



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé hAoine, 10 Iúil 2015*

*Friday, 10 July 2015*

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10 a.m.

***Paidir.***

***Prayer.***

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## **Criminal Law (Child Grooming) Bill 2014: Second Stage [Private Members]**

**Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy:** I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I welcome this opportunity to debate what I believe is a timely and important Bill. This legislation is the result of my previous work on the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality and with front-line agencies supporting victims of abuse and exploitation. It is a short Bill which will create an offence of child grooming for sexual exploitation. Incredibly, Ireland does not have a specific child grooming offence.

Deputies may recall that such a proposal was unanimously supported by the members of the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality, as part of the review of the laws on prostitution a couple of years ago. The committee is very ably chaired by our colleague, Deputy David Stanton. This debate is timely as it is taking place just two weeks after the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child challenged Ireland to outline what measures are in place to protect children from sexual abuse and grooming. The committee set a four-month deadline for Ireland to respond.

I believe the creation of an offence with strong penalties will address the concerns of the United Nations committee and also ensure that Ireland is meeting its obligations under EU directives. In addition, as Deputies will be aware, this debate takes place as the Government is about to honour its commitment to publish a new criminal law (sexual offences) Bill which will include the wider recommendation of the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality regarding laws targeting the buyers of sex. The time is now right for us to act to address shortfalls and weaknesses in our laws. In recent weeks I raised the need for the publication of the criminal law (sexual offences) Bill with the Taoiseach on the Order of Business. I was advised that it will be published in this Dáil term. I sincerely hope it is on that time schedule.

Deputies may notice that the Criminal Law (Child Grooming) Bill 2014 is a short Bill. However, that does not take away from its important content. We will all be aware of the significant levels of public concern last year about allegations of grooming on a large scale in

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Rotherham in England and in particular, the allegations that many of those responsible managed to evade justice. However, Deputies may not be aware of the number of children who, shockingly, are being moved around our own country to be sexually exploited. Thirty children were detected over a two-year period.

I believe that Members on all sides of the House will agree with me that we must ensure that the most robust laws possible are in place to combat these heinous crimes. The intention of this Bill is clear. Persons undertaking certain acts, including soliciting, requesting, counselling, encouraging, procuring or enticing a child to do any act, including meeting an adult, shall be guilty of an offence. Under the law a person under the age of 17 is considered to be a child. In addition, persons communicating with a child by whatever means, online or offline, with a view to gaining the trust of that child for the purpose of doing anything that would constitute sexual exploitation, shall be guilty of an offence.

In order to underline the seriousness of these crimes, on conviction such offences shall carry penalties not exceeding 14 years imprisonment. It is important to note that while some of the public commentary around my proposals have been about online grooming, these offences would also apply to offline grooming so as to protect children in the general community and not just when they surf the Internet.

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

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

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe):** On behalf of the Minister, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, who regrets that she is unable to attend today, I thank Deputy Corcoran Kennedy for bringing forward this Bill and raising this very important issue. Modern information and communications technology, in particular the Internet, offers all of us, including children, great opportunities. However, there are also risks and children can be exposed to inappropriate behaviour online. Educating children and their parents on Internet safety is the most effective way of recognising and avoiding this type of behaviour.

The office of Internet safety in the Department of Justice and Equality co-ordinates the EU safer Internet project in Ireland. This is a consortium of industry, education, child welfare and government partners which acts as a safer Internet centre in Ireland. The project promotes the safer use of electronic media and enhances the protection of children online. The office of Internet safety also provides information for both children and parents on safer Internet use. Understanding the risks and knowing how to avoid them is the best form of protection for all Internet users and children in particular.

None the less, children do make contact with people online whom they do not know. A 2012 project by EU Kids Online, funded by the EU and undertaken by the London School of Economics, surveyed more than 25,000 children across 25 countries. Although by no means affecting a majority of users, the statistics from that report and a subsequent update in 2014 show that online risks affect a significant minority of children. These would include exposure to sexual messaging and imagery. The Minister for Justice and Equality is bringing forward a number of proposals to target such risks. While sharing the aim of this Bill, these proposals deal with specific types of behaviour and actions which would fall under the category of child grooming. Where a child is identified by a potential abuser, a process of communicating with the child can begin. To a child, this conduct may be innocuous but to a reasonable person it may give cause for concern that a meeting with a child would be for a sexual purpose. This conduct and type of communication is grooming. They are the initial steps which are likely or intended to lead to the sexual exploitation of a child. As the Deputy identifies rightly in the explanatory memorandum to the Bill, the existing offence of sexual exploitation of a child under section 3 of the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 includes inducing the child to engage in or observe a sexual act as well as inducing the child to engage in prostitution or the production of child pornography. These offences would address a range of conduct under the heading “sexual grooming”. However, not all conduct that would constitute grooming is included. The Minister for Justice and Equality agrees with the Deputy in this regard. The process of child grooming can be gradual. Seemingly innocent contact via information and communication technology such as social media, messaging apps or online forums may hide a sinister motive.

To combat what may appear to be innocent behaviour, the Minister for Justice and Equality will propose new offences which will specifically address online grooming and will be included in the forthcoming criminal law (sexual offences) Bill. The first offence will criminalise persons who contact children either online or through mobile communications such as text messaging for the purpose of sexually exploiting the child. The offence is targeted at the initial stages of grooming and does not require physical contact or a meeting between the adult and child. The offence does not necessarily require the communication to contain a sexual advance or to include sexual material as these are not generally features of sophisticated grooming but it does require that the communication is to facilitate the sexual exploitation of the child. The penalty of up to 14 years imprisonment reflects the serious nature and intent behind the communication.

It will be a separate offence to send a child sexually explicit material by means of information and communications technology. Familiarising a child with such material is a classic grooming technique which seeks to desensitise a child to sexual activity. These offences specifically address online grooming. However, the sexual offences Bill will also address other forms of child sexual grooming. While the provisions are being finalised for publication, I would like to outline for the House the very specific conduct which will be targeted.

As I have mentioned, familiarising a child with sexually explicit material is a classic grooming technique. Under the sexual offences Bill, a person who, for the purpose of corrupting or depraving a child, causes the child to witness or watch sexual activity or view sexually explicit material will commit an offence. It will also be an offence for a person, for their own sexual gratification, to cause a child to witness or watch sexual activity. The sexual offences Bill will also address meeting a child for the purpose of the sexual exploitation of that child. While initial meetings may be for the purpose of advancing the grooming of the child, ultimately this conduct is intent on an act of sexual abuse against the child. This is also an element of the of-

fence set out in the Bill before us.

A version of this offence exists under current law. Under section 3(2A) of the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998, it is an offence to meet a child or travel with the intention of meeting a child having met or communicated with the child on two or more previous occasions. This offence is to be replaced in the new sexual offences legislation. First, a single prior communication is sufficient rather than the current requirement for two such communications. Second, the offence will be triggered simply by making the arrangements to travel to meet a child. Again, this is directed at behaviour initiating and encouraging a relationship between an adult and child for the purpose of sexually exploiting that child.

Like Deputy Corcoran Kennedy, the Minister for Justice and Equality is also concerned that persons who travel outside the State to commit the offences covered by the new legislation can be prosecuted. Under existing legislation, there is an offence of travelling abroad for the purpose of sexually exploiting a child. That offence will also be broadened along the lines of the domestic offence to include making arrangements to travel abroad as an element of the offence.

There will be an offence under the new legislation of soliciting or importuning a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Similar provisions are contained in Deputy Corcoran Kennedy's Bill. The new offence includes paying, giving, offering to pay or give money or some other consideration for the purpose of sexually exploiting a child. The offence will be worded to include circumstances where non-monetary remuneration, such as a computer game, is offered or given to a child.

All of the new offences related to child grooming will also be included in the new jurisdiction provisions to be included in the sexual offences Bill so that it will be an offence for a person to commit any of those offences against a child in a place outside the State.

While there is an understandable focus on the risks posed to children by online predators, it is a fact that children can be at risk in both the virtual and real worlds. The sexual exploitation of children has devastating effects. The impact on the child, its health, relationships, families and opportunities can stretch lifelong. The special vulnerability of children requires that we ensure every protection is available. Being able to effectively target those who prey on children before an act of abuse or exploitation occurs is therefore crucial. Deputy Corcoran Kennedy targets this behaviour through her Bill. However, while it is not proposed to oppose this Bill, the Minister for Justice and Equality intends to pursue grooming behaviours through the sexual offences Bill. In addition to the number of offences relating to child grooming I have outlined to the House, it will also address a wide range of other matters relating to sexual offences and offending. In doing so, it extends and strengthens our sexual offences law and more fully reflects the provisions of a number of international instruments including the EU Directive on combatting child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse.

On behalf of the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, I thank again Deputy Corcoran Kennedy for bringing this Bill forward. Protecting children from predatory behaviour is a priority. Educating children on internet safety is the most effective means of protection. Such protection is supported by the criminal law which must target those who would target children. The Deputy's Bill reflects the policy developments in the Department of Justice and Equality and I look forward to hearing all of the contributions to today's debate.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I am glad of the opportunity to speak on this Bill and congratulate

Deputy Corcoran Kennedy on producing it and thank her for doing so. She is a loss to the Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality. Bringing this Bill forward has given us another opportunity to deal with what is a very sinister part of our society and the world we live in today and something we have to face up in a robust fashion. Fianna Fáil supports the Bill and extending the criminalisation of the grooming of children for sexual exploitation. Currently, numerous pieces of legislation are used to protect minors from sexual offences. The offences, as currently constituted, include most acts which would include grooming of a child. The proposed legislation extends current offences to include activities geared towards building a relationship with a child so that a meeting and-or sexual exploitation will subsequently occur.

The Garda estimates that it had approximately 30 detections of what could be classified as child exploitation or trafficking of people for child exploitation or grooming during the 2013 to 2014 period. The criminal law (sexual offences) Bill, published by the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, has been mentioned. The heads of the Bill were published in November 2014 and have been under consideration for a long time. The Bill will form a necessary part in the implementation of the EU directive. It is clear an EU-wide response is urgently required to the situation given trafficking transverses our borders and does not recognise or respect them.

Not wishing to be partisan in this debate, it is regrettable that the criminal law (sexual offences) Bill has not been brought forward before now. Everybody is on the same page regarding that legislation and everybody in this House supports it fully. I cannot understand why it has not been brought forward to date. We should take every opportunity, even on these Friday sittings, to take legislation like that and, if necessary, pass All Stages.

We agree with the provision in the proposed legislation that persons undertaking acts that include soliciting, requesting, counselling, encouraging, procuring or enticing a child under the age of 17 to carry out any act, including meeting an adult, shall be guilty of an offence. We agree also that persons communicating with a child by whatever means with a view to gaining his or her trust for the purpose of doing anything that would constitute sexual exploitation shall be guilty of an offence. To underline the seriousness of the crimes involved, Fianna Fáil and I agree that a conviction should carry a sentence of imprisonment for up to 14 years. This sends out a strong message.

We agree with the rationale for the Bill. Unfortunately, there are many new tools and software that have been used to exploit children for sex abuse. The adoption of modern communications technology has resulted in a significant step change in the sexual abuse of children in many ways. The online spheres, referred to by previous speakers, carry with them perceived anonymity. This goes all the way towards emboldening the offenders because they can hide behind a veil of secrecy. Persons interested in child sexual abuse feel their online behaviour is less risky because they have this anonymity. This encourages them to offend more and seek more graphic and violent content than would be found offline. We know all this material is available online. There is a worldwide community of like-minded individuals who are able to speak to each other and act as a network over the Internet in order to organise themselves to engage in child grooming, which ultimately leads to the commission of sexual offences.

With regard to the word “grooming”, the online sphere facilitates grooming and the solicitation of children for the purpose of sexual abuse and exploitation. It involves getting close to the children and gaining their trust. We have all heard so many stories or read accounts of how children have got sucked into the online sphere in the belief they are conversing with a person

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of their own age. They do not know that, behind the cloak of secrecy, there is in many cases an adult or older child.

It is high time we took on this issue. We are living in the information and technology age. We must be as firm in dealing with the problem as we are in dealing with other offences scourging our land. There is a major problem with burglary in the country and the Minister for Justice and Equality has brought forward proposals in that regard. My party and I have done so also. It is a question of sending out a robust message and strong response. The message in the legislation before the House, that a person can be imprisoned for up to 14 years, is very robust.

My main point concerns the fact that the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill has been stagnant for too long. While the Bill before us is to discuss child grooming, we know the main intent of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill is to criminalise the purchaser of sex. As part of our deliberations on this, the joint committee met sex workers or people involved in prostitution. They give themselves different titles. Many of them gave us some very harrowing accounts of how they became involved and the experiences they had when they worked in the industry. The point that really struck home for me was the fact that the younger the sex worker, the more in demand she was. This proves the point that there is a great desire among some very sick people in our communities to get their hands on children for the purpose of sexual exploitation. That is why we need a robust response in our criminal law. It is regrettable that it has not been achieved before now.

I pay tribute to all the people who came forward to speak to the committee. We met them also in Buswells Hotel in a private briefing session run by Ruhama and representatives of the Turn Off the Red Light campaign. I publicly acknowledge the work of the campaigners in this regard. The meeting went a long way towards educating me and other legislators on the need to protect children from grooming and women who get sucked into prostitution. Behind prostitution and child grooming is a very well organised criminal network. The workers are being trafficked by criminals to make illicit profit.

Our legislation has to catch up and be fit for purpose so as to address the activity of the criminals. One way of dealing with the problem is by tackling the demand. International studies have shown this. The committee visited the Scandinavian region and examined outcomes there based on the authorities' approach to tackling demand for sexual services and prostitution services. One will never eradicate the practice completely. Society in Ireland has to move on and we must tackle the demand. The glib old response that prostitution is the oldest trade in the world - fellows have a laugh about it and there is a bit of brouhaha - is not good enough at all. Behind prostitution are men, women, boys and girls who have been trafficked and who are being sexually exploited so criminal gangs can make profit. That is not good enough.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill and thank Deputy Corcoran Kennedy for bringing it before the House and allowing this discussion to take place. The Government's delay in making progress on the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill is unacceptable. Both Houses of the Oireachtas have for a number of years been debating Private Members' Bills such as this one only to be told by Ministers time and again that such Bills are unnecessary because a more comprehensive Bill is on its way. We are coming to the end of this Dáil term and there is still no sign of a comprehensive Bill to reform this area of law. If the Government knew there would be a delay like this, it should have accepted Private Members' Bills and enacted them so that, at the very least, some reform would have been legislated for and some adequate protection would have been afforded to citizens.

I welcome Deputy Corcoran Kennedy's Bill. It is an important one and it is comprehensive and logical. It is in keeping with international best practice and Sinn Féin will support its passage to Committee Stage. It is a shame that the general scheme of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill that was published by the Minister for Justice and Equality late last year has not seen progress since. There is a pressing need to address all the law in this area.

Sexual violence is probably the most pervasive crime in Irish society, yet it remains under-reported, under-investigated and under-prosecuted. Conviction rates are low and criminal sentences rarely reflect the devastating impact of the crime on its victims. For their part, policy-makers and policing services consistently fail to afford this crime the focus or resources it deserves. Sinn Féin believes that safeguarding the well-being of children and young people to protect them from physical, sexual and emotional harm and neglect should be a priority in law and policy. In all matters concerning the child, the welfare and protection of the young person must be paramount. Every child has the right to be protected from all forms of abuse.

Sinn Féin acknowledges that most child victims are abused by members of their families, but there are a growing number of offenders who are using the Internet and social media. I agree with the statement made by the Deputy in the explanatory memorandum to the effect that in this time of information and communications technology it is possible for non-contact sexual abuse to occur even without a face-to-face meeting. In that context, measures such as sex offender registers and vetting in isolation will not stop abhorrent crimes of sexual abuse occurring. Deputy Corcoran Kennedy's initiative is to be welcomed as an additional measure to give reassurance to parents, guardians and so forth. The widening of the offence is a common-sense way to combat the growing rate of such abhorrent offences.

It is indeed necessary to further strengthen the child protection framework of criminal law by removing the offence of meeting a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation and replacing it with an offence of grooming a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The law must recognise that sexual offences against children are emerging from the building of relationships with children. The dangers posed by the Internet in this regard must be tackled. Education on online safety must continue.

My colleague, Sinn Féin's justice spokesperson Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, has raised the challenges faced by the computer crime investigation unit of An Garda Síochána previously. There have been numerous reports of resource shortages and apparently a poor level of modern technology to keep up with the changes. This has led to backlogs in the reporting and monitoring systems. There is significant concern in child protection sectors that anyone allegedly looking at level five child pornography could get off because of resource issues. We need urgent assurance from the Minister that the technology, which apparently is antiquated, will be brought up to the required specification as soon as possible and that the necessary personnel resources will be deployed. We cannot have a situation in which persons inclined to view the most heinous type of child pornography have a sense that they might get off due to resource or technology issues.

In this regard, it is important to address an issue that must be dealt with in the Minister's Bill when it is finally brought forward. It must be clear that only An Garda Síochána can take part in sting operations against paedophiles. I do not want to see a situation in which vigilantes target paedophiles of their own accord through sting operations online. I am rather concerned that this would be done by people who are not trained, or delegated by society, to do it. The focus for the Minister, though, must be to give An Garda Síochána the information technology equip-



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ment and human resources that it needs. We have to give the Garda every angle the force needs, and I hope this will be teased through in the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality.

Sinn Féin is calling for greater cross-Border co-operation between the Six Counties Assembly and the Twenty-six County Government, as well as the Garda Síochána and the PSNI, in dealing with predatory sex offenders. We are seeking greater cross-jurisdictional co-operation throughout the European Union and on the part of agencies such as Interpol in this regard. Furthermore, Sinn Féin is seeking the establishment of an all-Ireland policy on sex offenders - especially those who offend against children - to ensure congruence in sentencing and monitoring in order that neither jurisdiction will offer a safe haven for such individuals to escape justice or cause further suffering. We call for all-Ireland standards and protocols on the treatment of sex offenders and for the introduction of an effective all-Ireland register of sex offenders. The latter should include an in-built effectiveness review every five years.

I welcome the fact that Deputy Corcoran Kennedy has submitted a Bill to deal with this issue. The Government should have sought to introduce the criminal law (sexual offences) Bill far more quickly, and I hope that the debate in the House today will help in moving the Government Bill along. Sinn Féin will support this Bill to Committee Stage. This Bill deals with a pressing and dangerous issue that must be acted upon for the safety of children in this State.

**Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor:** As a mother, a daughter and a former school principal, I wholeheartedly welcome this Bill. However, I am saddened that this is the reality we live in, a reality in which we have to protect our innocent children from sexual exploitation and depraved individuals. This Bill responds to the concerns not only of the United Nations committee but of Irish parents who need to be sure in the knowledge that we are doing our utmost to protect their children from sexual exploitation.

I am a strong advocate for children's rights and against cyberbullying. Recently, I chaired an online national cyberbullying conference. I have seen how the Internet has become a dark place, with bullies, predators and the depraved people who prey on innocent children. Head 8 of the criminal justice (sexual offences) Bill 2014 addresses two particular activities. The first relates to a person who, particularly via the Internet, directly contacts a child to facilitate the sexual exploitation of that child. A second proposed offence relates to sending sexually explicit material to a child using communications technology. These offences will target the use of modern technologies for the purpose of sexually grooming a child, and I strongly welcome the measures.

Parents need to be vigilant at all times. Online activity of their children needs to be monitored. Parents should make no mistake about it: there are depraved individuals surfing the Internet and social media with the intent of corrupting and soliciting their children to be involved in sexually depraved acts. I encourage parents to monitor their children's online behaviour at all times. No responsible parent would allow her child to wander down O'Connell Street or a street in any city without supervision. Yet parents seem to believe it is safe for children to surf the Internet and online chat rooms.

I have had occasion in the recent past to visit a school where second year students, aged 14, were being advised about the dangers of cyberbullying. During the course of the class a number of boys reported that they had visited sites where men were attempting to entice them to meet. The boys told me that they responded to the men for the craic because they were bored. Parents should realise that this is what is happening in their homes. I advise that parents cannot be

careful enough. It is their responsibility to know what is happening in their homes. Legislators, politicians and police have a responsibility, but it is also incumbent on parents to ensure their children's safety.

I commend my hard-working colleague and friend, Deputy Corcoran Kennedy, on ensuring that this legislation is moved forward.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe):** I thank all the contributors to the debate. On behalf of the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Fitzgerald, I express my gratitude specifically to Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy for raising this important issue. As I said earlier, this Bill reflects the policy that the Department of Justice and Equality has been developing, which will form the basis of a number of provisions in the criminal law (sexual offences) Bill.

The shared goal of Deputy Corcoran Kennedy's Bill and the forthcoming criminal law (sexual offences) Bill is to ensure there is no gap in the law that can be exploited by those who would prey on children for the purpose of sexually exploiting or corrupting them.

When it comes to the online world, the most effective way of protecting children is to ensure they can protect themselves through safe Internet use. Projects such as the EU Safer Internet programme in Ireland promote the safer use of electronic and online media. Where it is necessary to employ the criminal law specifically to target child sexual grooming, the provisions to be included in the criminal law (sexual offences) Bill, which incorporate the concepts of the Bill before us, will effectively strengthen and extend the current law criminalising grooming behaviour. The law will cover more eventualities and can intervene at an earlier stage where behaviour indicative of child grooming comes to light.

I again thank the Deputy for introducing this Bill and the Members of the House for their contributions.

**Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy:** I thank all the Members who spoke in support of the Bill, in particular the Opposition Members, Deputies Niall Collins and McLellan. I also acknowledge my colleague, Deputy Mitchell O'Connor, for her contribution. The Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality would have spoken on the Bill today but, unfortunately, it clashes with a meeting of the select committee.

At long last we, as a society, are waking up to the type of criminal out there. These people can be in their own homes or on the Internet in another country and they are willing to prey on our children, objectify them and use them for their own gratification. We need to recognise this is happening and make every effort possible to protect our children and future children in our society.

I was delighted to hear the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, say that the Minister for Justice and Equality is accepting the Bill and that the Government is not opposing it. I look forward to the provisions of the Bill appearing in the criminal law (sexual offences) Bill. The specific actions and behaviours that constitute grooming are changing from decade to decade or even from year to year.

I again thank Members for their contributions and I look forward to the Bill moving to the next Stage in its passage through the Houses of the Oireachtas.

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Question put and agreed to.

### **Criminal Law (Child Grooming) Bill 2014: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** As this is a Private Members' Bill, it must, under Standing Orders 82A and 118, be referred to a select or special committee. The relevant committee is the Select Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality.

**Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy:** I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality, in accordance with Standing Orders 82A3(a) and 118 of the Orders of Reference of that committee.

Question put and agreed to.

*Sitting suspended at 10.45 a.m. and resumed at 11 a.m.*

*11 o'clock*

### **Rural Coastal Communities Report: Motion**

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann shall consider the Report of the Joint sub-Committee on Fisheries, entitled 'Report on Promoting Sustainable Rural Coastal and Island Communities', copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 14th January, 2014."

I thank the Ceann Comhairle and welcome the opportunity to outline the context, background and conclusions of the report of the Joint sub-Committee on Fisheries, Agriculture, Food and the Marine, which was published in January 2014. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Paul Kehoe. I note the irony that we have long been waiting for an opportunity to debate the report in the House yet when it finally happens it coincides with the second annual Harnessing our Ocean Wealth Conference which is taking place today in Ringaskiddy. With no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, I am sure the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Coveney, would have liked to be present here but for the conference. Deputy Noel Harrington, a sub-committee member, is also attending today's conference and other members might also be there.

By way of background information, as part of its work programme, the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, following its establishment in 2012, identified issues of common concern in relation to the fishing sector and the socio-economic challenge facing rural and island communities, in particular the fishing communities, as meriting detailed consideration.

The joint committee agreed to set up a sub-committee on fisheries. The committee is aware that inland fishing and island fishing come under the remit of the Departments of Transport, Tourism and Sport; Communications, Energy and Natural Resources; and the Environment, Community and Local Government, respectively, and considered it vital to establish a Joint Sub-Committee on Fisheries to focus solely on examining all such matters. The committee invited the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications and the Joint Committee on Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht to establish their own respective sub-committees so as to participate in proposed joint meetings of the three sub-committees.

Subsequent to that, a joint sub-committee of the three committees was established in December 2012, which while not unique is unusual, and we commenced detailed work throughout 2013. During this period, the joint sub-committee met in public on eight occasions and in private on nine occasions. We had engagement with a wide variety of stakeholders. To that end, I wish to express the committee's appreciation to all those who participated in the debate process. Those people gave the joint committee valuable information and insights into their experience. The time and energy devoted to the report has ensured that it contains a number of concrete and credible recommendations, of which there are 29 in total. Most of the people who attended the hearings had to travel from the south-west and north-west coasts and it was a considerable effort for them. To that end, we chose to launch the report in their territory on Inis Oírr on 18 January so as at least to acknowledge in some way the fact that they had given of their time to contribute to the findings. I will allow the other members of the sub-committee to elaborate on a number of issues, as they are probably all more *au fait* with fishing matters than I, but on a personal level I both enjoyed the process and learned a lot about the subject of the report from the proceedings and the engagement with my colleagues and the witnesses who came before us.

The report addresses the following key themes: defining the rural coastal and island communities on which the report is focused and sourcing a socio-economic profile of them; describing the existing policy and licensing regimes upon which the industries and services, as listed in the report, are based; providing key statistics relating to the industries and services listed; summarising other challenges and opportunities facing the relevant communities and stakeholders; and confirming which industries and services are most important to the communities and stakeholders. While renewable energy is one such emerging industry, the sub-committee felt that this particular industry would possibly merit a specialised examination in future by it or another Oireachtas committee. The other key themes addressed are providing relevant background and comparative information from another EU member state, namely, the United Kingdom and more specifically Scotland where we visited; examining the effectiveness of Government policy in relation to the industries upon which the communities rely, in particular inshore fishing; and identifying strategies that could help the communities address unemployment and deprivation.

The report thereafter addresses the issues identified by the sub-committee on a thematic basis, which is subsectioned into three as follows, and on which the sub-committee has made specific recommendations. Section 1 refers to rural coastal and island communities, provides a socio-economic profile and gives a brief overview of the current reform of the CFP; examines the socio-economic profile of rural coastal and island communities and attempts to define the geographical extent of the communities. That is contained in recommendation No. 1.

Section 2 relates to existing policy and licensing regimes. It examines all of the themes set out in the introduction to the report but, in the main, gives the background policy and statistics, which are contained in recommendations Nos. 2 to 15. Section 3 concerns developing strategies for rural and island communities. It examines all the main themes but does so, generally,

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from a more analytical perspective and identifies what are the most relevant policy and operational questions that need to be addressed at this stage. They are contained in recommendations Nos. 16 to 29. They vary extensively.

The sub-committee report makes a number of important recommendations to ensure Ireland's seas and coasts are managed effectively for the benefit of the communities that depend on them most.

It is imperative that Ireland's distinctive rural coastal areas and islands are developed in a sustainable manner into the future. As well as their rich influence on national culture and language, the communities have the potential to make a significant contribution to the wider economy in areas such as food, tourism and marine energy. The report seeks to chart an optimum course to sustainably develop our marine resources, ensuring that long-term economic and employment potential of the commercial aquaculture industry can be unleashed, while safeguarding Ireland's enviable reputation for seafood production. Any development of aquaculture is predicated on the implementation of a sound regulatory system, which has the confidence of the public and the European Commission.

The Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine is preparing a submission on the consultation process on the sustainable development of the aquaculture sector. We had hearings last week and this week and will have one more next week before we conclude. It is timely that this issue is back on the agenda because potential is one thing but realising that potential in a sustainable fashion is another. The key theme we were trying to identify and highlight, which carries through the aquaculture sector, is the word "sustainable". As I have noted and as people have said, if the 20th century was about the industrial, mechanical and motor revolution in industry, the 21st century will be defined by the way all of the inhabitants of this planet can live sustainably on it without doing it permanent damage. Those of us who are involved in activities concerning our lands, seas and natural resources, and who have more knowledge of them, probably have more responsibility to ensure that this happens for future generations.

There are people I wish to thank and I will do so at the conclusion of the debate but I would like to acknowledge that the sub-committee's report was extensive. It is a quite a large document with a number of appendices and it has taken a considerable amount of time to prepare it. I would hate, regardless of who is in government, to think that the recommendations and themes of this report would not be adopted and implemented. We would like to think that the second Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth Conference was one of them which followed shortly after the first one. We would also like to think that the establishment of the regional inshore fisheries forums, RIFFs, was another. Its proposed establishment is contained in some of our recommendations. We would like eventually to see some of our key themes with regard to aquaculture adopted when the new consultation process on a sustainable development plan for aquaculture is adopted. I will now hand over to my colleagues.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach(Deputy Paul Kehoe):** I am speaking on behalf of my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, who is opening the second annual Harnessing our Ocean Wealth Conference in Ringaskiddy, County Cork, as Deputy Doyle explained. The conference and the SeaFest Maritime Festival, which has been organised to coincide with it, mark the progress Ireland has made in developing our blue economy under the stewardship of this Government.

It is important to put into context the role of seafood in relation to sustaining rural coastal

and island communities. Taking exports and the home market into account, the Irish seafood sector is now worth €800 million annually and supports 11,000 jobs primarily in coastal areas. There is significant scope for further value expansion in our seafood sector in the years ahead. Further development of the seafood processing sector is critical to that expansion in both the export and the home markets and to providing jobs. The Seafood Development Programme 2014-2020 aims to support the development of the sector through a wide range of targeted measures worth up to €241 million.

The increasing trend of greater foreign landings into Ireland is a positive development for the processing and support activities in our coastal communities. In total 78,000 tonnes of fish were landed from foreign vessels into our ports in 2013. This development allows Ireland to benefit from the economic dividend that flows from such landings by way of increased economic activity in some of our most isolated coastal communities.

Irish Seafood exports amounted to €540 million in 2014. Seafood exports to Asian markets such as Korea, China and Hong Kong continued to grow strongly in 2014 reaching €50 million. This strong future potential of the seafood industry is identified and acknowledged in the Food Wise 2025 national agrifood plan and in the marine strategy, Harvesting our Ocean Wealth 2020, and is being delivered through BIM and Bord Bia's strategies. The sub-committee's report makes a number of recommendations which concern a range of Government policies, including natural resources, marine safety and social protection.

Speaking on behalf of the Minister, I intend to address progress on aspects relevant to the seafood sector under his remit as Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The overarching goal of the new Common Fisheries Policy is to end overfishing and to make fishing sustainable - environmentally, economically and socially - thus resulting in a competitive and viable seafood sector for all. Key elements of the new Common Fisheries Policy include the setting of fishing levels on the basis of the maximum sustainable yield, MSY, principle, regionalisation of decision-making and the gradual phasing in of a discards ban. With regard to the latter, a discards plan for demersal stocks for north-western waters was recently agreed unanimously by the regional group of member states. This will come into force from the 1 January 2016. The discards ban will apply to all quota species in all fisheries from 2019 and the purpose of the discard plans is to begin a gradual phasing in of this new reality thereby allowing time for the industry to adapt and prepare. These are radical changes but they will help to achieve a sustainable, profitable and self-reliant industry that protects and enhances the social and economic fabric of rural coastal communities dependent on the seafood sector. The Minister is providing funding under the new operational programme to support the fishing fleet, both large and small, during this period of change.

In May 2014, the Minister established innovative consultative structures to bring Ireland's inshore fishing communities into discussions on the future of Ireland's seafood industry. The Minister recognised the need to take a different approach to communicating with Ireland's small-scale coastal fishermen in view of the very low level of professional trade representation for this part of the industry.

The newly established national inshore fisheries forum, NIFF, and regional inshore fisheries forums, RIFFs, provide areas for inshore fishermen to develop proposals on inshore fisheries management, including compliance and data gathering. The NIFF is representative of the under 12 m fishing fleet, the fishing boats of less than 12 m overall length. The focus on the NIFF work programme is on fisheries management in the coastal waters within six nautical miles.

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To date, the three NIFF meetings have led to very constructive two-way conversations on issues of mutual concern, industry priorities, emerging policies and initiatives. As a result of the successful discussions between the Minister and the forum, the Minister has included NIFF members on the quota management advisory committee, the industry science fisheries partnership and the EMFF operational programme monitoring committee. This gives the inshore sector a role in making recommendations to the Minister on allocation of Ireland's quotas, on data collection and scientific research and, perhaps most importantly, on how funding is utilised. The new consultative structures may foster the development of an inshore producer organisation, as the sub-committee's report recommends, but this is a matter for the industry itself to consider and bring forward.

The sub-committee's report refers to managing the lobster and shrimp fisheries. The Minister introduced changes which came into effect this year to the management of lobster and shrimp fisheries, following on from an extensive consultation process. The changes seek to achieve long-term sustainability for both stocks. In the case of shrimp, the new measures adjust the fishing season by bringing forward the closing date from 1 May to 15 March to protect the stock during the spawning season.

For lobster, in line with its economic importance as a mainstay of many inshore fishing boats, a multifaceted approach was introduced, commencing in May last year when the Minister announced a number of initiatives. First, the rate of financial assistance provided to fishermen for v-notching lobsters was increased to a maximum of 75% of the market value. The practice of v-notching allows lobsters to be returned to sea. It is illegal to sell lobsters that have been v-notched. Second, figures from BIM, which administers the lobster v-notching programme, indicated that the number of lobsters v-notched in 2014 was more than double the number in recent years, with some €250,000 of funding supporting the return of more than 30,000 berried female lobsters to the sea this year. Third, from 1 January 2015, a maximum landing size of 127 mm was introduced to support the reproductive potential of the lobster stock. The retention of very large lobsters in the stock is known scientifically to greatly enhance the reproductive potential of the stock and help to ensure its future sustainability. Fourth, during the first two years of the maximum landing size measure fishermen are permitted to bring oversize lobsters ashore to be v-notched. Following discussions with the National Inshore Fisheries Forum in May, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, increased financial assistance of up to 80% of the market value, the maximum allowable under EU rules, for this conservation practice.

The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has also introduced management measures which apply to razor clam fisheries. The measures were developed following public and industry consultation and discussions with the National Inshore Fisheries Forum. The new measures are essential tools in developing future sustainable plans for this fishery.

The sub-committee's report makes a number of recommendations concerning aquaculture. Irish aquaculture is at something of a crossroads at present, with many challenges to overcome in order to realise its full potential. The global projections for the expansion of aquaculture are very strong, and it is important that Ireland harness its coastal and marine resources to develop a sustainable aquaculture sector for the future.

To this end, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, launched a public consultation on Ireland's draft national strategic plan for sustainable aquaculture development proposing 24 actions and initiatives to boost the sustainable growth of aquaculture, which runs until 24 July. Actions proposed in the draft plan include the introduction of a set of guiding principles for the sustainable de-

velopment of aquaculture, recommended to the Minister by the Marine Institute, together with scale limits and phasing in regard to the development of individual offshore salmon farms, also recommended by the Marine Institute.

Other initiatives include a review of the regulatory framework for aquaculture licensing and associated administrative procedures, financial supports to build capacity and foster knowledge, innovation and technology transfer, and expert advice and training for aquaculture operators in business planning, disease management and environmental best practice.

I hope that I have managed to convey a broad perspective on the progress being made to develop the seafood sector, particularly the range of aspects that are relevant to rural coastal and island communities.

**Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan:** Although I am a Dubliner representing Dublin Central, tá áthas orm go bhfuil seans agam labhairt ar an ábhar seo, go háirithe ábhar ag baint leis na hoileáin, mar i rith na blianta, bhí seans agam turas a thabhairt chuig cuid mhór de na hoileáin thar timpeall an chósta. Ach tá caidreamh speisialta agam le hoileán amháin, Oileán Cléire i gContae Chorcaí. Thug mé cuairt ar an oileán sin don chéad uair níos mó ná 40 bliain ó shin agus táim ag dul ann go fóill. Despite my being from Dublin, my comments are based on visits to many of the islands, but particularly Cape Clear island off the coast of County Cork. We know that all the islands are places of spectacular physical beauty, from Rathlin and Tory and around the west coast to the south east coast, and one cannot but be struck by that.

I am probably the only person I know who enjoyed reading *Peig* and *An tOileánach*, but there is no doubt that island life presents challenges. There are difficulties for those living on islands, and people who live on the mainland have no idea about the practicalities. It is a positive development that we are having this discussion today as a result of the committee’s report.

I was struck by the sub-committee’s holistic approach to the issue of how these communities could be supported in a sustainable manner. “Sustainable” is the key word, because many of the islands are seeing a decrease in population, notwithstanding the increases during the summer months, especially for those which, like Oileán Chléire, have students coming in because they want to speak Irish.

In terms of bringing about sustainability, the report notes many different actors within the institutional policy framework and references nine Departments and agencies. What one person is drawing all that together, particularly in regard to the islands? There was a time when the islands were part of somebody’s ministerial brief, but that is no longer the case. I know there are demands on Ministers of State, and I was supportive of appointing one with responsibility for the area of drugs and addiction, but if we are taking the sustainability of islands seriously there is a need for such an appointment.

There is also a need for a particular type of engagement with island communities, and I am aware they were represented at these talks. The annual meeting of Comharchumann na nOileán was held last weekend. Islanders are the people who know the reality of living on the island and what they have to deal with, but sometimes officials who have not experienced aspects of island life come in and try to tell the islanders what is best for them. There is probably a case to be made that officials from the Department, particularly new officials, should spend time on the islands to try to understand the challenges people are facing and the changing nature of the fishing industry.



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Understandably, many of the recommendations are to do with fishing. While membership of the European Union has benefited farming, there is no doubt that fishing has suffered over the years, and fishermen with smaller fishing boats, in particular, are still struggling. It is sad to see young men who want to make a living from their small fishing boats having to give that up.

I note there are some practical recommendations on the small vessel sector.

There is no doubt that overfishing has been a problem, and while there was short-term gain for fishermen, it resulted in a long-term disaster. However, the smaller vessels did not contribute to that; it was the massive factory ships. As the salmon stock is increasing, priority must be given to certain communities along the coast, and particularly the islands.

Cape Clear was a pioneer in the area of aquaculture. Many years ago, fish farming was developed there. They had turbot, halibut and abalone. They put a tremendous amount of work into the infrastructure and marketing, with some success over the years. Unfortunately, due to various things that happened, that has gone. It was disappointing to see that go. In spite of all their innovation and very hard work.

When weather disasters occur, such as the one the Christmas before last, which decimated the livelihood of many small fishermen, particularly in terms of the lobster pots, there must be a quicker response to get people back fishing.

I do not believe that sustainability can be totally dependent on fishing. We have to consider other aspects. While in Cape Clear last weekend, I asked people there what would be on their wish lists. The first wish mentioned - this is the same for every industry - was broadband, which is vital. A broadband service is essential in many industries and to create employment. I am aware that a lack of broadband has prevented companies from setting up businesses on the islands.

I understand that Ireland is not included in the coastal periphery maritime region section in Brussels, and that we do not have a representative. That is surprising, because Ireland fits the peripheral and maritime categories.

There are other aspects that can help island life. Various suggestions have been made, which I will not go into now, but health care was one. I acknowledge the role of the lifeboats, which are very important for the fishing industry as well. I am conscious of the Baltimore lifeboat, and I know the men who work on that boat, which gives so much. We saw that recently with the tragedy in Baltimore. I know of the number of times they have come out to the islands to rescue fishermen, not just from Ireland but from other countries as well.

For the fishing industry and the people who live on the islands, the harbours are the lifelines. Piers have to be user-friendly. We must ensure they can be used regardless of the weather to ensure islands are not cut off.

Tourism is noted in the report. There is massive potential for tourism, but islands have been let down by Fáilte Ireland. It put so much into the development of the Wild Atlantic Way, which is a great initiative to be supported, but there is a need for an Atlantic way that is focused on the islands. Fishing tourism could be brought into that also. Jobs are needed to keep people on the islands. Thanks to the efforts of t-athair Ó Peicín, Tory was saved from depopulation and it did not suffer the same fate as the Blaskets. There are serious issues for the islands in terms of depopulation. As such, our focus should not be only on fishing. We must also look to the po-

tential for tourism, which is massive. Education is also very important. That five of our island schools have only one teacher is a serious issue. What is very noticeable about island life is the communities and the way in which they come together in fair and foul weather. We must work with the island communities on how to address all of these issues into the future.

There are other issues in relation to the islands that could feed into this report. For example, Cape Clear Island is very anxious to acquire national heritage status because this would help it in accessing other funding. I note that even though natural environment projects are eligible for national lottery funding no money has been provided to these types of projects. This is an opening for the islands.

In one way, islands are like any other community. Like any village, town or neighbourhood we share a lot. However, island life is different. Islanders face a different set of circumstances and this must be acknowledged. It is often because of those difficult set of circumstances that national policies do not suit. Particular national policies need to be adapted to the particular set of circumstances of island life.

The report is welcome, including by the people I have met on the islands. It is a way to move forward.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I welcome that this report is being discussed in the House today. It is almost 18 months since the report was published and it is important to have it placed officially on the record of the House. I hope it will not be consigned to the record and the archives from this point on.

I pay tribute to the chairman of the committee, Deputy Andrew Doyle. From day one, and particularly after he heard from the representatives of the Donegal islands community about the impact of the drift net ban on their communities, he was keen to ensure that a sub-committee would be established to address those issues. As stated by Deputy Doyle, he does not come from a coastal community. However, he has facilitated any discussions required at the committee and has seen the need for positive action to be taken. As chairman, he has always facilitated discussion by the committee of fishing and fishing community issues.

Before I speak to the report, I would like to inform Members that a documentary, entitled, *A Turning Tide in the Life of Man*, which documents the campaign by the island fishing communities in Donegal to try to save their community and influence decision makers, will be shown in Galway tomorrow as part of the Galway Film Festival. For those wishing to get a flavour of the background to the committee's work, a trip to the Town Hall Theatre in Galway to see it would be worthwhile.

The report was launched on Inish Oir island in January last year. It was fitting that it was launched there. Owing to weather conditions, flights off the island were cancelled and we had to travel from the mainland on the ferry. It was as though the weather had conspired to show first-hand to the committee members some of the difficulties of island life. The report arises from the fall-out of the ban on drift netting for salmon implemented finally in 2004 and the harm that the ban has had on the livelihood and life blood of island life and our coastal communities. Owing to people's inability to maintain their families through island life, the population of Aranmore Island has declined by half over the past 15 years. This is, perhaps, more starkly highlighted by the fact that in the region of 21 to 23 of Donegal island fishermen have refused the compensation offered by the Government as part of the drift net ban and have campaigned

since for some recognition of their dependence on the sea and policies at national and European level that would reflect this.

The report covers nine different Departments and agencies, which reflects the complexity of addressing this issue. More important, it reflects the difficulty of not having one agency with responsibility for what needs to be done. I know from my short time as a Member of this House that it is difficult to deal with any one Department. If one has to deal with two, three or four Departments in an effort to get something done, one might as well forget about it. An example in this regard is Natura 2000 and the many different agencies involved in setting the conservation objectives and the appropriate assessments to allow for aquaculture licensing. The real problem has been trying to get the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Marine Institute or the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which is under the aegis of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, to take a lead in this area. This is an issue which the Government needs to address seriously in terms of driving policy forward. It is important that even where an issue spreads across different Departments or agencies, one of them is forced to take responsibility to drive it forward.

At European level, the Common Fisheries Policy, CFP, adopted last year recognised small-scale and island fisheries in EU policy. What this actually means in practice and what impact it will have remains to be seen. The sub-committee report is another part of the response. Unfortunately, the committee is limited in its power and can only contribute by way of giving a platform to groups that are campaigning and by publishing reports attempting to influence policy at a national level.

There are 29 recommendations in the report, which, if implemented, may go some way to making life a bit easier for our coastal and island communities. They are wide-ranging and include attempts to ensure there are accurate statistics available to decision makers - it is not possible to make good decisions without good information - trying to secure exclusive fishing zones for coastal communities. The recommendations in relation to the Central Statistics Office, CSO, and the provision of particular statistics in relation to coastal communities is important because unless we can point to specific statistics that can demonstrate the impact of policy directly on communities, we cannot ensure we have good policy to be implemented in the first instance.

One of the constant complaints from officialdom in relation to the difficulty in working with inshore fishermen has been that there is not a unified voice. If only they could be like the IFA, it would be so much easier. Recognising this, and arising from the committee hearings, the island communities formed the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation, IIMRO, to lobby and work on behalf of their communities. IIMRO has been active since and has appeared before the committee, seeking a follow up on the report and what recommendations have been implemented. This is what is needed because reports should not be published and then left to sit on a shelf.

When the fodder crisis arose in 2013, committee hearings were held on the matter. There were so many members and organisations who wanted to make a contribution to those hearings one often could not get a seat in the committee room. Yet, during the hearings on the damage to the fishing communities following the storms at the beginning of last year, there were hardly enough members available to allow those committee hearings to take place. This reflects the need for lobby groups to ensure one's message gets out.

The National Inshore Fisheries Forum, NIFF, has been established under the Fisheries Local Action Groups, FLAG. Groups have been set up around the country to disperse some of the funding from the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund over the next few years, which is a belated attempt by the Government to provide some benefit to coastal communities that have suffered from the decline in fishing effort. NIFF needs to develop and break out from under the wing of FLAGS and assert itself on behalf of coastal communities. It is early days yet for it and hopefully it can achieve that and be a voice for inshore fishermen and communities.

I would like now to speak to some of the recommendations in the report. No. 10 recommends that the Government examine the feasibility of introducing a system of heritage fishing licences. Heritage licences would recognise traditional fishing methods and traditional fishermen and should recognise communities that depend in whole or in part on fishing as their sole livelihood. Regrettably, the Department does not seem to have done much on this yet. This needs to be addressed, in particular in terms of the low impact that inshore fishermen have on stocks.

No 14 recommends exclusive access for inshore fishermen within the 12 mile limit of national waters. This is a recommendation that I cannot see any Department supporting, unfortunately. However a proactive policy of making fishing opportunities available for inshore fishermen is a vital step, one linked to the previous recommendation.

No. 28 addresses access to social welfare benefits for inshore fishermen. Under class P insurance, share fishermen classified as self-employed can make a voluntary contribution that allows them to claim jobseeker's benefit for 13 weeks per year. After much toing and froing in terms of getting clarification on that matter, the Department has informed me that self-employed inshore fishermen who are sole traders can register under class P and get that voluntary contribution. However, to qualify for this entitlement, a share fisherman must have 260 paid class A contributions since starting insurable employment. This burden must be reduced. This means that not everyone could have the potential to qualify and for something to be successful, it must benefit everybody.

In recommendation No. 23, the committee calls for relevant statutory instruments to be brought to it for consultation in advance of implementation. This is a practical proposal and should be done anyway as the normal course of events. People would be forgiven for thinking that a recommendation like this should not even have to be included in a committee report, but in terms of good governance, it would be natural to have consultation with the relevant committee.

Recommendation No. 25 deals with the licensing of dual use vessels. If implemented, this would mean that a fishing vessel could be used during the summer months as an angling or tourist vessel, which would provide many fishermen with an alternative source of income and reduce the pressure on stocks at certain times of the year. As things stand, a fisherman would need to have two boats, a fishing vessel and a tourist or angling vessel. This is beyond the means of many fishermen. If we were operating the Maritime Fisheries Fund, EMFF, properly in this State and making the EU work for us, this would be something that the EMFF should and could be supporting. For example, could the development co-op on Arranmore island not be supported to have two or three angling or tourism vessels available that the fishing community could share to provide an additional source of income for the island?

There are many things that should be done to secure the future of our inshore and island

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fishermen and what is required is the political will and a Department that reflects the desire of citizens to live and work in the communities in which they and their ancestors have lived. Rather than slavishly following EU regulation and implementing EU law as rigidly as possible, we should be adapting policy to support our communities. For example, the ban on net fishing in area 6A, which covers most of the coast of Donegal, had a disproportionate impact on inshore fishermen, who in the main had a very low impact on the stocks that the ban attempted to protect. The Department and the agencies need to start from the point of protecting and sustaining communities and then we would see more positive policy.

**Deputy Martin Ferris:** I compliment the Chairman, Deputy Andrew Doyle, the members of the sub-committee, the staff on their patience and encouragement, and everybody who contributed during the deliberations before we finalised the recommendations.

Coming from a coastal community, I have seen a marked change from the late 1950s or 1960s onwards. At one time, 40 or 45 years ago, it was a hub of activity, with fairly high incomes for most people in the sector. Now it is absolutely decimated, except for a few people who have access to, and effectively own, a national quota. That comes down to the management of the various fishing policies, which were primarily designed to facilitate parochial political decisions, rather than to look at the overall benefit to our coastal communities. Coastal communities have been decimated and there has been no improvement for many years. One would hope this report, if implemented in its totality, can go some way towards addressing the deficiencies, inequalities and wrongs that are there and try to bring about a situation where a fishing industry can become sustainable and can give hope and opportunity for young people to take up the industry.

The Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, is reading out the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine's statement regarding the v-notching of female lobsters. A compensation package of 80% is laudable and I fully support it. Having said that, it should have been in place for some time. Anybody who knows the sector, and the people involved in lobster, and crayfish fishing in particular, has seen a huge change in 30 or 35 years. I have fished lobsters and if someone had 100 or 150 pots in the past, they could make a living from it. Now most people who are fishing lobster pots are fishing 500 plus "soft eyes", from which there is no escape. Many of them are up to 1,000 pots and the catches they are getting now are less than what we were getting with 100 pots going back to the late 1970s or early 1980s. That gives an indication of how affected the stocks are now.

In respect of salmon fishing, which has been mentioned by Deputy Pringle, fishing used to be very seasonal. Lobster and crayfish fishing usually started around the end of March and went into April and May. Salmon fishing came in around June or July and went on to the end of August. It then went back to lobster fishing and then people might be involved in whitefish fishing and trawling for the winter. Each sector got a rest. When the salmon sector was effectively banned, those who were involved in that sector went exclusively into lobster and crayfish. The consequence of that has been a depletion of those stocks and more and more pressure being put on them. We are seeing the outcome of that.

I could never for the life of me understand the banning of salmon fishing. The pretext was that stocks were being depleted because of the driftmen who were fishing off the coast. Obviously, this was to ignore probably the greatest threat to salmon stocks, namely, river pollution. Nobody ever looked at that. The driftmen were scapegoated and were taken out of the equation. It affected our coastal communities and, in particular, our islands.

If we are to reinvigorate our fishing sector, all of those aspects must be looked at. In fairness, that report has looked at every aspect that is affecting rural Ireland. We have made a recommendation in section 2 that “one Government Department or Agency should have more marine-related activities brought under its aegis”. That is self-explanatory. It needs that type of attention and representation if it is to make a comeback. Another part of our recommendations relates to the need to develop an inshore coastal management policy. Again, that is easily done if the political will is there. All those recommendations come down to political will. If the political will and commitment are there, these can be recommended and can go some way to addressing the situation.

Quota distribution has long been a big bone of contention for me. People are tied to the Common Fisheries Policy so they are dependent on the Government to fight for extra quotas and so on. The Government keeps saying it cannot get extra quotas. I will never accept that, but we must put up with what we have. The mackerel quota, or the mackerel national asset, as I would call it, is owned by 23 boats. Can anybody here or anybody on this island tell me that is justified? The herring quota has also been parochialised by the relevant Ministers to their respective areas. Many mackerel people could not get a quota because they did not have records to say they were fishing herring and so on up to that point in time. The reality is that all those people in the south west, south east and up along parts of the west coast have fished it throughout my lifetime. I have seen herring being driftnetted, not just trawled. Now these people cannot get a quota because there is no historical record that they were involved in it. The reason for this is that fishermen were on a very low income and they were paying no tax because they were not making enough to pay tax, so there was no record of them having paid tax and they are excluded. They have had no returns. They were being put in a situation where they were liable for tax and so forth. That is why they are excluded and it is not right.

Aquaculture is another one of our opportunities to develop, but it has taken a big hit, particularly regarding the attempted imposition of a huge salmon farm in Galway Bay without any effective negotiation with local communities. This has left a bad taste in many people’s mouths. I fully support aquaculture and I support salmon farming. It is a way for coastal communities to make a living but it must be done in consultation with local people, and there must also be a dividend. No matter what one does, whether it is renewable energy or whatever, it has to be done with consultation, and there must be a dividend for the host communities. If the issue is looked at in that way, we can go some way towards getting people to buy into it.

Recommendation 14 states that “consideration should be given to exclusive access to vessels under 10 metres ... within the national 12 mile limit”. Looking back on it, we probably tied it to vessels too small. It could be for vessels up to 15 metres. That would give an income to many boats that fish exclusively within the 12 mile limit. It could result in the survival of much of the fishing fleet. One must remember that 85% of boats in the fishing fleet are under that size. It is something that could make a difference for many fishermen.

Welfare was mentioned by Deputy Pringle. For the many who do not understand, all fishermen are self-employed. Share fishermen are self-employed. The boat might be tied up for three or four months but, by virtue of being self-employed, the fisherman does not have any entitlement to social welfare payments. My party has done a lot of work on that. Now the committee has done a good bit of work on it stating that voluntary class P PRSI contributions would overcome that, but it is a matter of getting that out there and getting skippers, boat owners and crew to buy into it.

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Fishing tourism has been mentioned. There should be a joined-up approach to this among coastal communities, both onshore and offshore, so that they can work together for the benefit of their respective areas.

All this is achievable, but it is down to whether the report will end up sitting on a shelf gathering dust without being implemented. Tremendous work was put in, with all shades of political opinion working together for the common good of rural coastal communities in Ireland. If the report is left to sit there, it is an awful indictment of the political system.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I compliment the committee chairperson, Deputy Doyle, on the fantastic work and effort that has been put into this report. Although he claimed at the beginning not to know much about coastal communities or fishermen, he made a significant contribution to this report. I must also say I do not have the knowledge of fishing that Deputy Martin Ferris has, but I have been dealing with fishermen for a long time.

In the first place, I have never agreed - I accept it was my party that was in government at the time - with the arrangements made with the European Union in relation to our fishing waters where we have 40% of the fish, with 4% going to this country and the rest going to others. I believe that in every negotiation in Europe this matter should be raised by the Government. I have expressed my view to the Minister, Deputy Coveney, that when the Common Fisheries Policy is being negotiated we should always start on the basis that the present regime is not fair or just. In the forthcoming negotiations with Britain and with Greece, we should put this issue on the table again and say that if they are going to get special deals, there are a few outstanding issues that Ireland needs resolved as well. There is a saying in my part of the country that the crying baby gets the bottle and the silent baby does not. It is time we became the crying baby.

Recommendation 2 is important. The present situation whereby the Minister with responsibility for agriculture, on a day-to-day basis, is also the Minister with responsibility for fisheries and for defence is totally unsatisfactory, and means that this incredible resource, which is many times the size of the country, is being neglected. Therefore, I believe that the marine portfolio should not be part of a much bigger portfolio. In particular, I am surprised that there is not even a dedicated Minister of State dealing with fisheries and that Deputy Coveney was given the job of Minister with responsibility for defence.

Recommendation 7 makes a lot of sense. As Deputy Martin Ferris stated, it is time to break with all of these rules about track record, etc. Nowhere is that more evident than if, for example, one goes out to Inis Meáin on the Aran Islands. One asks what the track record is, and they will tell one it is damn all because, not having a pier to tie up a boat, all they had was currachs. Are they forever to be penalised because there was not the wherewithal to keep boats on the island because the State did not provide it? I believe the next time extra mackerel quota is given, it should be given exclusively to the inshore fleet.

The next recommendation is to do with salmon. My party, in government, banned drift-netting. We were told that this would solve the problem and there would be plenty of salmon. It is amazing that we do not even know the salmon numbers. We need a comprehensive fish-counting system on the rivers so that we know how many salmon are going up and down, and then we need to find out why they are not going up. It cannot be blamed on the drift-net fishermen now.

Recommendation 10 concerns the issuing of heritage licences to rural coastal communities.

It is important to recognise that there seems to be little evidence that the ban on drift-netting achieved much except for the impoverishment of many communities. It would be fair to say that island communities have been particularly disadvantaged. The Government of which I was a member made the decision. There was a fairly heated debate about it. However, we should look at this issue of heritage licences and do it in a controlled way. That also relates to Recommendation 12. Through the use of new technology, I believe the old traditional arguments against drift-netting can be overcome. We can do it in a way that would be controlled, whereby we would get over the mixed-stock fishing issue, while still giving the communities that live by the coast access to some of the stock.

I do not see any evidence of a massive increase in incomes arising from angling tourists in areas where we were told new opportunities would open up if drift-netting stopped. Should the Minister ask the fishermen, they would tell him they have not gained.

Deputy Martin Ferris spoke of the recommendation to give exclusive rights to fishing within the 12 mile limit to vessels under 10 metres. I will not argue here about the overall length, which perhaps should be slightly larger. The idea of going back to traditional-style fishing makes a lot of sense, and allowing fishermen with boats with limited catch capacity to fish all the different species actually takes pressure off the species. What all the fishermen would tell the Minister is that the day we stopped drift-netting we put more pressure on the lobster. Everyone went at the lobster, and the Minister brought in controls on the lobster they moved on to fishing crab, and then the Minister brought in controls on the crab, and the fishermen kept moving away because they have to earn a living. The traditional practice, where the capacity to catch fish was much more limited, meant that all of these fisheries were sustainable, and it was the development of technology, bigger boats, etc., that resulted in the raping of the seas. If we cannot get our own fishery grounds back, persuading every coastal community in Europe to limit the first 12 or 20 miles offshore to small boats, it would have a similar effect, because we have more coastline than most, but it would also get buy-in from small coastal communities. There is one interesting democratic issue here. The vast majority of those fishermen who vote are in small boats, not big boats. If the Minister were to do this, it would be popular. Also many on the green side would say the damage done by the small boats is limited and the real challenge is large factory boats. I often wonder how many salmon are being taken unintentionally by the large trawlers that effectively take everything out of the sea.

*12 o'clock*

It is time we put a time limit on aquaculture licences. If we can put time limits on planning decisions, it is time for them to apply to aquaculture licences. I tabled a question in the Dáil this week about an oyster aquaculture licence that was applied for in 2012. I was told that the engineering division is looking at it, three years later. It is not satisfactory that I cannot get information on when it is likely that a decision will be made, which was the question I asked, and it is not satisfactory that someone should have to wait three years for a decision. I believe statutory time limits should apply to decisions on aquaculture licences. When someone has to make a decision, he or she makes a decision. We see that with county council planners all the time.

Recommendation 19 is important because it addresses other threats to fishing stocks, including municipal pollution, the effect of fish farms on native stocks of salmon and the cross-breeding that is going on. We need to do more scientific study. As I have said, we need counters on the rivers as well.



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The meaning of recommendation 22, which relates to small boats, is that we need infrastructure. I am a little surprised that the Minister with responsibility for the marine has funded just one pier in County Galway this year, not including the Ros a' Mhíl project. That just one of the hundreds of local authority piers in the county is getting money - it is getting it for a bursting wall - is a demonstration of the lack of priority that attaches to marine infrastructure. As small boats are tied up locally, there needs to be constant investment. We were making such investment in previous years. I would respond to any suggestion that we do not have the money now by saying the total investment required is tiny by comparison with a mile of motorway, for example. This needs to be a much higher priority.

Recommendation 23 is a request for the sub-committee to be consulted "when the relevant Ministers consider any draft Statutory Instrument" that should be brought before it. The stakeholders are very unhappy about a statutory instrument relating to razor fish on the east coast that was introduced in recent weeks. I am sorry that this matter was not brought before the sub-committee so that it could be debated. It is now proving quite contentious. I have a question down on it for next week.

Safety initiatives are very important, as are many other things. The simple answer to the social welfare issue is to get the Minister for Social Protection to cover all self-employed people for invalidity, illness and the whole gamut. We need to do that. There have been reports done on this proposal. It would deal with the class P issue. I would have liked to have spoken about the seaweed industry and the establishment of a Comhairle na Mara along the lines of Comhairle na Tuaithé.

**Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor:** I will be brief. As a Galway girl and a farmer's daughter from the small village of Milltown in north Galway who spent many summer holidays in Connemara, Westport and the Aran Islands, I feel it is important to speak on the Report on Promoting Sustainable Rural Coastal and Island Communities. It must be said that this report is not just of importance to the people and communities of rural areas; it is also important to the people of Ireland. There should not be an urban-rural divide. People say that Dublin gets all the investment and the rest of the county gets overlooked. That is why it is extremely important for us to equally promote and ensure the sustainability of our rural communities and especially our island communities, which need investment. Rural communities have suffered as a result of the economic downturn, but now they too must share in the recovery of our economy. Rural communities have a wealth to offer to Irish and international tourists. Tourism is vital.

I spent the last two summers ag athfhoghlaím mo theanga dhúchais ar An Cheathrú Rua i gContae na Gaillimhe. A number of people from An Cheathrú Rua have contacted me about this report to raise concerns about issues like broadband, tourism, fishing, agriculture and the agrifood industry. A small number of people from my own constituency of Dún Laoghaire have also contacted me because they hail from far-flung rural places throughout Ireland and, like me, are eager to see the continued promotion, success and sustainability of these communities. Many of the residents of our large cities and urban towns have rural roots. They want to see progress and wealth in their homesteads and in the villages and communities where they grew up and where their relatives live. As a Deputy representing Dún Laoghaire, I am strongly aware that tourism is vital. The tourists who come to Ireland are not interested in just one thing or just one place. They want an all-Ireland experience. They want the urban and cosmopolitan experience of Dún Laoghaire and Dublin, as well as the rural experience. They want the Ireland brand that we all know and love. Cultural unity and political diversity works in Ireland. That is why I would encourage all urban and rural Deputies to work together to ensure the continued

success and promotion of our rural, coastal and island communities.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** I would like to congratulate Deputy Doyle and his sub-committee on the production of this report. While I admit that I have not read it, the Members who have contributed to today's debate have enabled me to capture the essence of the report and its understanding of where we stand as an island country. All of the contributions have been hugely instructive and very revealing to me as someone who grew up in the city, essentially - in the metropolis of Dublin. Like Deputy Mitchell O'Connor, I spent summers in my school and student days along the coastline and on the islands of this country.

Ireland is made up of the lands, coastal areas and islands we have. I refer to the seas, mountains, rivers and lakes and the people who live here. As I was just thinking about the coastal and island periphery of this country, I was struck by the analogy of the rose tree. The leaves must be healthy so that the plant - the tree itself - should be healthy. If the leaves that feed the rose bush are affected by black spot or other diseases, it behoves the gardener to pay attention to such diseases. The islands, the coasts and the people who live there are like the leaves of the nation. It will be to our cost if we do not provide sunlight and nourishment to the leaves.

We have heard about the cultural understanding of our survival as human beings in an environment which is mild, temperate and oceanic. That is the reality of our lives. When we analyse things into scientific and metric-type language, we can sometimes lose the essence of that experience. A debate like this is important for Members who are involved in the Departments that harness the main resources of the country. We talk in big numbers, like 100,000 new jobs in factories, but we lose the reality of the pop-up ideas and reflex pictures that instinctively come about in the minds of everybody. There is a poetry and music of our lives, a synthesis of our lives, that is important to understand and appreciate so we can get the communication nerves of broadband to the coastal and island areas, where people who are benefitting from the rhythms of nature and the seasons can feed those in the cities who are starved of those realities and experiences. The madness of living on the twelfth floor of a concrete block, the noise that comes from metropolitan living, the pace and the visual and aural disturbance of living in the city are upsetting to the human soul. In the coastal areas and on the islands human beings can still be the repositories of what makes sense as human beings. We listen to the lives of the people who are fishing or farming or exchanging educational ideas, so it is important to have all of those organs of humanity functioning, living and breathing well.

This might sound like a big diversion from the excellent critiques of the recommendations in the report, which had to be made-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Derek Keating):** You almost took the words from my mouth.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** That I should speak to the report.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Derek Keating):** Yes.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** I am doing that. However, there is no point in echoing the detail of what Deputies Martin Ferris, Pringle, Doyle, Ó Cuív or Mitchell O'Connor have said. They have put their critiques on the record, from the advantaged position of understanding it and having first-hand experience of this.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** The Deputy should read the report and talk to us then.

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**Acting Chairman (Deputy Derek Keating):** I was tempted after five minutes of the Deputy's contribution to draw his attention to the fact that there is a particular scope for the debate. That scope is to focus on the elements in the report.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** My point is that, like me, many other Deputies come from the metropolis, and they are hurrying in one direction. They are monoline thinkers and monoline contributors to the powerful and vested interests of the country, where the resources are concentrated towards multinational corporations, taxation and so forth. Out on the coast, within the 12 mile limit, there is the conjunction of the land of Ireland, the sea, the resources and the people who are on those borders. They are on the threshold of our island. It makes sense to understand that and to make sure they are not starved, because the recommendations are saying that they are starved in many respects. Being an urban voice and having an urban mind, I am trying to say: "Listen to the trees. The leaves are shrinking. The plant will die - the plant is the country - unless we pay attention to the nourishment of the leaves." The leaves are the islands and the coastal areas.

I thank the sub-committee whose members have done the legwork on this, the measurement and presentation of the facts. There is a context for the rest of us to understand and not to ignore the importance of getting resources to the areas that are crying out for them, so there will be a better, healthier and more meaningful weave of the fabric of the country. That is my point.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe):** I will address the points that were raised. Unfortunately, I was not prepared for Deputy Mathews's few words, so I will not be able to address them. I would have to prepare myself to respond to the way Deputy Mathews spoke.

The Minister's Department owns, maintains and directly manages six fishery harbour centres. The network of harbours, located at Killybegs, Ros an Mhil, An Daingean, Castletownbere, Dunmore East and Howth, is a valuable and vital resource to the Irish fishing fleet. The fishery harbour centres provide state-of-the-art facilities and infrastructure for the increasingly mobile and large scale Irish and EU fishing industries. The importance of these harbours and their facilities to the Irish seafood sector is best told through some of the recent figures. In 2014, a total of 251,000 tonnes of fish was landed into the six fishery harbour centres. This represents 72% of all fish landings into Ireland. The value of fish landed into the fishery harbour centres increased from €200 million in 2011 to €262 million in 2014.

The fishery harbour centres underpin the Government's strategy to further develop a modern offshore fishing fleet and a modern onshore processing industry. The volume of landings going through the centres is enabled by the infrastructure created and the services operated and managed by the fishery harbour centres. The fishery harbours and coastal infrastructure development programme run by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is key to ensuring the future viability of the fishing industry. In total, €38.9 million was spent under this programme between 2011 and 2014: €24.2 million on Department owned and managed marine infrastructure, including the six fishery harbour centres; €9.4 million on local authority owned harbours linked to the fishing and aquaculture industries; €5.3 million on the once-off storm damage programme for piers and harbours as part of the Government's response to the damage caused by the winter storms of late 2013 and early 2014. It is unfortunate that Deputy Ó Cuív did not wait to hear the figures. When he, as Minister, was investing in Galway he forgot about the rest of the country, specifically County Wexford where there was no investment by his Government in its large and small harbours.

In 2015, the Minister allocated €14.8 million for the repair and development of departmental owned marine infrastructure. The flagship project in 2015 is the dredging works at Dunmore East Fishery Harbour Centre, at a cost of €7 million. The Minister has also allocated a further €1.6 million to the 2015 local authority programme as part of the overall 2015 programme. This vital funding will be spent on 25 approved local authority projects with a wide geographical spread, 16 of which are harbour development requiring funding of €1.257 million and nine of which relate to marine leisure requiring funding of €360,000. The infrastructure supported will be of great benefit to many rural coastal and island communities. In addition, the Minister has allocated €1.4 million in 2015 to enable local authorities to complete storm damage projects approved in 2014, which were unfinished due to time and other constraints.

Aquaculture is a rapidly growing industry internationally with very rapid expansion opportunities identified over the coming decades to meet the ever growing seafood demand arising from population growth and increased consumption in Asia. Aquaculture internationally produced 67 million tonnes of farmed fish in 2012 and it is projected to increase to 85 million tonnes by 2022, a projected increase of 18 million tonnes. The national strategic aquaculture plan proposes to increase Irish aquaculture production by 45,000 tonnes across all species by 2023. These targets are ambitious in the context of the past performance of this industry nationally but when one looks at the projected global expansion which this industry will experience over the next seven years, the national proposals are modest.

It is important to allay concerns about the environmental sustainability of the industry. In the draft national strategic plan, the Minister has sought to identify all of the issues affecting both the growth potential and sustainability of the aquaculture industry and has proposed a suite of 24 tailored actions to boost sustainable growth, while allaying legitimate areas of concern. With these initiatives, we can get our aquaculture sector back on a path of sustainable growth and provide much needed jobs in our coastal communities. There is a wide consensus regarding the enormous potential of the seafood sector to grow sustainably in the years ahead. There are also many challenges to be addressed. Much investment will have to happen in the years ahead to equip Ireland's seafood processing industry increasingly to add value to commodity products.

I outlined the measures proposed for the aquaculture sector in the draft national strategic plan for sustainable aquaculture. These measures must be matched with investment to grow output after recent years of stalled production. Funding and investment must also be targeted in our fishing fleet and in landing sites to adjust to the discards ban under the Common Fisheries Policy. We must invest in the science that underpins our industry and meet increasing demands to ensure environmental sustainability. A number of proposed schemes target investment to address issues which are of particular relevance to rural coastal and island communities including: €42 million in implementing the new Common Fisheries Policy, including measures for developing more selective fishing gear and supporting the new discards ban; a further €6 million to build on the good work that has been ongoing over recent months to revive and sustainably grow our inshore fisheries; €30 million to sustainably develop our aquaculture industry and implement a new national plan for aquaculture which the Minister will announce shortly; €12 million to grow the seafood-based economies of our coastal communities through community led fisheries local action groups; €41 million to grow markets for our seafood products, to develop our seafood processing industry and to develop new value-added products for those markets; and almost €10 million to support implementation of EU environmental law to help protect vulnerable habitats and species and to ensure that our seafood sector continues to operate

and grow in a sustainable manner.

The Minister is opening the Our Ocean Wealth conference today in Cork to mark the progress being made in developing Ireland's blue economy. Our seafood sector has been an important contributor to that progress. I spoke about the value of our seafood exports - €540 million in 2014, up a staggering 70% on 2009. Part of that progress has been achieved through successful collaborations between industry, trade and Government, helping to develop important markets like China, South Korea and Egypt.

Last week the Taoiseach launched the Food Wise 2025 strategy which aims to increase food exports to €19 billion and to create 23,000 new jobs by 2025. Local roots global reach, is the key theme of Food Wise 2025 and perhaps this is most apt when we look at the roots of our seafood sector in local communities around the coastline and its rapidly increasing global reach. When we reflect on the progress in recent years, we can see that we are right to be ambitious for the future of our seafood sector. Although there are challenges ahead, our seafood sector can continue to grow and develop with the support of targeted funding and investment and will bring much needed additional jobs to our rural coastal and island communities.

I thank all the Deputies for their contributions to this very important debate and, in particular, Deputy Doyle and the members of the sub-committee for bringing this very important report to the House. I come from a rural community and I understand the importance of small fishing villages, whether in the constituencies of Deputies Pringle, Martin Ferris or Doyle. There is an onus on all of us to ensure that our fishing villages and the fishing industry are given the support they need.

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** I compliment my colleagues on the sub-committee on the breadth and depth of their knowledge and acknowledge Deputies McNamara and Harrington as significant contributors to this report. I mention, in particular Senators Ó Domhnaill and Landy, who are very active contributors to, and participants on, the sub-committee. The format whereby committee reports are laid before this House and debated needs to be reviewed to allow for joint sittings, so that Senators who contribute to these reports have an opportunity to debate them. It is highly unlikely that the three Senators, who are members of the sub-committee will have an opportunity to bring the report before the Seanad. I suggest this needs to be considered in the next Dáil as such a change would be welcome.

Ireland's coastal communities have a richness of culture and heritage. A previous speaker referred to the value of the Irish language schools to the life of these communities. We advertise and showcase our coastal communities as being wonderful assets for the country and they enhance our reputation abroad. However, there is a danger that they will become like the rural post offices in that we will say how wonderful they are and lament them when they are gone but we will not do anything to help them when they are here. This is the fundamental principle behind the report.

The Minister of State has outlined the value of the industry but it should be noted that six harbours in the country are responsible for 72% of the output. However, we are talking about the other 28%. Whether the vessels inside the 12 mile limit are under 10 m, 12 m or 15 m, if left to their own devices there would be no danger to any fish stock and there would be no danger from drift-net fishing.

The report makes a number of specific recommendations based on the key themes. The

aim of the report is to promote a sustainable socio-economic model for coastal, island and rural communities and we must not lose sight of this aim.

I refer to a report in the *Marine Times* in February 2014 by Tom McSweeney entitled, *Preserving Indigenous Communities*:

The report of the Oireachtas joint committee on fisheries which has recommended how coastal and island communities can be sustained and developed into the future, is an important document which the Government must not put on the shelves where many reports are placed with the intention that they should be forgotten or ignored with the passing of time.

His comments at the conclusion of the article are worth considering. I acknowledge that certain initiatives are under way. Some of the recommendations in the report are provocative - which was deliberate - about the mackerel and the exclusivity of the 12 mile limit. However, many of the recommendations are pragmatic and practical, such as the PRSI changes so that people can feed their families. I mention a recent coffee morning held here for Nepal but climatic factors also affect fishermen and their boats can be tied up for three or four months apart from the restrictions on their quotas.

I am not from a fishing background but the models are the same. If we are to pay more than token attention to this sector, we need to consider the background to the report. The Comhairle na Mara idea is very pragmatic and it is not a quango. It could be established in-house. We could do the same for the forestry sector. This kind of forum needs to be established so that we can harness our ocean wealth in a true fashion and protect coastal and island communities because if they go, or if they are diminished, we will regret it.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan visited Cape Clear island and referred to the Irish language on the island. People go out to Cape Clear not to wander around in a vast wasteland but rather to enjoy the culture. Many years ago I was pushing my eldest lad in a buggy on Sherkin island - he is now 25 - and I stopped to talk to a man on his way back from delivering his churn of milk. He broke out of his normal language to explain island living to me and he was very informative. I could have spent all day with him but the child started to cry because it was a very hot day. That heritage and richness is something we cannot afford to lose. It boils down to having an economic and a sustainable model that can protect that environment, which is what we are trying to do, and the recommendations go a long way towards it.

The sub-committee members put a lot of work into this report but I would like to acknowledge, in particular, those in the Oireachtas Library and Research Service who helped us. We travelled to Scotland and I wish to acknowledge the hospitality and accommodation afforded us while in the Parliament and in Oban, where the Scottish Association for Marine Science is located and where a number of Irish senior marine engineers work. This visit enriched the process.

Scotland is the country most akin to us in many ways. It has the jagged, rough Atlantic coastline, island communities, native Gaelic speakers, aquaculture, marine energy and so many other things. I am not saying everything is perfect but examining how they process applications and deal with initiatives was worthwhile. Our fisheries local action groups, FLAGS, and inshore fisheries forums are a step in the right direction but they have a long way to go to be as effective. We are improving and it is the sub-committee's hope and expectation that, given the work put into the report, it will not be left to gather dust and that it will be used as a work-

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ing model to develop a sustainable approach so that people can live, work and recreate in the coastal and island communities.

I thank my colleagues on, and the secretariat of, our sub-committee. It was quite unusual to pull three sub-committees into one. It was not a unique occurrence but it does not happen frequently. It took us a while to get established but it is fair to say that we covered a lot of detail during the 17 meetings and the visit to Scotland. The report contains 29 recommendations, many appendices, which give the background to the recommendations, and information on who and what entities fed into the process. We have carried out a comprehensive piece of work.

I acknowledge the Minister of State's presence today and that the Government and the Ceann Comhairle, in particular, have accommodated this motion. Given the conference in Cork, we toyed with the idea of deferring taking this motion today but we had no guarantee it would see the light of day again before the end of this Dáil's lifetime. Everyone will probably agree it was the right decision to take this opportunity.

Question put and agreed to.

The Dáil adjourned at 12.35 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 14 July 2015.