategy is very welcome and the Alzheimer Society has been watching for it for a long time. The question is what will happen in 2018.

Obesity, smoking and lack of exercise are recognised as risk factors for Alzheimer's disease, and we are very conscious of those issues. There is a need for joined-up thinking with the other Departments which are involved with each of the risk factors, particularly for people at a certain age. As the Minister said, we could paper the walls of many buildings with the many strategy and policy documents, and implementation is the most important aspect. The monitoring group, and the fact that it will not wait three years but will examine the issue in a year's time, is to be welcomed. I am particularly happy that the group includes a person who is living with dementia and one of that person's carers.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Paudie Coffey): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this very important topic that transcends politics. It affects many families in this country and all over the world. As I look around the House and the Gallery, I note we have all ages listening to this debate from schoolchildren to the elderly.

Unfortunately, most families will have a member affected by dementia or Alzheimer's disease at some stage. I want to contribute to this debate because I have personal experience of close family members who have suffered from dementia. I want to put on the record my appreciation and acknowledgement of the professional health services which assisted my family and many others.

I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, for bringing forward this strategy and implementation plan. It is the first strategy that will address the strong challenges dementia and Alzheimer's present for the individuals affected and their families. A strategy is not worth the paper it is written on unless it is evaluated and monitored. Accordingly, I welcome the fact a monitoring group has been established to evaluate progress under the strategy.

The strategy will address several key areas, including home-care packages and supports for families affected by dementia. It is important we keep loved ones in their family home and environment for as long as possible. That is where they are most comfortable and stimulated most by the people they love and see every day. This will assist them in dealing with the illness and the challenges it presents. Another important area that will be addressed in the strategy is the resourcing of general practitioners in this area, as well as the other health professionals like practice nurses, who might identify the early signs of dementia when the person is in for

a regular health check-up. It is important GP practices, the primary contact area, are properly resourced and the staff properly trained to recognise early signs of dementia so interventions can be made at the appropriate time.

Most importantly, the strategy will deal with public awareness which will help people recognise the challenges faced by people with dementia, Alzheimer's and brain injuries and their families. We need to support them in as many places as possible across all sectors in society.

It is important we involve all stakeholders as early as possible which includes the individuals themselves, their families, health professionals, carers and home helps, as well as the administrators and policymakers. It is by working together that we will build capacity in our society to assist people who need help most in this area. I especially want to commend the public health and community nurses who already work in this field, supporting families in these difficult circumstances. Residential care is very important. We must ensure as many resources as possible are used to keep people in their homes.

I also want to acknowledge the work of bodies such as the Alzheimer Society of Ireland. Another body that is not recognised as much in this area is the Hospice Movement. Traditionally, it has been recognised for cancer and palliative care. However, I have seen the fabulous work of the professionals in the Hospice Movement who are now working in the area of dementia, assisting families in end-of-life situations, bringing dignity to the individuals involved and keeping people at home. Recently in Waterford, the Hospice Movement held a day-long seminar on dementia and the challenges it presents. I urge support be given for further seminars across the country to assist the Hospice Movement in its work.

Professor John Nolan and his team at Waterford Institute of Technology are doing groundbreaking international research in diet and how it impacts on brain cells and how they deteriorate over time. This research is at the early stage but Professor John Nolan, a young professor only in his 30s, is developing it and attracting international interest and investment. It is focusing on how diet affects bodily function and brain nutrition, as well as how, over time, if certain supplements are included in our diet, they will help our brain cells.

Day centres for the elderly are important. I am the secretary of a community centre in my parish. It is a key area which allows early contact, social inclusion for our elderly, as well as the possibility for early signs of dementia to be picked up. They also provide activity, stimulus and social interaction for the elderly. It is important these day centres continue to be supported through subvention grants from the Health Service Executive. Many of them would not survive if it were not for these grants and I thank the Minister of State and her Department for providing them.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: I am pleased that within months of just launching the national dementia strategy, we are here welcoming the actual implementation of this programme, as well as the real steps and actions it will include. Politicians have been promising this for decades. Today, we are really seeing progress.

Sadly, we all know people who are living with dementia and Alzheimer's. For many, their lives are changed for ever, beyond recognition of what they once were. They should not feel isolated, alone or unsupported. Families should not feel like they have lost a loved one when that person suffering from dementia is still alive and, in many respects, well and able.

With the correct and sufficient provision of care and supports, people with dementia and

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Alzheimer's can continue to live a normal, happy and safe life in their own communities. It is important people with dementia can continue, when possible, to live within their own communities. This is essential for the continued happiness and well-being of both the person suffering from dementia and their families. Often, the carer of a dementia patient is also an elderly partner.

I am pleased the national dementia strategy implementation programme will represent a substantial combined investment of €27.5 million. This will include the roll-out of a much needed programme of intensive home supports and home-care packages for people with dementia. I urge the Minister to ensure this investment is wisely allocated and correctly used so the best possible outcome for people with dementia and Alzheimer's can be achieved. The welcome effect of this investment should be directly felt by the people and families who to date have felt alone, unsupported and in many cases, unnoticed.

I note this investment will go towards awareness raising, a vital point. Too many people cast dementia off as a symptom and part of their old age, as something that is inevitable and cannot be treated or assisted with. This should not be the case. Help can be sought to support and help a person cope with dementia. The problem is that so little is known about dementia. What are the signs, at what age can it begin, are there ways of preventing it and where can one find information on it? Does one get information from a GP or a district nurse? Is a contact centre or assistance group better as a first call?

Thankfully, this new programme will provide additional dementia specific resources for GPs who are the critical and initial point of contact with the health system for many people. Training materials and guidance on local services and contact points are all vital pieces of information that need to become more widely available and well-known.

Like all conditions, early diagnosis and intervention is key. A timely diagnosis can make the difference in the outcome of a person's life with dementia. This programme will thankfully promote a greater focus on timely diagnosis. By establishing a national dementia office, we are finally giving real and fair recognition of the condition. It will remove the stigma and offers people a point of contact.

I look forward to receiving the final implementation plan due in June and urge the Minister of State not to delay its implementation.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I wish to share time with Deputy Fitzmaurice.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I am grateful for this opportunity to speak on the national dementia strategy, which I welcome. It contains some excellent recommendations, but will it be implemented? When I heard the figure of €27.5 million mentioned, my instinctive reaction was to ask whether it would benefit people. That is the real question and it is something of which I have yet to be convinced. We now have a situation wherein the elderly population, which nowadays means those aged 80 and over, will rise from its current population share of 2.9% to as high as 10.2% in the coming years. We must be prepared for such an increase.

Over the next couple of years, the population of this island will rise to 5.3 million according to the European Commission's ageing strategy report. Sensible planning is therefore essential and we urgently need to proceed with this strategy. In discussing such strategies, however, we

should not con people but rather ensure that everything is done properly.

The hypocrisy of some people in this debate when dealing with these issues must be challenged. As an Independent Member of the Oireachtas, I will always challenge that. For example, this morning we are talking about the dementia strategy while at the same time we have had cuts to services for adults with physical and intellectual disabilities. Nine young adults contacted me this morning from St. Michael's House in that regard.

Yesterday, we learned that Tusla has cut €81,000 from the budget of the Disability Equality Specialist Support Agency, which provides courses and support for families of those with disabilities. I know it is the responsibility of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, but taking €81,000 from an excellent project for adults with disabilities is unacceptable. This is especially so in the current climate when the recovery has started.

An even worse situation arose last week concerning a group of adults with Down's syndrome. They have been doing an excellent educational course in Trinity College, but they are short €1,000 to complete their studies. These sums are not "big bucks", so we need to get our act together. We should not exclude people with disabilities by depriving them of the services they require.

Dementia is characterised by a progressive cognitive impairment and is associated with the impairment of functional abilities and, in many cases, behavioural and psychological symptoms. Many different diseases can produce the symptoms of dementia, but Alzheimer's accounts for the majority of cases and vascular dementia is the second most common sub-type.

Despite the strong association between dementia and old age, it is not solely a disease of the elderly. Significant numbers within the overall dementia population are not old, including, for example, those with Down's syndrome. I am very conscious of this as the parent of a daughter in her mid-20s with Down's syndrome. I am also a former chairperson of the Dublin branch of Down's syndrome Ireland. People with Down's syndrome face an increased risk in this regard, which is something we must plan for in future.

It is estimated that currently there are approximately 4,000 people under the age of 65 with dementia in Ireland. We need to plan for this situation as we can see the challenges ahead. We must also ensure that those with disabilities receive the necessary services, so I hope the €27 million will be spent wisely to provide such facilities. It is unacceptable to cut funding for such services in any inclusive, democratic society.

The OECD and World Bank said recently that gross income inequality is growing. This has to be identified as a serious impediment for future economic growth. We must deal with inequality in our society, particularly when it comes to support services. I welcome the national dementia strategy and hope that it will be implemented because many people need the support of such services.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank Deputy Finian McGrath for sharing time with me. I represent the constituency of Roscommon-South Leitrim. County Leitrim has the highest number of people, *per capita*, with dementia, while County Roscommon has the second highest. The statistics show that our population is ageing and every family has someone, be it a cousin or other relative, who has been touched by dementia. Early intervention is crucial for such people. Clarity is required through diagnosis, as early intervention is so important.

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Towns should be adapted for those with dementia so they can go shopping, for example. There should be a premises in each town where such people could have a cup of tea and feel safe. Community awareness of dementia through education is also required so that townspeople will take care of those affected. In that way, an outlet can be provided for those with dementia. Such a strategy should be pursued in every county in order to facilitate those suffering from dementia, as well as their families.

I intend to make a pre-budget submission on the lines of what happens in Britain where the purchase of facilities and services for dementia sufferers does not incur VAT. I am aware of families that try to keep a parent suffering from dementia at home. One can buy many items, including an electronic wrist-strap that can close a door and prevent it from opening, VAT-free in the UK. We should emulate this novel idea of removing VAT from such items. Such a measure would actually save the State money.

I have met a person in Athlone who designed a house for a dementia sufferer. Such buildings allow those with dementia to remain longer in their family home. We should examine this approach.

It is important to ensure that the public are aware of the difficulties surrounding dementia. I understand that €15 million will be made available to the HSE for the national dementia strategy through Atlantic Philanthropies. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, to ensure that the money is ring-fenced for dementia care. I know it is being matched 50-50, but it should be put to good use.

In this regard, the Minister of State should also look at the west of Ireland, including Roscommon and South Leitrim, where figures for dementia are very high. I urge her to implement pilot dementia projects in the places that are most affected. Dementia sufferers deserve comfort, as do their families.

Debate adjourned.

Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): 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 Timmy Dooley - the need to address accommodation needs of the Gaelscoil in Kilrush, County Clare; (2) Deputy Eamonn Maloney - the need for a two year freeze on private residential rents; (3) Deputy Lucinda Creighton - the miscarriage of justice suffered by Harry Gleeson, executed in 1941; (4) Deputy Terence Flanagan - the need to reduce the burden of child care costs; (5) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the reason for the reduction in funding to the ACCORD pre-marriage course and the implications of its impact; (6) Deputy Seamus Kirk - the need to review assessment of income of guardians in relation to children in guardianship applying for third-level higher education grants; (7) Deputy Brendan Smith - the potential impact on the Good Friday Agreement of any changes to the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into Northern Ireland laws; (8) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the allocation of funds for housing to local authorities; (9) Deputies Mick Wallace and Clare Daly - the decision to resettle refugees here as part of the EU resettlement programme; and (10) Deputy Charlie McConalogue - cuts in funding by the Child and Family Agency to groups that provide support services for children.

The matters raised by Deputies Eamonn Maloney; Mattie McGrath; Terence Flanagan; and Mick Wallace and Clare Daly have been selected for discussion.

12 o'clock

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Reports this morning that the banks will not reduce the variable interest rate on mortgages make for disturbing reading. As the Tánaiste is well aware, there are over 300,000 variable rate mortgage holders in Ireland paying, on average, 2% higher than anywhere else in Europe. That is an extra €4,000 per year that is putting an intolerable burden on many families. If this is not addressed, it will lead to more home owners finding themselves in arrears.

There is a German group of MPs who have been visiting the Houses for the past two days and they are in the Visitors Gallery at the moment. They are members of the Friends of Ireland in the Bundestag and I had the pleasure of meeting them this morning. It would not be an overestimation to say they are somewhat amazed that mortgage holders here are paying 4.5% in interest, as opposed to 2% in Germany. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, met the Governor of the Central Bank on behalf of the Government and expressed its concern at a routine meeting approximately one month ago. The Governor indicated he would prepare a report by June. At the time, the Tánaiste said she believed a levy should be placed on banks if they did not address or reduce the variable interest rates.

Representatives of AIB have come before the finance committee and offered a cut of 0.25%. That is something but it is by no means enough when one considers the extent to which banks are gouging mortgage holders, as the amount they take is well above the cost of funding. Representatives of PTSB were before the finance committee yesterday and, notwithstanding the wishes and views of members of the committee, they retorted with standard banking language, obfuscated their responsibility to the taxpayer and mortgage holders and refused to accept that they were rebuilding their balance sheets on the backs of the 70,000 mortgage holders that they have on their books with a variable interest rate.

Today it is reported that all the Governor of the Central Bank can say to the banks is that it is advisable to reduce the variable rates to head off any political response on the issue. That is a rather weak response from the Governor, who is somebody I respect. It is not the full extent to which the matter should be addressed.

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

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Surely the banks have got the message at this stage if the Government is expressing its message in the way we would have thought. Clearly, they believe this is a cotton wool exercise in the Government's approach and that it is taking a "softly softly" approach. Does the Tánaiste firmly believe the banks should reduce the variable interest rate? Will she address the issue today? Just as importantly, if she believes there should be a reduction, what will the Government do about it? Is it just a matter of waiting until June for the report from the Governor or will the Government address the issue by imposing a levy on the banks?

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They have been given adequate time and they know the concerns - they are real - of the Government. They certainly know the concerns of this side of the House. Will the Tánaiste move quickly to address this matter and make it very clear to the banks that they either act now or the Government will impose a levy on them?

The Tánaiste: I welcome our friends from the Bundestag in Germany. We had a banking collapse, which people know happened on the watch of the Deputy's party and cost the country much money. We are in the process of recovering much of that. Nonetheless, a strong element in the portfolio of lending built up by the banks comprises tracker mortgages on which the banks are losing money. Part of the action of banks in their charges for standard variable rate mortgages is to seek to recover, as the Deputy suggested, costs from the losses incurred with respect to tracker mortgages. No doubt, there may yet be action that could be taken within a European context, with the agreement of our German friends, with regard to the tracker mortgage issue that could provide some relief into the Irish banking system. That is a wider issue and not the subject of the question.

The standard variable rate mortgage rates are excessive in terms of cost and I have said that on a number of occasions. In recent days, the Minister for Finance and the Governor of the Central Bank have met on mortgage issues. I understand that at their meeting, the issue of mortgage interest rates was discussed. There are issues for the banks both with respect to tracker and standard variable rate mortgages. The Governor provided an update to the Minister on the ongoing research that he and his officials are carrying out on the issue of the standard variable rate charges. The Governor and the Minister noted that the standard variable rates charged in Ireland are higher than other euro area countries and have not fallen in line with European Central Bank wholesale rates.

The Central Bank has submitted its research to the Department of Finance and it is expected to be dealt with in the next few days. The Minister, Deputy Noonan, and his officials will review the research ahead of meeting representatives of the six main mortgage lenders in the coming weeks. I have advised the main banks that they need to consider their pricing policies with respect to standard variable rate mortgage holders. If they are not inclined to listen to the difficulties that people are facing as a consequence of their pricing policies, there are other mechanisms of addressing this. I have referenced that before. Given that the Irish taxpayer bailed them out for extraordinary amounts following Fianna Fáil's actions, the banks would be wise to listen to the advice in relation to their pricing policies and to provide better deals for their customers.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Sure, they are not listening.

The Tánaiste: However, they do have a problem in relation to tracker mortgages and anyone who looks at the issue must consider all of the problems faced by the banks.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Tánaiste for her reply and for the history lesson on the economy and how it got there.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: There was no harm in that.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Maybe we can look at a little bit of recent history.

Deputy Niall Collins: It is Frankfurt's way.

Deputy Robert Dowds: It was in case Deputy Dooley was suffering from amnesia.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I doubt that shivers are running down the spines of any bankers based on the response the Tánaiste has given.

Deputy Eamonn Maloney: Was that the bank guarantee?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I do not think bankers feel the Government is about to impose a levy as a result of the approach they have taken in opposition to Government policy. The Tánaiste has, frankly, bought a large supply of the banks' Kool-Aid. The notion that tracker mortgages are the root of all evil is not the case and it would be worth the Tánaiste's while to look into it. If that was the issue, one could turn to the decision that was taken at the EU Council meeting in June 2012, which the Tánaiste and others hailed as seismic and a phenomenal game changer with the potential to resolve much of the legacy issues. Within that, the overhang from the tracker mortgage issue could have been dealt with. However, we discovered here on Tuesday that the Government never even applied to the ESM for funding under that decision as it now believes the banks are resolving the issue without recourse to the ESM. Does the Tánaiste know how the banks are doing it without recourse to the ESM? It is on the backs of the 300,000 variable interest rate mortgage holders in the State. The balance sheets are being repaired and the Government is preparing to sell its stake in the banks all on the backs of those 300,000 mortgage holders. The Government needs to come clean on that. Will the Tánaiste at least reiterate the Government's previous statement to the effect that it is prepared to impose a levy on the banks if they fail to acquiesce to an appropriate rate reduction commensurate with the cost of funds today rather than in the past? That is what we all want to see.

The Tánaiste: Well, Timmy, you seem to be a bit of a Clare Bourbon. I do not know how much Deputy Dooley remembers and how much he has forgotten, but he certainly seems to have learned very little. Ireland needs a banking system that functions properly.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Remember when the Tánaiste was going to burn the bondholders.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Tánaiste is sounding like a banker herself at this stage.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is Frankfurt's way.

The Tánaiste: When we came into office, we faced the depredations of Fianna Fáil which its representatives seem, like the Bourbons in France, to have forgotten completely.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Government has bought the Kool-Aid.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Do not mind the Bourbons; look after the mortgage holders.

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

The Tánaiste: Deputy Dooley is the Clare version of it. Deputy Dooley said he wants a properly functioning banking system.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We do not have it.

The Tánaiste: I am not sure Fianna Fáil is converted to that idea yet, but it is absolutely critical.

Deputy Niall Collins: What is the Government doing about variable rate mortgages? That

is the question.

The Tánaiste: What we have in this country are banks with two particular portfolios of mortgages; tracker mortgages and variable rate mortgages.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Government is four-square behind the banks. The Tánaiste is guaranteeing the banks here today.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is a bankers' charter.

The Tánaiste: I hope some of the bankers are listening. I know Fianna Fáil invited them in when it was in government.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They will be happy with what the Tánaiste is saying anyway.

Deputy Niall Collins: They will be delighted with the Tánaiste.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They will be having a party.

The Tánaiste: The bankers were in there on the evenings the fatal decisions were made that wrecked the banks. That was Fianna Fáil's contribution to what happened. When it comes to the banks, I do not expect them to fetch up being grateful to the Irish people as they seem to have collective amnesia at times.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is spreading to the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: Fianna Fáil arranged a mortgage called the promissory note of €30 billion for this country, which was to be paid within ten years.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Tánaiste was going to burn all the bondholders. Does she remember that?

The Tánaiste: By the way, Fianna Fáil took an interest holiday on the first two years, which were the last two years of its Government, and left us to renegotiate that.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Government is burning the variable mortgage holders.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The only people the Government burned were those who voted for it.

The Tánaiste: When it comes to renegotiating better deals for our taxpayers in relation to banking, we have done so with the promissory notes. People from Fianna Fáil and other parties told us the changes would not work but they have ended up saving the country an enormous amount of money.

Deputy Niall Collins: Talk to the variable mortgage holders.

Deputy Robert Dowds: The Government saved us €9 billion.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We are still paying every penny of it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Bourbons are behind the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: As we resolve this issue with the banks, the people who are paying those rates will receive reductions. If they do not, there are other mechanisms. One of those is a levy, but there are others as well.

Deputy Niall Collins: “The Government does not have the power to direct, but it has the power to influence”. Does the Tánaiste remember that phrase?

The Tánaiste: I am resolved to see that if the banks continue to turn a deaf ear to the discussion that is ongoing, expressed by both the Minister for Finance and the Central Bank, those banks will have to face other consequences.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Yesterday, the Minister for Health told reporters that maternity services may be closed at a number of smaller hospitals. He said this against the backdrop of his visit to Portlaoise and his meeting with bereaved parents who tragically lost newborns there in recent years. This follows his announcement last week of the establishment of a steering group to advise on the development of a national maternity strategy, which is to report by the end of the year. Irrespective of our political views in the House, we are all deeply concerned at the series of tragic outcomes at a number of maternity units across the State, including at Portlaoise and at Cavan in my constituency. Our thoughts are with the grieving parents and their families. We all want to know the full facts as to why these distressing events took place and what must now be done to ensure as far as humanly possible that there are no further such incidents.

I must ask the following in the context of what the Minister for Health said yesterday and repeated this morning at the Joint Committee on Health and Children. It is fuelling further concern and distress at a time when we clearly have not yet got the report of the new steering group. The Minister is being pre-emptive in suggesting the closure of any number of maternity units. Will the Tánaiste undertake to ensure that these sad, tragic and distressing outcomes are not employed to serve a programme of closures which is a long-standing objective of some within our health services? On foot of her position in government, will the Tánaiste ensure instead that all appropriate measures to address the deficiencies and needs identified out of all the reports, some of which have yet to be presented including the one on the Cavan incidents, are acted on or introduced?

The Tánaiste: First, I also express my sympathy with the families who lost children and who very bravely met the Minister over a prolonged period yesterday in Portlaoise. I understand from media reports that they told him their personal stories.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Were you talking to them?

The Tánaiste: It is difficult to contemplate a more distressing scenario for parents than the death of a baby during childbirth or shortly after delivery. It is all the more difficult for women in that I do not think anyone is quite as vulnerable as a woman when she is having a baby. I cannot say enough to express how sorry I am for the families and parents, in particular the mothers, involved. Having heard the distressing news about a further death in Cavan General Hospital and considering what the mother, the parents and the family must be going through, I offer my sympathy.

Before answering Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin’s specific questions, we should be able to agree that the objective ought to be a health policy which focuses on the best health outcomes for mother and baby and the safe delivery of the baby. These babies are very much wanted. The

best outcomes have to be at the core of our approach to maternity services in Ireland. Nothing other than this as a policy will serve women and babies as well as they might be served. It used to be said baby deaths and maternal mortality rates were exceptionally low in Ireland. I do not know the international figures and I am not an expert in the area. However, as almost every woman, mother and father has been shocked, I have been shocked by the repeated reports of deaths associated with maternity services. We need to agree that the best health outcome for mother and baby is the policy we should agree.

In that context, I welcome the decision by the Minister for Health, Deputy Leo Varadkar, to have the national maternity strategy review carried out this year. The strategy will provide the policy to underpin the women and infants health programme. The steering group advising on the strategy met for the first time last week and I understand it had a very useful discussion. The group is made up of people with wide experience, both in terms of personal experience and professional qualifications. That is as it should be. We need to agree that the core of the policy has to be one that promotes the best outcomes for mother and baby.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin has a supplementary question.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It is in total agreement that I take my second opportunity. This has to be the case. We cannot have a pre-emptive and prescriptive addressing of these problems and the Minister for Health's comments yesterday equated to such. For him to suggest in the context of these tragic outcomes that maternity services at a "number" of so-called smaller hospitals may close is the wrong answer, one which was offered before the review group had even commenced its work. His statement undoubtedly fits the agenda of those who are advocates of further centralisation and subscribe to the controlling obstetricians' view of child delivery. I say "controlling" obstetricians rather than obstetricians in general. I do not view expectant mothers as ill - far from it - or in need of consultant care generally. The overwhelming number require the services and support of a midwife or midwives. Nowhere in the eight recommendations made in the report on Portlaoise hospital is there a mention of closure. It is within the gift of the system to address the deficiencies and needs in order to ensure a safe service for women and the child or children they are expecting. That is absolutely what the Tánaiste has said and I agree that it must at all times be the critical focus.

I again appeal to the Tánaiste because I am concerned that an agenda is being oxygenised. She should ensure the assessment process is allowed to finish and not allow those with an agenda to seize the moment and set the scene for the closure of any number of the remaining 19 maternity units across the country. Will she defend the right of women to access a safe service of their choice and not to be pressed against their will into heavily centralised conveyor belt child birthing settings?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for agreeing that the best outcomes for mothers and babies are the key objective. HIQA's Portlaoise hospital report makes eight recommendations, of which I want to pick out two. In terms of the recommendations to the Department of Health, the third is to develop a national maternity strategy. In terms of the recommendations to the HSE, the sixth is to develop a strong clinical network. These are very important recommendations and, in that context, what has happened is that the Minister has developed the group to further develop the national maternity strategy. That is the right approach because people have to sit down and look at where we are now, what are the resources and what will produce the best outcomes. That is good and should be welcomed.

The other recommendation is to develop strong clinical networks. We have a long tradition in maternity services in this country which has been very good in terms of the commitment of the people who work in the services to the health of mothers and babies. They are the obstetricians, the midwives and all others who work in the services and their commitment goes back generations. In the case of Portlaoise hospital, what has happened - perhaps it is something that might be explored in the case of Cavan General Hospital - is that a network has been developed in the context of the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group. The Coombe Women and Infant University Hospital, a recognised international centre of excellence, has, as we all know, a very high number of births annually. We know that there is a correlation, particularly when there are difficulties, between births which offer challenges to the mother or the baby and medical expertise with a high volume of experience. We know this from other areas.

The relationship and protocol established by the Coombe and Portlaoise hospitals make a lot of sense and will have to be resourced. I have had a private conversation with the Minister about the matter. It is a good approach, but it requires resourcing. We know in the case of Portlaoise hospital that there have been significant additional resources. There have also been failures in the practice of what we have come to expect as a people from medical services. Elements of it, including the management issues that arise, are under examination. That is the right way to approach the matter.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I wish to discuss the issue of children. We have had appalling examples of mistreatment of children in the past. We had the Magdalen laundries, the industrial schools and mother and baby homes. We have seen abuse in families, by members of the clergy and in swimming circles. The children involved were deprived of innocence, laughter and fun, all of which should be associated with childhood. We have had commissions, reports and inquiries. While life is better for the majority of children today, I can guarantee that in 20, 30 or 40 years time we will have reports, inquiries and commissions to deal with the way certain children are treated today. I am talking about children in homeless and direct provision accommodation. We are told that one third of all asylum seekers in those conditions are children. They can be there for anything between one and seven years. The recent first quarter report by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive was disturbing. While there is movement out of homelessness, there is an increase in the number of people becoming homeless. For example, there has been a 62% increase in the number of children in homeless services since June.

Neither set of children is living in a natural family environment. There are issues around safety, living in confined spaces and food, given the fact that the children are reliant on fast food with high fat content levels. We know of the country's difficulties with obesity. There is no space to play and there is a lack of stability, as the children are being moved from one homeless accommodation to another. More displacement is expected because we are approaching the high tourism season.

There are also issues with schools. Either children must travel long distances to their original schools or they must move schools. One can imagine a child entering a new school, being asked where he or she lives and replying that it is in the bed and breakfast or hotel down the road. There is a stigma. We are storing up severe psychological, emotional and personal developmental difficulties for these children.

Recently, the Children's Rights Alliance awarded the Government a C on the question of children. Two days ago, the European Commission repeated its call for Government action on child poverty and child care. Will the issue of homelessness, particularly as it relates to children

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in inappropriate settings, be viewed as an emergency of great urgency before more damage is done to the children of this country?

Deputy Finian McGrath: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy knows, the Government has committed to probably the largest ever investment in social housing because most of the families to which she referred would be interested in obtaining social housing as the solution to their housing issues.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Some €300 million.

The Tánaiste: That programme is under way. Councils have been given allocations and I want to see them starting work on the programme as soon as possible. In addition, the number of voided properties for which councils were given funding in recent years, including this year, should result in an extra 1,000 units being available this year-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Not worth a penny.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is not enough.

The Tánaiste: -----depending in particular on the co-operation and level of activity of Dublin City Council. If we can increase supply significantly, be it through reopening and refurbishing voided properties or building new properties as fast as we can and looking for co-operation, which we are getting, from the voluntary housing associations in making additional housing provision, this will be the greatest relief to the problems experienced by families at risk of homelessness.

Given the fact that we have a significant number of families in rented accommodation, I initiated - it was actually last June on a formal basis but happened some months before that - the protocol for dealing with families who were at risk of losing their rental accommodation. If anyone of whom the Deputy or any other Deputy is aware-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: Lots.

The Tánaiste: -----is at risk of homelessness because his or her lease might be coming to an end or the landlord has made an approach about raising the rent, causing the person concern, I am asking people in that situation and public representatives to get people to go to the community welfare services of the Department of Social Protection. We have already negotiated, in conjunction with quite a number of voluntary organisations such as Threshold and the Simon Communities, the renewal of leases or the sourcing of other accommodation for those families. I think-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: There is no accommodation.

The Tánaiste: We have already-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: There is none. Representatives of Focus Ireland were in Leinster House yesterday. If the Tánaiste had listened to them-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Tánaiste: Can I just say-----

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Some 4,500 agreements.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: -----she would have heard that we were in a crisis.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: For God's sake. The Tánaiste would want to wake up.

The Tánaiste: Can I just say that we have already this year negotiated 4,500-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I can show the Tánaiste the figures.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am sorry, but the Tánaiste has the floor.

The Tánaiste: Would Deputy Ellis do me the courtesy of listening?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I will not listen to spoofing.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Tánaiste is not listening.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Deputy Ellis left a fair few families in crisis.

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

The Tánaiste: We have already negotiated 4,500 rental agreements for families under the Department of Social Protection.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Forty families per month are becoming homeless, in case the Tánaiste does not know.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, order.

The Tánaiste: Sorry, but I am just going to repeat the figures. We have already negotiated this year 4,500 rentals through the rent supplement scheme. Deputy Ellis should not be saying to people that their only alternative is to register as homeless.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I have not said that.

The Tánaiste: He should get them to go to the community welfare service-----

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: The community welfare officers-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: They have no alternatives.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Excuse me, but this is Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan's question.

The Tánaiste: -----where they will be helped to negotiate.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Hear, hear.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The crisis is out of control. Has the Tánaiste not copped on?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste to conclude, please.

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Deputy Paul Kehoe: You left a fair few families in crisis, Deputy Ellis.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan's question.

The Tánaiste: I want to address-----

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Does Deputy Ellis have anything to say about Priory Hall?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Tánaiste does not know what she is on about with her high bleeding tactics.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could we settle down, please?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: What about Deputy Ellis's friends in Priory Hall?

Deputy Dinny McGinley: What about the likes of Priory Hall?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: No friends there.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste has the floor. Could we settle down, please?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Deputy Ellis has gone very quiet all of a sudden.

The Tánaiste: I want to address Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan's question. There are two ways of helping families at risk of becoming homeless. I think that there is agreement across this House that that is a major priority. The first is to increase supply, build houses-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: In 2016.

The Tánaiste: -----and get houses for lease or rent for families that need housing. We are doing that.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Government is not.

The Tánaiste: Already this year, we have negotiated 4,500-----

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Does Deputy Ellis apologise to the people of-----

The Tánaiste: -----rental arrangements funded by rent supplement.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Deputy O'Donovan would know about the builders.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Deputy Ellis would know about the demolitions boys. He demolished enough.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Quiet, please.

The Tánaiste: What I want to say to Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan is that people having to register as homeless should be the absolute last resort. It is extraordinarily and exceptionally difficult for families that move into temporary accommodation such as hotels to look after their children properly. We want families with children in homes that they can call their own and where they do not need to be in a hotel or hostel-type environment. I agree with the Deputy that it is a very difficult situation for the children. It is an even more difficult situation for the

parents looking after them and attending to them.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: I wish to highlight a number of other aspects by referring to a home of which I know that has been providing accommodation for women who have been abused or made the difficult journey out of addiction and into recovery. Fifteen women live in the house. Incidentally, it is in danger of losing some of its funding. Between the 15 women, there are 11 children who are in care. The women are now in a position to take their children out of care and back into a family home, but they do not have accommodation. This is another group of children who are badly affected by our housing crisis. Perhaps the motive for those women who are on their recovery journeys out of addiction is to get their children back. Seventeen year olds and 18 year olds are coming out of care for whom the HSE cannot access accommodation.

I am involved with another group that works in the Dublin area with homeless women who are pregnant or have just had their babies. The group is receiving repeated calls from maternity hospitals about taking women in, but it only has one set of premises. One of the women who has been there for a number of months is ready to move on, but there is nowhere for her to go. She is depriving someone with a newborn in the maternity hospital of a place with the group. A woman from Kildare with a premature baby cannot get anyone in Kildare to accept rent supplement. She is seeking a place in the house in Dublin.

There are 21 supported accommodation places for pregnant women or women with babies in Dublin who are homeless. We have children in care because of homelessness. This statistic is not being taken into account. If we examined the cost of foster care as opposed to the cost of providing homes for people, there would probably be a cost saving. Under the Constitution, our State guarantees protection for the family. The family is “indispensable to the welfare of the Nation”. I listened to all that the Tánaiste stated. In time, those solutions will make a difference. In the meantime, though, the reality for those in emergency accommodation like bed and breakfasts and hotels, particularly children and the other groups that I mentioned, is appalling.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: So far this year through the Department of Social Protection there have been 4,500 negotiated rent agreements in respect of which we are paying a rent supplement to new families and individuals. The rent supplement provision is a very important service for families.

Deputy Finian McGrath: It is important that the Tánaiste answer the question.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy and her colleague beside her were members of Dublin City Council. Dublin City Council has had the practice of closing large volumes of accommodation units when they become vacant. Local authorities have been heavily resourced by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, by the then Minister of State with responsibility, Deputy Jan O’Sullivan, and more recently by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly, to bring these back into use.

In the case of a number of the families about whom the Deputy is speaking, accommodation where the empty properties have been redone are in locations where there is other council housing and they would be highly acceptable, as I know and the Deputy knows, to many of the people concerned provided they come on stream as fast as Dublin City Council can do that. Through the protocol with the housing organisations and the support services, we have made provision for up to 1,500 agreements. In addition, across a range of local authorities new

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people coming in get the housing assistance payment, HAP. That is also working.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy spoke specifically about women rehabilitating out of drug addiction or some other form of addiction and I ask her to give me the specific details. The community welfare service works specifically with the homeless services in the HSE and the different local authorities, particularly Dublin City Council. If the Deputy can give me details of some of those I will ask the community welfare service to see if it can give any additional support.

Order of Business

The Tánaiste: It is proposed to take No. *a*10, motion re referral to joint committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Companies Act 2014 (Section 1313) Regulations 2015; No. *b*10, motion re referral to select sub-committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the terms of the Statute of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA); and No. 35, statements on the implementation of the national dementia strategy (resumed). It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that Nos. *a*10 and *b*10 shall be decided without debate; and in the event No. 35 concludes before 2 p.m., Topical Issues shall be taken at 2 p.m.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are two proposals to put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with No. *a*10, motion re referral to joint committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Companies Act 2014 (Section 1313) Regulations 2015 and No. *b*10, motion re referral to select sub-committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the terms of the Statute of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) without debate agreed to? Agreed.

Is the proposal for dealing with Topical Issues today agreed to? Agreed.

I call Deputy Dooley on the Order of Business.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What is happening about next week?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have nothing here before me.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Normally on Thursday we find out. The rumour is that we will only be here for one day.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have called Deputy Dooley.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Can we get some clarification?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will deal with the Order of Business now and we will come back.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The House collapsed yesterday. The House has collapsed for hours three times in the past three weeks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does the Deputy wish to be called?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: With the committee and other work, we have no Dáil here for three or four hours every week. It is a farce. Now we are getting rumours that there is nothing

happening next week.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Was the Deputy here yesterday?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I was here.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have called Deputy Dooley. I will call Deputy Mattie McGrath if he wishes to be called.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What is happening next week? I ask for clarification. It could fall apart again.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Quiet, please.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government needs to get its fingers out.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: At least we do not get gangs after people.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we have order please. I call Deputy Dooley.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I do not know what the Minister of State is insinuating about gangs after people. I ask the Leas-Cheann Comhairle to have him withdraw it, please. I do not know what you are insinuating about gangs after me or getting gangs after everyone.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy McGrath-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Will he withdraw that remark, please?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I cannot hear everything.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Will he withdraw that remark, please?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I heard no remark. I have called Deputy Dooley.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am sure the Clerk heard it. We all heard it. I want him to withdraw it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am trying to listen to Deputy Dooley.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On a point of order, I want the remark about getting gangs after people withdrawn.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not know what was said.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I was never involved in any such activity. He might have been with the Blueshirts.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay. All right.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: No, it is not all right.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Dooley.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: No. I want it withdrawn, please.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have not-----

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Deputy Mattie McGrath: You can check with the Clerk later.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Excuse me-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We all heard it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If there is disorder in the House I cannot hear what is going on. There was disorder-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There were clear remarks. A very serious insinuation was made against my character.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will listen to the tape and we will go back to the Deputy on that. I call Deputy Dooley.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I had expected that we would hear about next week's order, but obviously that will be raised on Tuesday and we will deal with it in the normal course.

On the public sector standards Bill, a Bill from the Department of Finance, is the Tánaiste aware of a submission on the national minimum wage made by Department of Finance officials to the Low Pay Commission, which is due to deliberate shortly? As she is aware, the Department of Finance has warned that there are serious risks surrounding the increase in the national minimum wage. The submission stated:

The combination of a too-high cost base and a collapse in global demand had severe consequences for Ireland from 2008 on ... this suggests the need for a 'competitiveness buffer' to allow the economy absorb potential adverse shocks with as little impact on employment as possible.

The Department calls for a system to allow the minimum wage to be reduced in the future. Did the Tánaiste have sight of that report before it went to the commission? Was it discussed at the Economic Management Council, which generally now steers all matters relating to the economy through the Cabinet? On its submission, does it have the Tánaiste's full support?

The Tánaiste: I am a bit shocked that Deputy Dooley seems to be so resoundingly in favour of the caution expressed by the Department of Finance about improving the minimum wage. I know Fianna Fáil reduced the minimum wage previously but I thought it might have changed its policy to recognise that as the economy progressed, low-paid workers should be in a position to benefit. That is why I have championed it. The proposal for the Low Pay Commission originated from my involvement in the election campaign for the leadership of the Labour Party.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: So the Tánaiste does not support this recommendation.

The Tánaiste: I am surprised at the Deputy's tone-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I am just asking.

The Tánaiste: -----in praising the Department of Finance proposing to cut the minimum wage. I am shocked that Fianna Fáil would propose that.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I did not praise; I asked the Tánaiste if it had her support.

The Tánaiste: There was a glowing approving tone in his voice. He just said that its recom-

mendation was his recommendation.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: No I did not.

The Tánaiste: I am shocked. There will be Fianna Fáil people throughout the country desperately shocked at this.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Tánaiste should look at the transcript.

The Tánaiste: When I was appointed Minister-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Is the Tánaiste on the Economic Management Council?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please now-----

The Tánaiste: -----I made it my first job to reinstate the minimum wage. Fianna Fáil cut €1 an hour off it. Not since Ernest Blythe have we heard of anything as cruel done to very poor people as was done by Fianna Fáil on the minimum wage.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Tánaiste did not share the cruelty.

The Tánaiste: I hear the Deputy now declaiming for the Department of Finance. Not a lot in politics surprises me, but this does. It was with regret that I heard it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste. Was there another issue?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Leave Timmy alone.

The Tánaiste: Let me say-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He cannot ask that now.

The Tánaiste: Let me say-----

A Deputy: He does not have a supplementary.

The Tánaiste: Let me say that the Low Pay Commission has been established to receive submissions from parties that wish to make submissions.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: This submission was from the Department of Finance.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy obviously supports the submission of the Department of Finance-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I am asking the Tánaiste whether she supports it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sorry, another nine Deputies have to ask questions.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Does the Tánaiste support it?

The Tánaiste: I repeat that if the Low Pay Commission makes a recommendation to increase low pay and the current minimum wage, I will be giving that recommendation my support.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Does the Tánaiste support the Department of Finance?

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The Tánaiste: I hope to see it implemented. The Department of Finance's submission is a matter for it-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Was it approved by the Economic Management Council?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are not having a debate.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: If she answered the question, we would not have-----

The Tánaiste: The Department of Finance is entitled to have a view and express that view; we are not living in a dictatorship. Had the Deputy sought its views during the bank crash, when I believe it got a lot of things wrong-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Did the Tánaiste support some of those?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have to call the next speaker.

The Tánaiste: It is entitled to its views.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ó Caoláin.

The Tánaiste: I hope Deputy Dooley will support an increase in-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Our submission already does. I am just concerned about the Government's. Times change, as the Tánaiste knows.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Try harder.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I want an update on two promised Bills, the Health Act 2007 (amendment) Bill, which is to extend HIQA's remit in a number of areas, including the setting and monitoring of standards of private and independent health care providers. The second is the patient safety (licensing) Bill, to provide for the mandatory system of licensing for public and private health care facilities.

The Tánaiste: I do not have a date for either of those important Bills.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Is there an update on their preparation?

The Tánaiste: There is a lot of work ongoing but I do not have an update. That would really be a question for the line Minister.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: Yesterday afternoon I was privileged to meet at an Oireachtas Members briefing a number of representatives from the Heritage Council. At the event, I was asked on a number of occasions about the new regulations that are being proposed for national archaeological heritage. In this regard, when can we expect the new national monuments Bill to be brought before the House for debate?

The Tánaiste: I anticipate that it will be later this year.

Deputy Brendan Smith: The Government has promised to introduce, as soon as possible, some legislative measures following on from the Stormont House Agreement. As the Tánaiste is aware, the Conservative Party, in its manifesto before the UK election, promised that if re-

elected to government, it would scrap the Human Rights Act. If such a development takes place, it would break the formal link between the British courts and European Court of Human Rights, and it would have very serious negative consequences for the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. As we all know, the Good Friday Agreement was endorsed in referenda in both the North and South in May 1998 and it was ratified by the British Parliament. It is an international treaty lodged with the United Nations and both the Irish and British Governments are co-guarantors of it. In the section of the Agreement guaranteeing the rights of minorities, the British Government specifically committed to “complete incorporation into Northern Ireland law of the European Convention on Human Rights [...], with direct access to the courts, and remedies for breach of the Convention, including power for the courts to overrule Assembly legislation on grounds of inconsistency”. Can the Tánaiste assure us that the Government will convey to the British Government in very strong terms that we will not tolerate any diminution in the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement and that the Irish people and, I am sure, the British want to see the full implementation of it, the St. Andrews Agreement and other relevant agreements that followed on from it? Our Parliament and Government need to convey a very strong message to the British Government that there can be no unpicking of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Tánaiste: I agree with the statements made during the British general election that potential changes, if implemented by the new British Government, could have significant implications for the Belfast Agreement and other agreements negotiated between the British and Irish Governments. The peace process and how it has developed are important both for the United Kingdom, the Republic and, most of all, the people of Northern Ireland, who have seen a period of peace as a consequence of the Agreement. Therefore, any proposals that would affect key elements of the Agreement have great significance for everybody on this island but also the United Kingdom itself. In that context, contact is ongoing between the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Charlie Flanagan, the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock, the parties in the North and London, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who has renewed her tenure of office. There is constant contact and there will be contact between the Taoiseach and the newly elected British Prime Minister in the near future. These matters are very important.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The programme for Government included a commitment to introduce new freedom of information legislation, and it was introduced. My understanding is that it also allows for a review of the legislation. I have submitted freedom of information requests to the Department of Finance but must say I am really unhappy with the way the legislation is playing out. I was due to receive responses at about the same time as a journalist received responses to the same questions. Two weeks later, I got the exact same information. I am awaiting other material that is overdue by weeks. I have gone through the appropriate channels, making the complaints, but the information is not being provided to me. I am not being given an explanation. It is completely unsatisfactory. Will the Tánaiste consider strengthening the legislation if there is evidence that it is not working? If there is such evidence, will she carry out a review before the term of this Government has concluded?

The Tánaiste: We have just strengthened, expanded and restored very significantly the remit of the Freedom of Information Act. I am not aware of the details of what the Deputy is complaining about. I will certainly refer her remarks to the Minister for Finance for comment and a reply.

It is important to have a more open information society in which as much information as possible would be published rather than requiring people to request information solely through

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the freedom of information legislation. This is reflected in Government policy. I do not know about the specific incident to which the Deputy is referring. As I said, I will refer it to the Minister for Finance for further comment and a reply.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask all Members to be brief as many are offering to contribute.

Deputy James Bannon: Right across the country, the electoral register continues to cause serious problems, particularly for individuals voting in both elections and referenda. They find that their names are missing on the register although they have lived in an area all their lives. There are incorrect names on the register and people who are deceased for three or four years. This is not good enough.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Deputy asking about legislation?

Deputy James Bannon: The establishment of an electoral commission needs to be fast-tracked. This was promised in the programme for Government. The electoral commission Bill, No. 84, is to provide for the establishment of an electoral commission. Can that be fast-tracked?

The Tánaiste: Let me first refer to the difficulties with the electoral register. If people are denied their vote, it is a very serious issue. The matter has been referred to the environment committee for it to examine it and report as soon as possible.

The Cabinet published a consultation document on the electoral commission proposal. Obviously, that will form part of the preparation of the legislation.

I o'clock

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The national disability equality specialist support agency, DESSA, is being forced to close its core services due to the sudden announcement by Tusla that it will no longer fund DESSA to deliver essential front-line services and supports to the families of disabled children nationwide. This is a disgraceful cut which will have a dramatic negative effect on these people. DESSA is calling for a meeting with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy James Reilly, to discuss the immediate reversal of this decision.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The matter does not arise on the Order of Business.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It arises under the child care (amendment) Bill.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Has the Tánaiste a reply on that issue?

The Tánaiste: I suggest a detailed question such as that is a matter for the line Minister in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: You are the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: In relation to the budget of Tusla which is charged with protecting the welfare, safety and positive development of children, if the Deputy wants to ask detailed questions he should put them to the Minister who is in charge of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Mar is eol don Tánaiste, tá gealltanas i gclár reachtaíochta an Rialtais go ndéanfar athbhreithniú ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla. An bhféadfadh an Tánaiste

a cur in iúl dúinn cén uair an bhfuil sí ag súil go mbeidh an Bille sin á fhoilsiú?

The Tánaiste: Beidh sé á fhoilsiú sa seisiún seo.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: The Government recently published the legislation to enact the dissolution of the Dublin Docklands Development Authority. Can the Tánaiste give an indication as to when it will be taken in the House?

The Tánaiste: The Bill has been published. I would hope it will be taken as soon as possible.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: Last week I asked about the Istanbul Convention to prevent violence against women. I also raised the issue of the domestic violence Bill which is promised in the legislative programme. At that time the Tánaiste was not able to tell us what the Government would do in respect of the Istanbul convention and she did not have a timeline for the domestic violence Bill. Has she been able to ascertain what progress has been made on either of those two important issues?

The Tánaiste: I think the Deputy received a written reply in respect of last week's questions. If not, I will have it resent to the Deputy. In respect of the second item, I do not have a date as yet for the taking of the domestic violence legislation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I again ask that you check the records regarding the Whip's comments.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish to raise two items. In regard to the electoral commission Bill, I ask the Tánaiste if she is aware, as I am sure she is, that the Labour Party has hundreds of posters up without proper identification.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That issue does not arise now.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It arises under the electoral commission Bill. Somebody has to control this. If there are rules they have to be observed by all people and all practitioners of politics. There is no identification on hundreds of the posters as regards where they are printed or published. Under the Regulation of Lobbying Bill what will the Government do to reign in the outrageous lobbying and funding by Atlantic Philanthropies of groups such as the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, €7 million, Amnesty International Ireland, €5 million-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is a Bill on lobbying.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: A lobbying Bill has been promised. Tusla, €8 million and GLEN, €7 million, a total of €24 million, which has been pumped into these organisations who are all campaigning for a Yes vote. It is total inference in our democratic system and is unacceptable in any democracy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We cannot have a debate. What is the position in respect of the lobbying Bill?

The Tánaiste: The Regulation of Lobbying Bill has been enacted.

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Deputy Mattie McGrath: Why does the Tánaiste not implement it? Surely the Tánaiste is aware that displaying Labour Party posters without any identification is breaking the law.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Communications has not gone to Tipperary yet.

The higher education Bill proposes to modernise the legislative framework underpinning the governance and functioning of the Higher Education Authority and governance structures of the universities. When is it expected the Bill will come before the House? Have the heads of the Bill been cleared? Will it be in the current year? Has the petroleum, exploration and extraction and safety (amendment) Bill to transpose EU directives on safety of offshore oil and gas exploration been cleared?

The Tánaiste: In relation to the petroleum legislation, the heads of the Bill were cleared in March, and in respect of the education legislation, the heads of the Bill are being drafted as we speak.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I wish to raise two issues. The Tánaiste is busy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has the floor.

The Tánaiste: I apologise.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I and quite a number of Members, including Members on the Government benches, are increasingly concerned at an apparent lack of interest and a loss of a sense of urgency on the part of the Government leadership to bring forward the gambling control and regulations Bill, including Internet betting and gambling. It is an extremely serious situation that has been allowed to be ignored. We have got voids in the schedule of business today and next week and if there was a real will to do something about this it could easily be brought forward.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does the Deputy wish to know when it will be taken?

Deputy Peter Mathews: This is legislation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does the Deputy want to know when it will be taken?

Deputy Peter Mathews: In racing parlance it appears that this legislation has been pulled up.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has a second item.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I would like to support the Tánaiste's colleague, Deputy Willie Penrose, and ask the Government to take a leaf out of his pragmatic, intelligent approach apropos of proposed legislation that bankruptcy should be all tidied up within a year.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I explained to the Taoiseach when he said there are credit unions and smaller suppliers to people who are bankrupt and three years is needed to tidy it up, that that is like saying somebody is only a little bit dead. When one is bankrupt, one is bankrupt and it means one tidies it all up faster.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call on the Tánaiste to respond.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The Tánaiste is a chartered accountant and she should know this.

The Tánaiste: I am delighted to hear the Deputy has such confidence in chartered accountants and in accountants generally. I am not sure everybody else in the House would have that confidence.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The Tánaiste should speak for herself.

The Tánaiste: In relation to Deputy Willie Penrose's valuable legislation in respect of the bankruptcy period, that legislation will be examined in some depth by the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform. The Deputy will be aware that in terms of the measures announced yesterday we will shortly have legislation on an examinership process in respect of people who are at risk in terms of their family home and a deal with the bank. Given the Deputy's experience as an accountant of many years' standing he will be aware that the examinership process should be in a position to help couples seriously to reach a sustainable agreement to ensure they can stay in their homes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: And in respect of the gambling legislation?

The Tánaiste: I do not have a date for the gambling legislation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That concludes the Order of Business.

Companies Act 2014 (Section 1313): Referral to Joint Committee

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Companies Act 2014 (Section 1313) Regulations 2015,

copies of which have been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 8 May 2015, be referred to the Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, in accordance with Standing Order 82A(4)(j), which, not later than 28 May 2015, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 87, and Standing Order 86(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Statute of the International Renewable Energy Agency: Referral to Select Committee

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the terms of the Statute of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), done at Bonn, Germany on 26 January 2009, a copy of which was laid before the Dáil on 6 May 2015, be referred to the Select Sub-Committee on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, in accordance with Standing Order 82A(3)(b) and (6)(a), which, not later than 28 May 2015, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 87, and Standing Order 86(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Implementation of National Dementia Strategy: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I welcome the opportunity to speak about the implementation of the national dementia strategy which was launched in December of last year and is delivering on a commitment in the programme for Government to develop and implement a national strategy for Alzheimer's disease and other conditions. The strategy has been designed to increase awareness, thereby ensuring early diagnosis and intervention. It has also been designed to ensure enhanced and improved community-based services will be developed. It is a stated aim of the strategy that people suffering from dementia will continue to live in their own communities and live active, healthy lives.

The strategy lays down a number of key principles, including the need to take account of dementia in the implementation of existing and future health policies. People suffering from dementia will be encouraged to participate in society and their own communities as fully as possible for as long as possible. End of life care for those suffering from dementia will be prioritised and provided in the most appropriate settings. All those caring and providing services for people suffering from dementia should be fully trained and supervised. Resources should be directed to provide the best possible outcome for those suffering from dementia, their families and carers.

I am delighted to note that the HSE and the Department of Health have agreed a joint initiative with Atlantic Philanthropies in order that significant elements of the strategy can be implemented during the period 2014 to 2017. I commend all parties involved in this initiative which will see €27.5 million invested in the national dementia strategy implementation programme. I would like to see more such initiatives in the future. I note that a national office has been established and will be dedicated to overseeing implementation of the strategy. A general manager and a senior project manager have been appointed. I also note that a draft implementation plan has been developed and was recently presented for discussion at the first meeting of the monitoring group and that a final plan will be presented in June. It is welcome that governance arrangements have been established, a monitoring group is in place and that its membership and terms of reference have been agreed. I urge all parties involved in this process to keep up the good work and ensure the plan is implemented as soon as possible.

Alzheimer's disease and dementia affect families all over Ireland. I know only too well the difficulties faced by the families and friends of those suffering from dementia. It can be very difficult to watch a loved one suffer the effects of dementia. I take the opportunity to mention some of the wonderful services being provided in my constituency. The Birches Alzheimer Day Centre, Priorland Road, Dundalk was opened in June 2000 and is a great example of how a community can come together to provide worthwhile services for people suffering from Alzheimer's disease and dementia. I must also mention the Birches Alzheimer Day Centre, Rath Abbey, Carlingford and the Drogheda day care centre at St. Laurence's Gate. There are some brilliant support groups in operation, including the Drogheda support group and the Dundalk support group. The Netwell Memory Clinic is available on the third Thursday of every month as part of the Alzheimer's café initiative. It is an excellent service which provides a warm and welcoming space for dementia sufferers, their families and friends, as well as social and health care professionals to meet on a monthly basis to exchange ideas.

I praise the work done to date in the implementation of the national dementia strategy by all those involved. I encourage them to continue their good work to ensure the plan will be fully implemented as soon as possible.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, on her work in the provision of mental health support and identifying strategic expenditure in an area that was neglected for a very long time. She should also be complimented on her personal commitment to dealing with the issue and her very detailed knowledge of the subject. As is the case in any area, knowledge of a subject is of enormous help in identifying ways to deal with a problem, from which commitment follows on. Long may the Minister of State continue her work in this area.

All Deputies have dealt with families who have been affected by dementia. One issue that has come to my attention recently concerns the age range of persons affected by dementia. In some cases, very young people have been afflicted by it, by which their families are taken aback and shocked. In that context, I must refer to the importance of identifying best practice in so far as possible, not necessarily with a view to prevention but to at least addressing the issues that seem to cause dementia. The Minister of State identified some of them and they are important in the context of what must be done.

It was brought to my attention some time ago that omega 3 had been hailed as an important element in a person's diet, but it was then discovered to be carcinogenic. As Deputies, we cannot advise on such an issue because we do not have the information required to give a considered opinion. In that context, I ask that all relevant information that would be of help to those who wish to follow a dietary regime that is complementary to good mental and physical health be put into the public domain. This is particularly important for those families with a history of dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

Mention was made of the importance of exercise. It is important that people realise adequate exercise does not mean running ten miles every morning. We all need a reasonable amount of exercise which has been proved, beyond doubt, to be an essential part of a healthy lifestyle, with a healthy diet. A good diet and sufficient exercise will ensure the brain and the body will remain active and work well together. In the context of the promotion of the proposals contained in the national dementia strategy, I ask the Minister of State to ensure the best advice is made available to the general public through the widest variety of media outlets. This will allow people to take whatever action is necessary to improve their health.

I compliment the Alzheimer Society of Ireland on its work. A long time ago I sat on a health board and a colleague was one of the first to bring Alzheimer's disease to attention. He spread the word in a very simple and meaningful way. He spoke about having the illness and the fact that it would not go away. In bringing the disease to the attention of the general public he did a great service, particularly in identifying the early stages of dementia. This was very influential in the formation of the health policy the Minister of State has brought to the fore and is implementing.

A great deal more remains to be done, a point on which I know the Minister of State agrees with me. In that context, great commitment at ministerial level is required. It is crucial that a diagnosis is made at the earliest possible stage and that dementia associated illnesses are dealt with in a meaningful way. From time to time we hear about behaviour that appears to be at variance with the normal behaviour of individuals with whom we are familiar. That seems to

indicate a change in their mental attitudes which requires early attention in terms of medication or other treatment. We have all dealt with people whose relatives have shown sudden signs of aggression or behaviour that is out of character. It is not always easy to access suitable treatment or diagnostic services. I hope we can put in place the measures necessary to allow us to identify at an early stage behaviour that gives rise to concern among family members. In some cases, an early diagnosis can prevent loss of life or the onslaught of an illness.

I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, on the commitment she has shown on this issue. I recognise, however, that the magnitude of the issue will continue to grow for some time.

Deputy Tom Fleming: Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, accounting for 60% to 80% of cases. Its onset is most common in individuals aged 65 years and older, although people in their 40s and 50s can also develop early onset Alzheimer's disease. Although it is one of the leading causes of death, there is, unfortunately, no way to prevent it, cure it or slow its progression. Extensive research carried out in recent years, particularly in the USA, has produced some promising medical advances and drug trials, but we have not yet seen a successful breakthrough formula.

Approximately 36 million people live with dementia worldwide. In Ireland an estimated 50,000 people are likely to have dementia. It is likely that the incidence of dementia will increase significantly in the future given our ageing population. We need to plan services in a strategic and coherent manner and in so doing we can learn from countries that have well developed policies and national strategies. The national dementia strategy is a major step forward in the delivery of services and supports and emphasises that most dementia patients can continue to live well and participate in their communities. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, on her contribution to the development of the strategy. I acknowledge her commitment and that of the Minister for Health to rolling out the strategy at the earliest opportunity.

The Department of Health, the HSE and Atlantic Philanthropies have pledged funding for an investment programme of intensive home supports, home care packages and dementia specific resources for GPs who are crucial as a first point of contact. I also welcome the measures aimed at raising public awareness, addressing stigma and promoting inclusion and involvement in society. It is important that we implement all elements of the strategy in an urgent timeframe. In the light of the gradual improvement in the economy and Exchequer returns, it is imperative that we prioritise the roll-out of the strategy, with delivery of the action plan for GPs to access specialist services. Early detection and diagnosis are crucial for patients. Staff training and development programmes for carers and emergency department staff are important in this regard.

It is estimated that approximately 26,000 dementia patients are living at home with the help of family carers. Evaluations suggest the number of family care givers to dementia patients is as high as 50,000. These care givers are central to the community care system but few of them receive financial compensation from the State by way of a carer's allowance or social welfare benefits. It is not easy work, but it is a labour of love for the individuals concerned. They need more recognition, support and relief for this intensive work. Families also want to be more closely involved in the process of caring, including making decisions about the services needed to help them in their care giving roles. In the absence of the required level of community care supports, a key element of the strategy will be a more formal partnership between family care givers and the institutional system of care. Families face a heavy burden in providing care

around the clock and preventing their relatives from being placed in long-term care institutions prematurely. Patients are more comfortable within the home environment where this is possible. We should strive to ensure this will continue for as long as possible, with support from community and health services.

Evidence from other countries suggests a significant proportion, up to 25%, of older people admitted to hospitals have dementia, but we lack reliable data for the prevalence of dementia in Irish hospitals. As dementia is often hidden in the community, it may remain undetected following admission to hospital. Even when older people are admitted through accident and emergency departments, dementia is often overlooked in assessments. This is a cause of concern because the reasons given for admitting patients with dementia are often other age related complaints rather than the patient's social circumstances such as a breakdown of care giving arrangements. The hospital experience can be frightening and disturbing for an individual with dementia who needs a consistent and stable environment that reinforces self-identity and personhood. The hospital setting, with its multiple and competing stimuli, is far from ideal for patients suffering from severe cognitive impairment. General hospital staff do not always have the necessary skills and expertise to provide dementia care. One Irish study revealed that only 5% of junior hospital staff had received dementia care training in recent years. Caring for patients suffering from dementia who exhibit challenging behaviour such as aggression, paranoia, hallucinations or sleep disturbance can be particularly difficult for hospital staff.

Once admitted to hospital, people with dementia often have worse outcomes than older people without that affliction. Evidence suggests the length of stay of dementia patients in hospitals is longer and costlier and that patients are more likely to be discharged to a residential care setting. These patients are also known to have a higher rate of other illnesses and higher mortality rates and they often acquire new dependencies as a result of being inactive for prolonged periods.

In other countries, including Scotland, the United States and Australia, innovative approaches have been adopted towards the care and treatment of people with dementia in hospitals. These include the development of dementia champion programmes, which include the appointment of specialist staff within the hospital with a dementia remit. These are qualified staff who take ownership of patients with dementia in hospitals and who help raise awareness of dementia and encourage a more person-centred approach to care. Other approaches used internationally include outreach and community based specialist dementia services which reduce the risk of hospital admission for people. There are many reasons hospital staff should be aware of whether patients have dementia, not least the fact that patients admitted with dementia are at an increased risk of developing delirium. A dementia champion programme in general hospitals would facilitate more awareness of dementia care in such a challenging environment.

There is a need to develop better hospital patient information systems that will yield data that will more accurately reflect admissions, readmissions, length of stay and discharge of people with dementia from hospitals. We need a major review of the care of patients with dementia in general hospitals in Ireland. We also need more awareness of the signs of dementia, which are often not very visible. Specific training should be provided for staff in that regard. Staff should be upskilled in the recognition of symptoms and in the communication of this information to other staff so as to improve the provision of dementia friendly care in the hospital setting.

Deputy Eamonn Maloney: I will not recycle any of the contributions made by other Members. I commend the Minister of State on the speed with which this strategy was put together

and commend her, the Department, those who worked with her and the various shareholders on confronting this condition. I find the critique of the Minister of State's announcement today rather begrudging as until now there has been nothing of the measure of this strategy, which was promised in the programme for Government. This is an important day for individuals affected by dementia. We are all aware of the ongoing effect of dementia on families.

The Minister of State mentioned that the stigma attached to dementia is a serious problem in this country. It is good she has highlighted this. We must overcome this stigma, because dementia is not a condition that is going to disappear. People are living longer and we now have a larger population of older people. This trend will continue and a greater part of the older population will suffer from this condition. Dementia does not affect all people the same way and can be more extreme for some.

This is an historic day. The strategy is now in place, but implementation is another issue. We all wish we were in a different place in terms of financial resources, but it is important to make a start on the journey to provide the best quality of life to the greatest number of people afflicted by this condition. I commend the Minister of State and those around her who have brought us to this stage today. As financial resources become more available, I hope we will see speedier implementation of this strategy.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the national dementia strategy and thank the Government for providing the opportunity to do so. We called for a debate on the issue some time ago, so I thank it for this response. There is significant interest on the part of all parties in this issue and in the need for the strategy to be implemented. We understand the challenge facing the Government in the context of resources, but the strategy should be prioritised in terms of resources. We need commitment and determination to ensure the strategy is implemented in full.

Fianna Fáil supports the call for the findings of the mid-term review to be utilised to develop the revised dementia plan. Earlier this morning, in another context, we discussed the need to learn from assessment of what does or does not work and should continue to implement what works best when developing any strategy. We should also try to reduce the impediments to development. At times when developing strategies, we are inclined to compartmentalise them and separate them from the rest of the health services. This strategy is dependent on the health services in general being able to deliver on the needs of people with dementia.

There are approximately 47,000 people with dementia living in Ireland, most of them women. Approximately 30,000 are women and 17,000 are men. If the current trend continues, the number of people with dementia is expected to rise to almost 70,000 by 2021, but what is even more alarming is that we could have 130,000 dementia sufferers by 2041. This may seem a long way down the road, but it is critical we start to plan in advance how to provide assistance and support to this huge cohort of people. We need to plan how to provide all the services required to ensure people with dementia have support.

When talking about strategies, a key issue is the complementary systems in place that need to be augmented and reinforced. We talk about primary care and independent, supported and assisted living in the home. These all need to be put in place to ensure we have continual, evolving support for the huge cohort of people we expect to have living with dementia in Ireland by 2041. This will require a determined effort on the part of the Government, particularly in view of the fact that 2041 appears to be a long time away. It is a natural phenomenon in the

Oireachtas that priority is given on an electoral cycle and individuals here and Departments do not get recognition for longer-term strategic planning. This is an inevitable consequence of our electoral system. Therefore, it takes bravery and determination on the part of Ministers and Departments to follow through and plant the seeds of a long-term strategy, although they may not benefit from the consequence. I am not saying this is true in regard to everything a Minister does, but the system corrals people into planning for the short and medium term, despite the challenges to be addressed in the long term in regard to the increase in the number of people who will be living with dementia. The strategy is clear and highlights what needs to be done and the actions already in place. When I met with the Alzheimer Society I made a suggestion for additional resource centres. We need community centres to support people to live independently in the community for longer. We could be imaginative in how we use the resources we already have in our communities such as GAA clubs, soccer clubs and rugby clubs, which all have fine facilities but are probably not being used in early midweek. A lot of them have been grant-aided by the State with sports capital grants over the years and could be used as day centres where people could come and meet clinicians, specialists and peers to talk and otherwise interact. In the next number of years there will be huge challenges to capital programmes and I do not expect day centres can be built in every parish or community. However, they already exist in the shape of these sports centres. If the necessary infrastructure was in place in terms of personnel to support the voluntary sector we could open up these facilities. We have spoken about day centres, health centres and resource centres but a lot of the bricks and mortar is already in our communities and we should interact with organisations such as the GAA, soccer clubs, rugby clubs and maybe even schools to make this come about.

Many more younger people will have dementia in the coming years, which is something we may not have addressed as a society. We need to keep people as active as possible and we should support people with dementia in remaining with their families. We should also help the families with a member who has contracted dementia. Fear often affects a person and that person's family when there has been a diagnosis of dementia or another neurological disease. We have to ensure there are strong supports in such cases and provide information and reassurance to people that they will not be left alone to deal with their issues. This is outlined in the strategy. I have referred to the suggestion that dementia awareness training be rolled out to local communities and accommodation will be needed for that, as it is for resource centres, active age groups and various other community groups. It is in such a context that we could look at sporting organisations because there are many GAA clubs today which will not see any activity until 5 p.m. or 6 p.m. when they start their training programmes and matches.

I was alarmed by the findings of the study which stated that only 11% of long-term residential care homes have dedicated dementia units. We know that huge challenges face residential units in general with the new HIQA regulations, the fact that we have an ageing demographic profile and a projected increase in the numbers with dementia in the years ahead. We have to be brave in how we tackle this issue. We discussed how we deal with the existing demographic profile in the discussion on care for the elderly and we need to tackle this in a non-partisan and non-political way. It should not be for the benefit of Deputy Billy Kelleher or the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, but of society. We need to work out how we fund and put in place the resource infrastructure to care for elderly people.

The review of the fair deal is ongoing but it is going to be a huge challenge for us and we need to be honest and upfront with ourselves about how we fund care for the elderly in the years ahead. We have spoken about the need for increases in peoples' contributions but we

cannot pretend that the State can indefinitely fund this out of current expenditure on an annual basis. We have to be brave and set up some mechanism to ensure there is sufficient funding on a multi-annual basis so that we can plan ahead and an individual with dementia, as well as the population in general, can know what contributions they will have to make.

There needs to be an assurance that whatever facilities are in place meet the required standards. HIQA has set a benchmark and we must continue that standard of care for our elderly people. We saw what happened to people with intellectual disabilities in Áras Attracta and that could very easily happen in the case of older people and those with dementia. In increasing capacity in community and residential long-stay facilities we must ensure standards are in place and an inspection process exists to ensure they are maintained.

There is huge goodwill in our communities towards the idea of voluntary work, which we see even in those who volunteer to canvass for candidates in elections, such as the Minister of State or myself. Other people get involved in meals on wheels or community associations such as Older and Bolder, and volunteerism is an important component across the whole spectrum of society. It is a critically important component of how we structure and support society and how we support communities and individuals within the community. There has been huge pressure on the funding programmes for voluntary organisations because there have been consistent reviews of overlapping areas to ensure that we have good administration systems and that any funding goes directly to the services for which it is intended.

We need to ensure that volunteers are supported and assisted in delivering care, no more so than in the area of dementia and other neurological illnesses and diseases. In commending the new strategy I insist that its implementation be consistently monitored and that we be brave in planning a strategy not just for a horizon of 2015 or 2016 but well beyond that, so that people in the early stages of the disease know that support and services will be available to them after that.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the new national dementia strategy announced by the Minister and I acknowledge her commitment to changing the way older people are looked after in our society. I recognise also that it has been put together initially in a very difficult economic climate and as things improve I hope and expect that the strategy will expand and there will be more funding available to look after our people.

We have a large number of people who will have dementia in the future. At the moment 12% of our population are over 65 and, by the year 2046, 25% - that is one in every four - will be over 65. Clearly, a significant number of these will have dementia issues, whether it is in the initial stages or longer-term. The number of people with dementia will double over the next 30 years. Internationally, in 2010 there were 36 million people with dementia but by 2030 the world estimate is 66 million. It is a huge problem that has a personal, emotional, financial and social impact on all of us and on all society. We need to change many things in our country to deal with it. When I meet people with dementia, in many cases I find families or individuals who are invisible, isolated in their community and socially excluded. Their families are worn out and strained, and are working 24-7 to look after them. The lack of care the community is offering them in their homes has a major negative impact.

Some two weeks ago I met a lady in her mid-70s who is dealing with her husband, who is in his 80s. He is doubly incontinent and suffers from serious dementia, and she was offered a princely amount of 18 minutes of home care help per day, one and a half hours per week. It is

a disgrace and I condemn the policies that do not provide adequate home care to people who need it. There have been cuts and we have been through a very difficult time, however we must prioritise home care packages. The lady's house was in a state of bedlam and was in bits. Her life had been shattered and she had no help, nothing at all. I was shocked and dismayed. I will give another example of a daughter who is looking after her mother who is suffering from dementia. Her father, who is in his mid-70s, is also very unwell with a heart condition. The lady, God bless her, is very active in her dementia state and is up and down the stairs all night repeatedly. Both these carers are at their wits' end.

People in Alzheimer's care centres say they do not have enough money. In Dundalk, the budget has been reduced by 5% and this has a major negative impact on the people who are entitled to the care but do not receive it. The same applies in Drogheda, where the members of the Drogheda Alzheimer Society are at their wits' end trying to provide better services for an increasing number of people.

How do we change the situation? While the dementia strategy is one way of starting it, there is a more fundamental principle, which the Oireachtas should establish, namely, an entitlement to home care and home help by statute, which does not exist. We should have legislation that guarantees that people are entitled to the care, just as much as they are entitled to benefit from the fair deal if they need to go into long-term care. We have got it the wrong way around. We are spending billions of euro on putting people into nursing homes, while many of them should not go there until they reach a much higher stage of dependency, but do so because of the lack of community supports. That is wrong. The lady who is trying to look after her husband told me she would have to put him into a nursing home, although she did not want to do so. She just needs help to look after the person she loved and who loved her all her life.

We need to change the way we address this. We need much more home support and to use modern technology. In the Great Northern Haven apartments in Dundalk, there is an experiment whereby older people live in the apartments and have technology that notifies a carer, who is attending 24-7, if they get up at night or leave a window open or a tap on. When they wake up in the morning they can use a laptop or iPad to communicate with a health care worker and verify that they have taken their medication. We need to change our local authority houses to use more technology to provide support to keep people in their homes.

The public health nurse is the real hero of our society. In every case I encounter, the public health nurse is the first person who helped the person, as best they could. Good care costs a lot of money. The policy in Norway is to make the most of the good days. We can make the most of the good days for our people who suffer from dementia by keeping them happy at home for as long as we can. The last place they should go is a nursing home. They should go there only when all other home care supports have been exhausted or failed. We need a bill of rights for our elderly identifying the promises we will fulfil in looking after them. There are plenty of examples from states around the world available on the Internet. If people have statutory entitlement to community care, a bill of rights identifying how older people are treated and protocols in place for them, it will change the way things happen.

I had a meeting with the Alzheimer Society of Ireland in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda regarding putting protocols in place for people who are suffering from dementia and who are admitted to an acute hospital. Such a person needs to be looked after specially and staff need to know how to treat them, given that many of them cannot talk or express what they feel or they are confused. We need these protocols in place now on a national basis. We received at-

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tention from the very top of the HSE. The quality of care for people suffering from dementia in some of our institutions is disgraceful. I have here dozens of complaints made to HIQA regarding the quality of care of people suffering from dementia. In many cases, there are not enough staff on duty to look after them. In some cases, sadly, they are treated disgracefully. I am waiting for a Bill of mine to come up in the lottery for debate on a Friday sitting. As backbencher, one hopes to make the lottery. My Bill will change the 2007 Act by giving statutory powers to HIQA to go into a home immediately to investigate a complaint that a person suffering from dementia is being assaulted. This cannot happen under the current legislation.

I spent the past few hours, with the assistance of the Minister's office, dealing with a family whose family member died in disgraceful circumstances in a HSE institution. The patient did not have dementia as such. The family complained to HIQA that they were unhappy with the care their relative was receiving. Nothing happened, and he subsequently died in disgraceful, shameful circumstances. I acknowledge the Department's commitment to get to the bottom of it.

This is just the beginning of the debate and I welcome the initiation of the strategy. However, we are not at the races if we do not look after people in their communities and homes and invest much more money in it. I accept that the degree of care the people need is a very complex issue. This week, the country is examining how we treat our people when they come into the world, and the tragic circumstances of the deaths of many babies, six or seven, in Portlaoise. We are also considering the appalling and disgraceful treatment of people suffering from dementia and how it can change. The two debates are equally important and, hopefully, they will get equal time and attention from the House and the Government.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I welcome the publication of the national dementia strategy and acknowledge the work of the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, the former Minister, Deputy Reilly and particularly the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch. The strategy was a commitment of the programme for Government and identifies the key principles to underpin and inform the full range of health and social care services provided to people with dementia, their families and their carers. I acknowledge the support of Atlantic Philanthropies and regret the comments in the past few days in this House and the Seanad regarding that organisation. The programme will focus on the timely diagnosis of dementia and the value of early intervention with the long-term objective of making people generally more aware and understanding of the needs of people suffering from dementia and the contribution they can continue to make to society. I acknowledge the role of the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, whose representatives I met before Christmas and who were gravely concerned about the delay in the publication of the strategy. They are very happy with the strategy that has been published.

2 o'clock

In Galway alone there are 2,364 people with dementia with up to 48,000 people nationally living with the condition. It touches every family in some way and we all know people suffering with it. Many try to get on with their lives to a degree. One has to commend all those families who care for their loved ones who suffer from this condition.

I compliment the Minister of State on this welcome strategy. I am confident it will deliver over the coming years.

Deputy John O'Mahony: I commend and support the implementation of the national de-

mentia strategy. Its publication in December was both necessary and welcome because, as the country's age profile increases, so too does the problem of dementia. Ireland's population is aging as evidenced during the debates on the fair deal scheme. There will be nearly 1 million people aged over 65 by 2031, an increase of more than 86% or an extra 20,000 people per annum. I commend the Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, and the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, on their efforts on the fair deal scheme. It is a natural consequence that dementia will become an increasing problem that needs to be planned for with proper structures and supports put in place.

We all know of the great work done by the Alzheimer Society of Ireland and Western Alzheimers in Ballindine, County Mayo. However, demands for their services are increasing but their resources are limited, meaning they have to come up with new strategies for fund-raising.

The increased projected figures for dementia given by NUI Galway and Trinity College Dublin are startling. They suggest the number of people with dementia in the coming years could be as high as 94,000 by 2031 and 132,000 by 2041, three times higher than it was in 2011. This highlights the need for this dementia strategy. I was also surprised to learn dementia is a condition that affects younger people with almost 4,000 people under the age of 65 with the condition. This is an exceptionally vulnerable group of people about which little is known. They come under the radar and very few of them use community services. That is not surprising as they do not easily fit into service systems and structures designed for older people. This has implications for the individuals and their families because much of their care is done at home.

An estimated 50,000 family carers are looking after someone with one of six specified symptoms of dementia. Research shows that two thirds of all long-stay residents have dementia but many of them do not have a formal diagnosis. This brings on high stress levels among carers which are high by international standards.

The services in place for dementia are limited. As Deputy Kyne said, in Galway up to 2,700 people have dementia with 1,800 people in County Mayo. There are pockets of areas in these counties, such as in west Galway, where respite care services, for example, are not available. There is much work to be done. The strategy is a good start but it needs to be progressed as quickly as possible.

The overall cost for caring for dementia patients is enormous, a point which outlines the challenge facing us. I was surprised to learn that dementia is a very costly condition given its duration, as people can live for a long time after diagnosis, its disease burden and the level of disability associated with the illness over time. In fact, the overall societal cost of dementia exceeds that of coronary heart disease, cancer and stroke combined. Analysing the financial cost of dementia what is particularly striking is the fact that almost half, 48%, of the overall costs of dementia are borne by family and friends who provide the much needed care services required. A further 43% is accounted for by care in long-stay settings, while formal health and social care services contribute only 9% of the total costs of dementia. The average cost per person with dementia is estimated at €40,500 per annum.

It will be a significant challenge. However, our elderly people deserve to be looked after and the services and supports need to be put in place so they and their families can have comfort in their retired years. As we are all on the train to that stage of life, it will affect us all.

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Deputy Dan Neville: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. I welcome the Government's launch of the national dementia strategy which is important to the many people who suffer from this difficult disease, a disease which is also difficult for their families. Families are often confused by it and the sufferer can also be upset. There is a fear factor around the whole area of dementia. We should endeavour to relieve that by disseminating information on assistance.

I commend the Alzheimer Society of Ireland on its excellent work in assisting people who suffer from Alzheimer's and their families. It works across the country in the heart of all communities providing dementia specific services and advocating for the rights and needs of all people living with dementia and their carers. Its vision is an Ireland where no one goes through dementia alone and where policies and services respond appropriately to the person with dementia and their carers at the times they need support.

I welcome the development of a national Alzheimer's and other dementias strategy to increase awareness, ensure timely diagnosis and intervention and develop enhanced community-based services. The strategy sets out several principles to underpin the provision of care and supports for people with dementia. These include taking account of dementia in the development and implementation of existing and future health policies, encouraging the participation of people with dementia in society and in their own communities as fully as possible for as long as possible, the prioritisation of end-of-life care in an appropriate setting for those with dementia, and appropriate training and supervision for all those caring for or providing services to people with dementia. In addition, the strategy directs resources to provide the best possible outcome for those with dementia and their families.

Dementia or old age should not control people's lives and rob them of what is so valuable to them, privacy and dignity. Central to the strategy announced by the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, last December is something that is characteristically taken away from people living with dementia - that is, awareness. We want to increase awareness of dementia in the community so that we can act faster and more smartly to ensure early diagnosis, treatment and all-important supports, particularly with community-based services.

It is estimated that there are approximately 50,000 people with dementia in Ireland today. These numbers are expected to increase to more than 140,000 by 2041 as the number of older people rises. I have also met some younger people with Alzheimer's, so it does not always respect age and consequently is not just an issue affecting the elderly.

The strategy emphasises that most people with dementia live in their own communities and can continue to live well and participate in those communities for longer than many people appreciate. The strategy distinguishes between those actions that can be progressed within existing resources and others to be addressed as more resources become available.

Those identified for first implementation include that clear responsibility for dementia will be assigned within the HSE. In this regard, a dedicated office of specialist services for older people has been established within the HSE to support the strategy's implementation. Clear descriptions of care pathways and better information and guidance on services will be made available to GPs, as well as to people with dementia, their families and carers.

A better understanding of dementia will be promoted, including modifiable risk factors. The strategy also promotes the use of existing resources to be reviewed to ensure that they are

used in the best possible way. Research will be promoted to inform and design the delivery of dementia services in Ireland in order to be supported and given appropriate priority.

The term dementia was used for generations concerning memory loss, but it is not a specific disease itself. Dementia describes a group of symptoms affecting memory, thinking and social abilities severely enough to interfere with daily functioning. Dementia indicates problems with at least two brain functions, such as memory loss and impaired judgment or language, and the inability to perform some daily activities such as paying bills or becoming lost while driving.

Though memory loss generally occurs in dementia, memory loss alone does not mean that one has dementia. A certain extent of memory loss is a normal part of ageing. Many causes of dementia symptoms exist. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of progressive dementia. Some causes of dementia may be reversible with treatment.

The common symptoms include declining memory loss. Short-term memory loss is the most common early symptom of dementia. People with ordinary forgetfulness can still remember other facts associated with the thing they have forgotten. For example, they may briefly forget the next door neighbour's name, but still know the person they are talking to is their next door neighbour. A person with dementia will not only forget the neighbour's name but also the context.

People with dementia often find it hard to complete familiar everyday tasks. For example, a person with dementia may not know how to get dressed or how to prepare a meal. Occasionally, everyone has trouble remembering the right word, but a person with dementia often forgets simple words or substitutes unusual words, thus making their speech or handwriting hard to understand.

We may sometimes forget what day it is or where we are going, but people with dementia can become lost in familiar places, such as the road where they live. They can forget where they are or how they got there and may not know how to return home. They may also confuse night and day. Those with dementia may dress inappropriately, wearing several layers on a warm day, or very few on a cold day. They may also find it difficult to follow conversations or keep up with paying their bills. Anyone can temporarily misplace his or her wallet or keys. A person with dementia, however, may put things in unusual places, such as an iron in the fridge or a wristwatch in a sugar bowl.

Everyone can become sad or moody from time to time. A person with dementia may become unusually emotional and experience rapid mood swings for no apparent reason. Alternatively, a person with dementia may show less emotion than is usual. A person with dementia may become suspicious, irritable, depressed, apathetic, anxious or agitated, especially in situations where memory problems are causing difficulties. At times, everyone can become tired of housework, business activities or social obligations but someone with dementia may become very passive, sitting in front of a television for hours or sleeping more than usual. They may also appear to lose interest in hobbies.

The Department of Health and the HSE have agreed a joint initiative with Atlantic Philanthropies to implement significant elements of the strategy proposed over the period 2014 to 2017. We look forward to the roll-out of the programme.

I congratulate the Minister of State once again on the work she is doing in all four areas within her remit. In this case, the work to provide services for the elderly is being undertaken

in difficult circumstances. This is because the economy has put a lot of pressure on services to all areas.

Deputy Joe Carey: Approximately 44,000 people in Ireland are currently living with some form of dementia. That number is expected to reach nearly 104,000 by 2037. More than 50,000 carers are also affected as each day they care for their loved ones who need that extra support.

Dementia is the umbrella term for a variety of conditions that can cause the brain to fail. The World Health Organisation describes dementia as a syndrome due to disease of the brain, usually of a chronic or progressive nature, in which there is impairment of multiple higher cortical functions. Alzheimer's disease is a form of dementia that represents the majority of cases. What Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia have in common is a high risk of behavioural disorders, including changing personalities and acting out of character.

The World Health Organization's definition means that functions such as memory, orientation, comprehension, emotions and judgment may be affected in a person with dementia. It is important to remember that Alzheimer's is a medical condition and a disease of the brain. If the brain affects thought, feelings, personality and behaviour then Alzheimer's will affect how a loved one thinks, feels and what he or she does. The range of symptoms can be enormous. People with Alzheimer's disease do not necessarily look sick. Although it is a physical illness, it often does not affect a person's appearance until the later stages of the disease. I welcome the work completed to date in putting a national dementia strategy into being. The Department of Health, together with the HSE, has agreed a joint initiative with Atlantic Philanthropies to implement significant elements of the strategy over the period 2014-17. This programme will promote a greater focus on timely diagnosis of dementia and on the value of early intervention, along with the long-term objective of making people in Ireland generally more aware and understanding of the needs of people with dementia and the contribution that those with dementia continue to make to our society.

People with dementia must be encouraged to participate in society and should be enabled to stay within their communities for as long as possible. I am delighted this Government, in conjunction with the HSE, recognised this fact in the case of Clarecastle day care centre's dementia unit. In late February 2013, following a near ten-year campaign, operational funding and recognition was finally given to the dementia-specific unit operating in the centre. The centre in Clarecastle is a purpose-built dementia day care facility that provides services for persons with mild and moderate dementia. I want to put on the record my thanks to the former Minister for Health, Deputy James Reilly, and Mr. Bernard Gloster, the area manager in the HSE, who took on board my representations and that of the local community and the board of Clarecastle day care centre. The dementia service in Clarecastle augments the provision of day care for elderly persons and it has operated at the site since 1999, catering for over 250 persons per week. The Clarecastle facility services a ten-mile radius and a population of over 50,000 people.

The service delivered in Clarecastle represents exceptional value for money while also offering precious respite for carers. The dementia services delivered in Clarecastle day care centre should be further enhanced, as there is a capacity to do so. Such a model of care should be replicated in other communities right across the country and such day care services for mild, moderate dementia patients should form a key part of the national strategy. I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, on her work and I look forward to the strategy being further developed and brought into being in the coming months and years ahead.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): I thank everyone who made a contribution, and this is clearly an issue in which everybody should have an interest. I was looking at the people who came and went from the Visitors Gallery today. Some were very small, aged between three or four years of age while others were in mid-childhood and their mid-teens. This is in addition to the young adults and those of us who have gone past all those age groups. It is significant that what we are doing with the dementia strategy will affect each and every one of us, whether it is as carers, people in our community or as people who suffer from the condition.

I will reply to some of the contributions, as many people raised the same issues. The €27.5 million in funding is significant and it will be divided, with mostly home-based delivery. Everybody agreed on this and we were urged to follow this route. Most of it will be delivered in the community and home. It will concern the raising of awareness, as everybody mentions, and there will be a significant element relating to research as well. Most people who know me see me as an optimist by nature. Some days, as a politician, the only way to get through the day is by being optimistic. The type of research being done on the types of dementia will ensure that although we may never find a cure - it is a degenerative process of ageing and as we live longer, certain parts of the body break down - we will find mechanisms to slow down the progress of the condition and stop the onset. That is why early diagnosis, which is a central part of this strategy, will be very important.

In my city there is research in St. Finbarr's Hospital on ageing and how we age. Trinity College, Dublin, is carrying out TILDA, the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing. Many people have mentioned the issue of people with Down's syndrome and the fact that they develop dementia at a much younger age than the rest of the population. Within the private sector, there is research going on in pharmaceutical companies. All the research will have a significant effect on the sort of forecasting we are looking at. With the help of Atlantic Philanthropies, there is a development in St. James's Hospital of a centre of excellence for successful ageing. All that intervention and focused approach, along with the dementia strategy, will have an impact.

I listened very carefully to what Deputy O'Dowd has said. As I listened, I thought that we all want Scandinavian-type services but we do not want to pay Scandinavian-type taxes. In the middle of his contribution, Deputy O'Dowd mentioned Norway. We all want that type of service but it comes with a cost. I have met people in those circumstances as well as Deputy O'Dowd. What politicians worth their salt have not done so? It is not always about resources. Kindness, compassion and listening cost very little but sometimes we do not see that. In the instance outlined by the Deputy, there must be awareness of where to go, how that is signposted and so on.

Deputy Ó Caoláin mentioned the reports which argue this will only benefit a small number of people. We must remember as well that the €27.5 million we are talking about, which is specifically for dementia services, does not take away a person's right to other existing services. For example, there was a report in one of the national newspapers that only one in six families would have access to the service. At a certain point, one might be getting a minor home help service, and that may already be available. This is part of the jigsaw that will make up the services to be delivered. Deputy Ó Caoláin asked about renovation schemes being extended beyond 2016 but that is one of the few parts that is not my area of responsibility. I will pass his query to the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, who has responsibility in this respect. General practitioners will be the gatekeepers and they will be trained.

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I am delighted to constantly mention Dr. Tony Foley, who was one of the pioneers in a pilot project that is still ongoing in Kinsale. He has a complete community approach to dementia that allows people not just to live in their own homes but to live in their own communities. Deputy Kelleher argued there is no long-term planning. Of all our initiatives, this is about long-term planning. It is about getting the basics right and ensuring that what we put in place will serve us well into the future. The Deputy inquired about a review, and a mid-term review is built into the strategy.

Another issue mentioned relates to age and ageing. I was glad to see that people agreed with me and I did not have to push the door very hard. This is not about age. More than anything else, it is about a condition that can develop at a very early stage in one's life. Someone I knew quite well developed the condition at 42. While I am glad to say that happens rarely, it is something that can develop at an early age. I insisted, therefore, that this would not be about age, but about the condition. When it comes to people developing it at an earlier age, the services will be available to them. That is significant. My constant mantra is that we should stop talking about age and this is the first strategy that recognises the condition rather than the age. It has always been an issue we assumed was about us as we aged. In fact, it is not. For instance, people with Down's syndrome develop dementia at a much younger age than others. As such, the insistence must be that whether it is someone with a disability or a person in the full of their health, the condition will be treated in the same way as it is for people in later life.

I thank every Member who contributed. We can ensure in planning for dementia that the forecasts we have been given do not materialise. They will only be avoided if we are careful about how we plan for our future.

Topical Issue Debate

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): As the Minister is detained, does Deputy Eamonn Maloney wish to defer his matter?

Deputy Eamonn Maloney: I would appreciate it if I could defer the issue I have raised on private rented accommodation until next week.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): That is fine. I thank Deputy Maloney.

Child and Family Agency Expenditure

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Paudie Coffey, for attending to take this matter. While he is a colleague from a neighbouring constituency and a good friend, I am disappointed the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs is not here.

An alarming and savage blow was announced yesterday morning when Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, informed ACCORD, the Catholic Marriage and Preparation Counselling Service, of the cutting of its total annual funding by €378,000. It is a savage blow five months on. To make it worse, the Tusla letter bizarrely informed ACCORD that its decision to cut the funding is retrospective and took effect from 1 January 2015, notwithstanding that the letter is dated 7 May 2015. It is scandalous. This organisation does a great deal of good work through-

out the country and the timing of the cut is very strange. Tusla cited the delay in the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy James Reilly, approving the budget as the reason for the retrospectivity of the cut.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): The Minister has now arrived.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: I got him in for Deputy McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am delighted. Will I start again?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): Whatever the Deputy thinks.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am in the Chair's hands.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): Start again.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I welcome the Minister. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, informed ACCORD, the Catholic Marriage and Preparation Counselling Service, that €378,000 was being withdrawn from its funding for 2015. Bizarrely, the Tusla letter informed ACCORD that its decision to cut the funding is retrospective and took effect from 1 January 2015, notwithstanding that the letter is dated 7 May 2015. These are very strange goings on. I am glad the Minister is here as Tusla cited the delay in the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy James Reilly, approving the budget for the retrospectivity of the cut. Where was the Minister and why did he not sign off on the funding? This is scandalous carry on. Other agencies have also been affected.

This has occurred against the background of a staggering donation of \$8 million from Atlantic Philanthropies. I wonder what is happening there. On the website of Atlantic Philanthropies, it states that its explicit aim is to fund groups "to work inside the machinery of Government" to advance its ideological agenda. It is a bold statement on its website. That agenda is in direct opposition to ACCORD's stated view on the upcoming referendum. This is unprecedented and makes the controversy surrounding former adviser Frank Flannery and access to Fine Gael and government corridors look like a goldfish bowl by comparison. It is unreal that Atlantic has that statement on its website. The funding is coming from outside organisations. I welcome the funding Atlantic Philanthropies has given to certain community projects, but this funding is completely off the radar and in support of agencies to interfere in a referendum process here.

As the Minister knows, ACCORD has seven centres nationally and in 2013 provided 50,959 counselling hours to 9,867 clients and 727 marriage preparation courses to 7,631 couples. At the same time, 32,139 children participated in its schools programme. Wonderful work has been done. While planning its work for this year and continuing its outreach services, it is told halfway through the year that its funding has been slashed. I did not think the Minister would be here, but I note that he said in October that the Department was going to boost Tusla's funding by €26 million. Does he know what he is doing or where he is? Does he know he is out of the Department of Health and in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs? Is he a spinning top? Does he know what a hames he made of health and does he want to do the same with the Child and Family Agency? Does he know the importance of that area? He is the same Minister who said after the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act was introduced that he would cut the funding of hospitals that did not participate and carry out the procedures he wanted. Is that not threatening, bullying and intimidating behaviour intended to get his way at all costs?

I put it to the Minister that this attack could not have come at a worse time for the Government's "Yes" campaign and is a despicable attack on an agency. What is the message it sends to Catholic agencies and others which are doing tremendous work if the referendum is passed? They will have to go whistle for their money and will get nothing. The Government will not give it to them. The Minister said Tusla was to get an increase of €26 million, yet it is imposing cuts on this and many other agencies. I brought up Atlantic Philanthropies because I am very worried. I asked the Tánaiste this morning about the electoral commission because Atlantic Philanthropies have funded groups like the Irish Council for Civil Liberties to the tune of €7 million, Amnesty International Ireland to the tune of €5 million, Tusla to the tune of €8 million and GLEN to the tune of €4 million. That amounts to €24 million. All of these quangos and Government agents are doing the work of the "Yes" campaign in the referendum. It is interference and a despicable attack on a sovereign state which undermines what democracy is about: a free and unhindered vote of the people. The chickens have come home to roost and the genie is out of the bottle.

The Minister needs to stand up, measure up and restore this funding. The Minister and his Government colleagues need to put some manners on these organisations. These quangos are doing the work of the Government, at its bidding, because people are expecting promotions on State boards. They are protecting everything else and they are all interlinked.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): Deputy McGrath will have another two minutes after the Minister's reply.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I hope I get a decent answer.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy James Reilly): I thank the Deputy for affording me the opportunity to address this issue and I would like to clarify issues around the funding of ACCORD by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I cannot hear the Minister.

Deputy James Reilly: There has been much comment on this issue over the past 24 hours and much of it ill-informed. This Government is delivering the most comprehensive reform of policy and provision for children, young people and families in the history of the State and our commitment to continuing that work remains strong and resolute. Indeed, I must make my apologies to the House as I was delayed because I was in the other House, the Seanad, dealing with a new Bill which will end the practice of placing children and people under 18 years of age in adult prisons, either for detention or on remand. The reform continues. This Government is committed to strengthening and developing our child care, protection and welfare services. The Government has provided Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, with significant additional funding in 2015 to enable it deliver on its mandate, as Deputy McGrath has rightly pointed out.

Tusla has a total budget of €643 million in 2015, made up of €631 million in current funding and €12 million in capital. This increase of €34 million is a 5.3% increase on funding for the agency in 2014. This level of funding demonstrates clearly that despite the overall national budgetary constraints, this Government is strongly supporting the delivery of critically important reforms needed to support Ireland's children and families. Of course, this comes on the back of the worst recession this country has ever experienced. This additional funding will help drive key priorities in the reform of children and family services. Despite the increase in funding, Tusla has calculated that it still needs to make significant savings in 2015 and the an-

nouncement of a funding reduction to ACCORD is but one of a wide range of funding change announcements by Tusla over the past days. It should be remembered that Tusla funds in the region of 700 organisations around the country.

The establishment of Tusla has presented an opportunity to explore new approaches to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged children and families. Through a comprehensive scoping exercise across all services, Tusla has begun the process of identifying where the resources can be used to best effect and in a manner consistent with its mandate. Tusla is undertaking a restructuring of its existing funding allocation to ensure priority is given to counselling services that best support and promote the development, welfare and protection of children and effective functioning of families.

ACCORD provides a range of services in a number of areas. It provides marriage and relationship counselling services for people who are experiencing difficulties in their relationships. Quite separately, it provides marriage preparation courses for people who are getting married in the Catholic Church. In 2014, ACCORD received €1.992 million in core funding from Tusla and in 2015 it will receive funding in excess of €1.6 million.

Tusla will spend approximately €6 million this year on counselling services, including the provision of significant funding to ACCORD, which amounts to more than a quarter of the available funding. Tusla has determined that marriage preparation courses, which are paid for by couples, do not form part of its core mission. I am informed by Tusla that it does not provide funding to any other dedicated marriage preparation courses. Tusla is targeting available funding at its core mission, which is supporting and promoting the development, welfare and protection of children and the effective functioning of families.

The chief executive of Tusla, Mr. Gordon Jeyes, has made clear that the funding decisions of his executive, which were approved by the Tusla board, were in no way related to the marriage equality referendum. Anyone who suggests that the reduction in funding for ACCORD is in any way related to the referendum should remember that other organisations who support a Yes vote in the referendum have been the subject of reductions as well. I would draw the attention of Deputies to a letter from the chief executive of Barnardos in today's edition of *The Irish Times*.

At all times, Tusla has endeavoured to ensure, where funding adjustments are being applied, that they will not affect front-line services, overlap of services will be reduced, backroom functions will be streamlined and that the services received will be of the utmost quality as outlined in Tusla's business plan for 2015. I want to assure the House that, in furtherance of Government policy for child and family services, Tusla is working with service providers on managing their budgets and the delivery of services to children and families across the country.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister did not answer the questions. He did not refer to the €8 million that Tusla received from Atlantic Philanthropies. He did not respond to the fact that he said in October that he was giving €26 million extra to Tusla, yet here we are. He failed completely to address the situation. Tusla itself has stated the reason the cuts run out on 7 May is because the Minister did not sign off on the budgets. I asked him what he was doing and where he was. Was he as láthair? Was he ina chodladh? He has a job to do. Why did he wait until 7 May to implement this?

The Minister can gloss over the figures all he likes but-----

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Deputy James Reilly: Is é an Rialtas a thug an Teachta McGrath tacaíocht dó a bhí ina chodladh

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Nach maith an fear é an tAire. Was he in Tiobraid Árann? He is welcome to the Tipperary-Offaly border anytime, but the accountable place is here. He should not be quoting what Fergus Finlay writes in *The Irish Times*. He is the accountable line Minister. Fergus Finlay is not a Minister although at times one would think he was when he is pontificating and when he is promoted to this board, that board and the other. It is all very unsavoury.

Deputy James Reilly: I must, with respect, ask the Deputy to withdraw that statement. That gentlemen is not here to defend himself.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It was the Minister who brought up his name.

Deputy James Reilly: I do not think Deputy McGrath should insult him in that way.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister brought his name into the equation.

Deputy James Reilly: We should have a bit of fairness and a bit of equity.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: If I caused any offence by mentioning his name, I withdraw it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): It is withdrawn.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: However, the Minister should withdraw his reference to him and his letter in *The Irish Times*. It would be better for the Minister to do his job as Minister instead of reading *The Irish Times* and the letters by Fergus Finlay and all his other supporters and cheerleaders promoting him and other people as well. Noel Whelan is another pundit. Should I say Mr. Whelan or maybe I should not mention his name at all? Let me say a pundit. I withdraw the name.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): Deputy McGrath has mentioned a few names.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: A pundit on RTE recently said that Catholic agencies that would not toe the line on the Government referendum would have funding cut. I did not see any more. That was on prime time television. I watched it. Bhí mé ag éisteacht agus ag féachaint----

Deputy James Reilly: Ní raibh an Teachta ag éisteacht go maith.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: ---- and it was loud and clear. That is what is going on.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Deputy McGrath is watching too much television.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I can tell Deputy Wallace that I watch very little television.

This is an outrageous cut, given it is four and a half months late. The other organisations are also trying to plan their year. The Minister said that Tusla will cut back on overlaps and everything else. It will and it is spending the money well and doing some wonderful work. This is true of other agencies as well. However, to announce a cut in the budget at this time, when the Minister said last October that he was giving it €26 million extra suggests there is something wrong with the Minister. Is he mixed up or confused? Does the Minister have any word at all? Some €26 million extra was announced, but funding is being cut. The Minister is saying that he increased the money by 5%. The sum of €26 million would be much more than 5%. It would

be a handsome increase of over one third.

Deputy James Reilly: Sílim go bhfuil an t-am istigh.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister seems to be as lost in this Department as he was in the last one. It is very disappointing and disquieting. I am glad that the Minister made it from the Seanad to this House to reply but he might as well have stayed there because he did not answer any of the questions.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): I ask the Minister to make a concluding statement. He has two minutes.

Deputy James Reilly: There is an adage that says that there are none so blind as those who will not see and none so deaf as those who will not listen.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They all saw and heard what the Minister told them in October.

Deputy James Reilly: Gabhaim leithscéal leis an Teachta, lena thoil. I did reference the extra money. I said in October that Tusla would get €26 million extra. It got €26 million extra and it got extra money in capital as well. I did reference that.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where did it come from? Why the cuts?

Deputy James Reilly: I explained to Deputy McGrath that notwithstanding the additional money, the pressures that it is under mean that it has to make cuts across the system. The Deputy may not understand that but that is the reality in all budgets. As a result of increasing demand-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am able to add two and two.

Deputy James Reilly: We have a growing population. We have one of the youngest populations in Europe. That is to our strength and that is to our future and I welcome the fact.

Deputy McGrath alleges that I will not give any money to ACCORD after the referendum. I have made it clear that it is in receipt of €1.6 million this year and that remains the case.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Provided they vote the right way.

Deputy James Reilly: I want to put on the record of this House that my Department and I value very much the counselling and mediation services ACCORD provides to married couples. The same applies to Tusla and that is why it continues to fund ACCORD. I have made it clear that pre-marriage counselling and training is not the core mission of Tusla. Bishop Nulty stated on radio that the money allowed ACCORD to do a little extra in terms of the provision of pamphlets and manuals. We would prefer not to have to cut anyone's budget, but this is the reality.

The Deputy alluded to Atlantic Philanthropies. I want to ensure no message from this House in any way undermines or disrespects the wonderful work Atlantic Philanthropies has done in this country.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I acknowledged that.

Deputy James Reilly: It is very much involved in early prevention for families that need support.

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Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is interfering in the democratic process. It is blatant.

Deputy James Reilly: As for the Deputy's other allegation that I did not sign off on the budget because bhí mé as láthair-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I did not say that.

Deputy James Reilly: -----I signed off on it in December 2014. The business plan was another matter entirely.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Tusla stated that; I did not.

Deputy James Reilly: No; again, the Deputy is misinterpreting.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): We are close to winding up.

Deputy James Reilly: The Deputy chose to misinterpret it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am not misinterpreting; Tusla stated it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): The Minister to continue, without interruption.

Deputy James Reilly: I could refer to how, despite the budgetary constraints on the health system, inpatient waiting times had decreased-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What?

Deputy James Reilly: -----and how we had introduced the country's first air ambulance service. The Deputy supported a Government that was in place for 14 years-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Stop. The Minister is obviously confused.

Deputy James Reilly: -----and which had more money than any previous Government, but he could not have an air ambulance service put in place.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): We are running out of time.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister is confused. He should go to Beaumont Hospital, Clonmel or anywhere else.

Deputy James Reilly: I wish to revert to the core issue.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): Please, Minister, we are running out of time.

Deputy James Reilly: I know and assume the Acting Chairman is running out of patience.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): Actually we have run out of time.

Deputy James Reilly: I will put this to the House clearly and straight - the operational decision made by Tusla and signed off on by its board was its decision and the Government had no influence over it. If we were to interfere, we would be accused of trying to fix the referendum.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government did so, but it backfired.

Deputy James Reilly: There was no such interference.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It was an own goal.

Deputy James Reilly: My good friend, the people know and understand this was Tusla's decision, not the Government's. The Government had no hand, act or part in it.

Child Care Costs

Deputy Terence Flanagan: I thank the Minister for attending to take this Topical Issue debate and the Ceann Comhairle's office for giving me the opportunity to raise what is an important matter that has been debated for the past ten or 15 years, namely, the high cost of child care. The financial strain placed on families, particularly young families, by having to pay €2,000 per month for two children to be kept in child care facilities is, as the Minister knows, unfair on parents. It creates difficulties for families' budgets, given the other cuts people have had to take in recent years because of the country's economic problems. For example, they must pay property taxes, water charges and USC. The high cost of child care has made it financially unfeasible for both parents to work. It makes more sense for one of them to give up work to look after their children, even though they desire to return to the workforce. As the Minister is aware, a study entitled, *The Baby Brain Drain*, concluded that 3,000 new mothers left the workforce annually, giving rise to a figure of €68 million in recruitment and training costs. This is having a detrimental effect on the economy. We must keep women in the workforce, contributing to the tax coffers, but doing so is uneconomic for them.

My colleagues and I in Renua Ireland have devised a policy. With the economic position improving, we must consider providing a tax credit for parents and crèche operators to help the hard-pressed, squeezed middle. Many families are being sandwiched by costs and cuts.

The inflexibility of maternity leave arrangements needs to be examined. We propose that six months of maternity leave be taken by both parents, with three months being taken by each, with the leave being renamed as "parental leave".

The local property tax was to provide money to improve communities, but that has not happened. In 2013 the Commission on Taxation recommended the introduction of a site valuation charge. This would have ring-fenced money and ensured the availability of more affordable child care facilities in communities, thereby relieving families of an unfair burden. I plead with the Minister to consider this suggestion on behalf of families. Many talented women are denied an opportunity to contribute to and play their part in the workforce because of exorbitant crèche fees. Will the Minister outline his plan of action? He is in discussions with the Minister for Finance and has set up a cross-departmental group that will make recommendations by the summer on how to deal with this issue. A second year of the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme has been mooted.

Deputy James Reilly: I am pleased to answer the Deputy and outline the Government's position on child care. I thank him for his question.

High-quality and well-structured investment in the early years of a child's life is widely recognised as being one of the most strategic investments we can make with public funding. Children are at a critical stage in their development in their early years and we have a golden

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opportunity to set them on the right path for their future - for all of our futures - by investing wisely in them at that stage. They are not the only beneficiaries. When they are given opportunities to develop to their full potential, we all benefit - parents, families, communities, wider society and the economy. It is because the Government recognised the critical importance of investment in children's early years that we worked hard to protect expenditure in this area, despite the dire economic circumstances that we had inherited. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs invests more than €250 million in child care each year. This is before spending on children by other Departments is taken into consideration.

The Government is well aware that Ireland's investment in this area is lower than in many other OECD countries and that parents face considerable difficulties in accessing quality and affordable child care. It is constrained in its ability to increase this investment significantly, as the recovery in the public finances is not yet complete and resources remain limited. Furthermore, I am strongly committed to ensuring every euro we invest in children is invested wisely. This is the area in which we get the greatest return for every euro we invest.

A number of programmes are in place to support parents with child care costs, the most significant of which in terms of State investment is the ECCE programme. This universal programme provides for one free preschool year for all eligible children before commencing primary school. More than €170 million is invested in the programme annually, reducing the child care costs of parents by more than €2,300 per child. Approximately 67,000 children benefit from the guaranteed investment for which the programme provides.

The community child care subvention programme funds community not-for-profit child care services to allow them to provide quality child care at reduced rates for disadvantaged and low-income working parents. More than 25,000 children benefit from this programme annually.

A number of further initiatives have been introduced under the training and employment child care programmes to support parents who are participating in training or educational courses in order to return to the workforce. They include the child care education and training support programme which provides subsidised child care places for qualifying trainees or students for the duration of their courses. The after school child care programme provides after school care for primary school children for certain categories of working parents for one year. Last year it was enhanced in a number of ways, including by providing funding for a pick-up service at no extra cost to parents where providers were in a position to do so.

3 o'clock

Community employment schemes often provide the first opportunity for parents to engage in the workforce. The community employment child care programme subsidises the cost of child care for participating parents. Following a number of enhancements, the programme now includes an after-school child care option at a weekly cost of €15 for parents of primary school children, as well as a part-time day care option for up to ten weeks during school holidays.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has been working closely with the Department of Social Protection to ensure that these initiatives provide the maximum benefit to parents in an economy that is now delivering an increased number of work opportunities.

The current level of State investment in child care, at more than €250 million per year, is very substantial. To ensure that all the benefits of child care investments are fully realised,

public investment in child care must be evidence-based and strategically co-ordinated.

In order to develop a coherent whole-of-government approach to child care investment, I have established an interdepartmental group to examine and develop options for future investment in child care, both in the early years and for children of school-going age. The work of the group will be informed by documented best practice and current policy commitments, and through consultation with relevant stakeholders.

On 31 March, an open policy debate was attended by 40 invited representatives including parents, child care providers, academics, child care committees, and non-governmental organisations. A range of views on future policy directions was put forward, and a number of options for future investment were examined and discussed. A report of the debate is currently being compiled and will be published in due course.

An online consultation process was also provided for stakeholders with an interest in the field, including policy-makers, practitioners, providers, advocates and academics, as well as one specifically for parents and guardians. Almost 400 submissions were made by stakeholders and nearly 1,000 submissions were made by parents and guardians. These submissions will feed into the deliberations of the interdepartmental group. I take this opportunity to thank all who made submissions for doing so.

I have asked the group to consider a wide range of options, which must be rigorously analysed and properly costed, to develop sensible solutions to the challenges families face, rather than an expensive shopping list of “like to haves”. I have asked that the final report of the group be submitted to me by the summer - next month in fact - to inform Government deliberations on this important area.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: I thank the Minister for his response. The crux of the matter is that our child care costs are among the most expensive in the world; we are up there with the US. It costs €2,000 per month for two children in a crèche, which is a shocking indictment.

We are told that the country is in a better position financially and that there is €500 million to €700 million to give out in the next budget. Is the Minister considering providing a tax credit to couples so that in particular talented women can remain in the workforce to help towards the cost of mortgage repayments, which is a second mortgage in the case of many families? It is costing the economy a considerable amount of money.

I previously quoted from the baby brain drain study which indicated that 3,000 new mothers leave the workforce annually which costs €68 million. We are depriving women of the opportunity to work and this could easily be remedied. I know that the country has been in a very bad place financially over the past ten years or so. We now have an opportunity to help families in the squeezed middle who are facing huge weekly costs. I hope the Minister can provide some hope for those people.

Deputy James Reilly: I thank the Deputy. People often speak about the Government spending 0.2% on children when compared with other OECD countries. However, in reality it is more than 0.4%, which is still lower than it should be, when we take into account the moneys spent elsewhere in education, social protection and now our commitment, on which I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, and the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, to give free GP care to all children under six.

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This morning I launched a new initiative, called Better Start, which is to support early childhood care and education providers. It is a mentoring service with 30 highly qualified mentors who will visit and support providers with ongoing advice on how to improve quality and care in the work they do. I welcome this as an initiative that will support people as they continue their professional development through life, which is something we need to do in all areas. It has existed for years for doctors and nurses.

The cost of child care is like a second mortgage and the Government has acknowledged that many families are struggling. That is why this group was established. It is not to come up with a wish list but to come up with properly analysed evidence-based options from which the Government can choose. They need to be properly costed so that we can start a process to address this. I favour giving parents a choice and affording Government the opportunity to have an input into standards and quality of the placements available, much as the ECCE programme works now.

We need more investment in child care and I will strongly fight for that. The Deputy compared the costs here with those in the United States. It is not that they are out of kilter *per se*, but the issue is our ability to subsidise care costs and we need to address that.

Refugee Data

Deputy Mick Wallace: Hundreds of thousands are trying to get across the Mediterranean, not because they are chasing wonderful welfare benefits in Europe, but because their lives have been destroyed in the countries from which they have come. Sadly we do not seem to have a problem with the US using Shannon Airport as a military base to cause severe destruction in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. We have refused to call Israel to account in Palestine. Of the refugees in the world today 5 million are Palestinian, 4 million are Syrian, 2.9 million are Afghans and 1.8 million are Iraqis.

There are serious issues at stake. Obviously those who have the gold make the rules. Even though the riches might be unequally divided, Europe and the US are rich in no small part because other places are poor. The developed world has much to answer for in that regard.

I welcome Ireland's decision to take in approximately 300 refugees; it is a small start. Given that they have been sanctioned by the UN as worthy of protection, will they go into direct provision or will they be given proper facilities to participate in Irish society and look for work?

I know there is a second stage to this and there is an effort to redistribute many of the refugees who have already arrived in Europe, mainly in Italy and Greece at the moment. Will the Government take a positive approach to this and seek to take in some of these people when they come to be redistributed in a few weeks' time?

An EU Foreign Ministers' meeting on Monday will consider a proposal to launch some military missions on Libya to attack the boats that could carry potential migrants across the sea. When our Minister goes there on Monday I urge him to advocate that this would be sheer lunacy. Most of these people are fishermen. The boats are involved in fishing. They get bought up overnight to carry migrants the next day at a high price. The idea of bombing them is crazy. We should never have agreed to the bombing of Libya in the first place. NATO has destroyed the place. The idea of another military adventure into Libya makes no sense. I advocate that

the Government refuse to sign up to such an idea.

Deputy Clare Daly: I welcome that we are taking 300 refugees; I am sorry it is not more. I hope the Minister and the Government will proactively consider and argue that we should take more when the EU moves to deal with these tens of thousands of people who are incarcerated in holding centres, particularly in Greece and Italy.

The real issue is what condition those people will be in when they come to Ireland. Are we going to treat them as citizens with respect and dignity or will they be thrown into direct provision centres with others who have desperately sought asylum here?

We have looked at this debate the wrong way around because it is not about charity or our being nice. Refugees do not want sympathy or tears; they want us to stop facilitating the reasons that made them refugees in the first place. Unless we address these issues, we will be faced with this crisis for years to come.

A report published at the end of April by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists reveals that the World Bank displaced a staggering 3.4 million people in the past five years. By funding privatisations, land grabs and dams, by backing companies and governments accused of rape, murder and torture, and by putting \$50 billion into projects graded highest risk for irreversible and unprecedented social impacts, the World Bank has massively contributed to the flow of impoverished people across the globe. If we are serious about stopping and assisting people, the first thing we could do is start dealing with the World Bank, IMF and other research institutions. The second thing we could do is stop being complicit and backing NATO and US imperialists in bombing the Middle East, particularly Libya and Syria. This has generated the beginnings of Isis. A key reason a flood of refugees and immigrants are desperately seeking a future in Europe is that the United States and NATO have destroyed their countries, families and livelihoods. It is not about charity or about our being nice; it is about us making amends in some way for activities in which we are complicit by allowing Shannon Airport to be used.

Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Damien English): I thank the Deputies for raising today Ireland's decision to resettle refugees as part of the EU resettlement programme. I am speaking on behalf of the Minister for Justice and Equality, who regrets she is unable to be present for the debate due to previous official commitments. I will, of course, bring the views of the Deputies to her attention and that of the other relevant Ministers before the meeting next week. I will ensure the transcript of the debate is read.

Ireland has participated in a UN-led resettlement programme since 2000. This programme is co-ordinated by the office for the promotion of migrant integration in the Department of Justice and Equality. Prior to Ireland's participation in this UN programme, Ireland had offered resettlement to groups of refugees, including Hungarians, Chileans, Vietnamese, Bosnians and Kosovars, since the 1950s.

Since the beginning of the UNHCR-led resettlement programme in 2000, 1,198 vulnerable persons from 27 different countries of origin have been resettled here. In general, the refugees resettled in Ireland come from Africa or Asia. The largest communities are from countries such as Burma, Iran, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Syria. Ireland is working closely with the UNHCR to respond to the plight of the most vulnerable persons displaced by these conflicts and has played its part in the international community resettlement effort and will continue to do so in the context of the EU response to the Mediterranean refugee crisis.

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The total number of persons displaced by the Syrian conflict admitted to Ireland under the resettlement programme from 2013 to date is 138. This includes 31 Afghans and four Iraqi Palestinians admitted from Damascus in 2013, 90 Syrian refugees admitted from Jordan and Lebanon in 2014 and 13 Syrian refugees who arrived from Jordan in April 2015. Prior to yesterday's announcement, the Minister had already committed to resettling 100 refugees in 2015 and 120 refugees in 2016. The focus was on refugees caught up in the conflict in the Middle East, notably Iraq and Syria, including a number of refugees who have urgent medical needs.

The EU agenda on migration, published yesterday, includes specific proposals on the resettlement of migrants in Europe under which Ireland was expected to receive 272 people by the end of 2016. Rather than waiting until the Commission's proposals are discussed formally by home affairs Ministers in June, the Minister announced yesterday that the Government has agreed in principle to resettle an additional 300 vulnerable people as our contribution to this European initiative. In addition, Ireland has operated a Syrian humanitarian application programme under which 114 people arrived in Ireland this year to join family already here.

Deputy Mick Wallace: It is good that Ireland is taking in some people. It has been one of the better countries at providing aid in some crises in which people are suffering badly. Rather than just examining the symptoms and trying to help in whatever way we can, it is surely time that we took on board the serious causes of the serious crises around the globe. As I stated before, the migrants did not just appear out of thin air.

Militarisation of much of the Middle East and other parts of the world has a lot to do with the efforts of so many hundreds of thousands of migrants to get across the Mediterranean. We need to take this on board. I appeal to the Government to think again about the fact that we allow arms and munitions to come through Shannon Airport. This helps to cause so much of the misery. War is responsible for a considerable proportion of the displacement. Ireland could play a very positive role by standing up and saying no country, including the United States, should be allowed to bring any arms and munitions or troops through Ireland to any war front because war does not create peace, it creates destruction. I appeal to the Government to take a fresh look at how we are allowing Shannon Airport to be used.

Deputy Clare Daly: We must stand back and consider the horrendous circumstances that force individuals and families to make the treacherous journey to try to seek a better life in Europe. It does not bear thinking about. People give up their life savings and essentially entrust their children to pirates who put them on a ship that they know has a good chance of not making it to the other side. It is beyond belief.

In that context, I am very glad the Government is resettling people but I am sorry more people are not being resettled. I hope more from the next batch will be resettled. However, the key issue here is not about resettling refugees. It should be about preventing them from being turned into refugees in the first place. People are being driven from their own countries where their families are and in which they speak their own language. They are left with no future where they should be living, surrounded by the people and life circumstances that they know best. Does the Minister of State believe they really want to come here? Their migration is because of economic pillaging or military devastation. I echo the point that we are complicit in this by allowing Shannon Airport to be part of this process. There is no doubt in my mind that the US military that have transited through Shannon Airport and engaged in activities such as those in Syria and Libya are partly the reason so many people are now ending up in this devastating situation.

Deputy Damien English: I thank the Deputies for raising the resettlement programme and many other issues, including that of Shannon Airport. The Deputies have debated Shannon here on numerous occasions with various Ministers, most recently with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charlie Flanagan. I will ask these Ministers to review today's discussion to feed into the debate.

The Deputies are correct that the Irish Government does have a role in prevention. Ireland is involved in a number of initiatives at European level to try to prevent the displacement of people. It is not just about helping out when circumstances reach crisis point but about arriving at long-term solutions. We are involved in discussions on this. There are many initiatives in this regard throughout Europe.

The commitment to resettle an additional 300 vulnerable people, announced yesterday, is part of the wider Government contribution to the crisis in the Mediterranean. It includes sending a naval vessel to the region to engage in search and rescue. Violence, conflict and instability have a horrendous impact on civilian populations. As the Deputies stated, families are faced with repeated displacement due to conflict and have very limited access to basic services. Ireland will continue to assist people affected by conflict and persecution. This year, it will provide nearly €80 million in funding to support communities affected by humanitarian crises, including in Syria, Yemen, northern Nigeria, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and other conflict-affected areas. The EU Commission proposals published yesterday are comprehensive and cover a number of issues that require detailed answers before the European Council meeting in June.

The Minister for Justice and Equality has previously expressed her horror and outrage at the tragic loss of life in the Mediterranean Sea. She has consistently said that the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Mediterranean is an EU issue that requires a co-ordinated EU response and that Ireland will play its part in that. This is what the Deputies are calling for.

The Dáil adjourned at 3.20 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 19 May 2015.