DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 13 Eanáir 2016

Wednesday, 13 January 2016

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

Paidiúr.
Prayer.

Business of Dáil

An Leas-Chéann Comhairle: Before proceeding to Question Time, I call on the Ceann Comhairle to make an announcement to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: I apologise for interrupting proceedings but I wish to make a brief announcement for the information of Members. In accordance with the Houses of the Oireachtas (Appointments to Certain Offices) Act 2015, following from a nomination made to me by the Top Level Appointments Committee and on foot of a recommendation made by me under the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Act, the commission today has appointed Mr. Peter Finnegan as Clerk of Dáil Éireann and Secretary General of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service. I offer Peter my personal congratulations on his appointment and wish him well for his future in the role.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

One-Parent Family Payment Payments

1. Deputy Willie O’Dea asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection if she will reverse the changes made to the one-parent family payment given the data in the Survey on Income and Living Conditions which show those living in households with one adult and one or more children had the highest deprivation rate, at 58.7%, in 2014; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [1190/16]

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Before dealing with the question, I take the opportunity to extend
my congratulations to the newly appointed Clerk of the Dáil, as announced by the Ceann Comhairle.

My question refers to a recent survey which shows poverty is endemic among single parents. In view of the startling figures set out in the report, particularly in respect of the deprivation rate, is the Tánaiste prepared to reverse the changes she made recently to the lone parent’s allowance?

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I extend my congratulations to the new Clerk of the Dáil, Mr. Peter Finnegan, and wish him well in the job.

In budget 2016, I introduced a number of measures that benefit lone parents. These include a 75% Christmas bonus, which equates to a payment of just over €163 for a lone parent with one child. Lone parents will benefit from the €5 increase in the monthly rate of child benefit and those in receipt of the family income supplement will also benefit from the increases to the thresholds for that scheme. Lone parents in receipt of fuel allowance gain an increase of €2.50 per week during the fuel season. Lone parents on the jobseeker’s transitional payment also gained an increase in overall income from the closer alignment of this means test with the more generous one-parent family payment means test. An extra €3 million is also being provided for the school meals scheme. It is important to highlight that the social impact assessment of budget 2016 showed that budgetary policy would increase average household incomes for working lone parents by 2%. Non-earning lone parents also fared above average, gaining 1.8%.

The most recent survey on income and living conditions relates to 2014 and is based on income data from 2013 and 2014. In 2004, during the economic boom, lone parents were over four and a half times more at risk of poverty than the rest of the population. In 2014, they were two and a half times more at risk of poverty than the rest of the population.

Research shows that being at work reduces the at-risk-of-poverty rate for lone parents by three quarters, compared to lone parents not at work, highlighting that the best way to tackle poverty among lone parents is to assist them into employment. Access to the Department’s Intreo service is critical to achieve this outcome. Any reversal of these reforms would delay access to this essential service and would be a backward step in terms of tackling poverty among lone parents. The positive outcome of the reforms can be seen in the increase in the number of lone parents becoming new family income supplement recipients. Of the lone parents affected by the reforms in July 2015, more than 3,000 became new family income supplement recipients by the end of 2015.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Saying lone parents are now only two and a half times at greater risk of poverty, compared to four and a half times at some point in the past, is quite irrelevant. This report is bald and it is brutal. It states that of all groups in society, the group that suffered the highest consistent rate of poverty in 2014 was lone parents, at a rate of 22.1%. It found those living in households with one adult and one or more children, that is, lone parents, had the highest deprivation rate, at 58.7% in 2014. It found single parents had the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate, 32%, in 2014. There were a number of other interesting findings about their ownership of property, such as the fact that 42.1% of lone parent households are credit-constrained. As I understand it, the gist of the Minister’s reply is that she is taking measures that will enable lone parents to improve their situation relative to the rest of society. I agree with the statement that the best way to assist somebody in poverty is to assist them into work, but they are all worse off now, so how do we encourage people to take up a job by ensuring they will be less well off than
before by taking up that job? This is what we were warned about and what I have discussed with lone parents who have transferred over to the Minister’s new system since,

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy O’Dea quoted the 58% deprivation rate for lone parents in 2014. That is down from 63% in the previous survey.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Is it acceptable?

Deputy Joan Burton: The figure the Deputy quoted is a drop from what was there previously-----

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Yes, before the change.

Deputy Joan Burton: -----because in fact we are putting extra resources into lone parents and we are particularly providing for the family income supplement, which means that where a lone parent goes to work, they are getting a top-up in respect of each of their children.

Second, in 2015 I brought in the back to work family dividend, which means a lone parent holds on to their €29.80 per week in terms of the weekly social welfare payment for their child, 100% in the first year they go back to work and 50% in the second year they are back at work. I chose the year 2004 because Deputy O’Dea was in government then, as far as I remember, and his Government was in a boom period. My point is that under Fianna Fáil lone parents were at a risk of poverty that was four and a half times greater than the rest of the population. In recent years this rate has fallen, and their risk of poverty is now two and a half times greater than the rest of the population, because we provided a wrap-around system of incentives for lone parents to go back to work. Also, this year, lone parents who are on the transitional payment and working on the minimum wage for only 15 hours a week will see an increase in their overall income of €28 per week, made up of the increase in the minimum wage plus the other supports.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will come back to the Tánaiste. I must call Deputy O’Dea.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: I really do not know what planet the Tánaiste is living on. I consulted the lone parents’ organisations when I tabled this question, and I spoke to a number of lone parents in my constituency. I can send the details on to the Minister. Every one of them, without exception, is worse off. I refer to lone parents with children between the ages of seven and 14 who have moved on to the transitional jobseeker’s allowance-----

Deputy Joan Burton: No. They are better off.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: -----whereas they were on lone parent allowance previously. They are not all imagining it. They are not all coming to me presenting false documentation. I can send the Tánaiste the details of various instances. I promise I will send them over to her. Lone parents are worse off. There is a different means test and it is less attractive to go out to work. That is the reality.

How is it making it more attractive for people to go out to work if they will be earning less than they were previously? How is the Tánaiste making it more attractive by bringing in a different means test that will ensure they earn less?

The Tánaiste can talk about the family dividend, the family income supplement and so on, but the figures, and the examples I can send her, take all those matters into account. One must remember - and the Tánaiste did not say this, of course - that the family dividend is only a tem-
porary provision. One gets 100% the first year and 50% the second year.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste to conclude.

Deputy Joan Burton: Let me repeat the official figures. A lone parent on the jobseeker’s transitional payment working 15 hours at the national minimum wage will see an increase this month in his or her overall income of just over €28 per week. Deputy O’Dea is complaining that they will see an increase in their income of €1,450 per annum.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: How much will the employer be paying?

Deputy Joan Burton: This is as a result of the increase in the national minimum wage, which-----

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Which the employer is paying?

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

Deputy Joan Burton: -----Fianna Fáil, in its wisdom, cut by €1 an hour and which I have been happy to raise by €1 an hour and, on 1 January, by a further 50 cent an hour.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: When someone else is paying for it. By how much did the Tánaiste raise the other one?

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy O’Dea’s record is, let us say, not the most shining given that 330,000 jobs were lost on his watch.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: The Tánaiste will be judged on her record shortly.

Deputy Joan Burton: The increases we are talking about are as a result of the increase in the minimum wage, the more generous means test on the jobseeker’s transitional payment and the increase in fuel allowance of €2.50 a week.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: The Tánaiste is kidding nobody.

Deputy Joan Burton: But these are all facts.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: The lone parents are not fooled.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We must go on to the next question.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: They are not fooled, and I will send the Tánaiste their comments and a few of the examples.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Snodaigh has the next Priority Question. I want order, please.

Pension Provisions

2. Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection how she can reconcile her promise to increase the State pension by €25 over five years with the ever-growing numbers entitled to a reduced State pension as a result of the changes she made to the
qualification criteria in budget 2012. [1250/16]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Cosúil leis na Teachtaí eile, déanaim comhghairdeachas le Peter Finnegan faoin ardú céime agus an jab nua atá aige. Jab deacair é d’aon duine, go háirithe sa tréimhse seo sa Teach.

I wish to ask the Tánaiste if there is a contradiction in electoral promises so far to increase the State pension at a time when, as a result of her actions, more pensioners, particularly women, will qualify only for a reduced State pension.

Deputy Joan Burton: The State contributory pension is based on contributions paid and credited over the course of a working life and is not subject to means testing. I increased the maximum weekly personal rate in the recent budget to €233.30, with proportionate increases for qualified adults. There were more than 360,000 recipients of that pension at the end of last year, with expenditure in 2016 now estimated at just over €4.6 billion.

A number of changes were made to the State contributory pension in the past five years in the context of State pension reform and to provide for sustainable pensions in the future. These included changes to the payment bands for those with a yearly average of between ten and 39 contributions per year. According to my Department’s records, some 28,000 pensioners in this category may have been impacted by those changes, although this would be expected to change over time.

Reforms such as this and increases in the pension age have safeguarded the pension system and its core rates, despite very significant demographic pressures and the economic crisis. By achieving this, even in such difficult circumstances, the Government has shown its commitment to supporting older people, as evidenced by CSO figures for consistent poverty which are lowest among pensioners. Now, thanks to the economic policies we have pursued, we have been able to move into a real recovery. In the 2016 budget, this allowed us to increase the maximum personal rate of State pensions by €3 per week. This will benefit more than 676,000 pensioners and their dependants this year.

Looking ahead, the appropriate level of the State contributory pension is all about adequacy and affordability. I am confident that, as our economy continues to grow on a sustainable basis, it will allow us to continue to increase the level of support for people aged 66 and over and, in particular, to take account of inflation. In this regard, I am pleased that the Social Insurance Fund, which had a deficit of almost €2.8 billion in 2012, is expected to have a small surplus in 2016. This means contributory pensions are secure. When I became Minister, the Social Insurance Fund deficit meant contributory pensions, widow’s and widower’s pensions, maternity benefit and the future paternity benefit, which we will introduce in September, were at risk. I am happy to say we have secured the future of the State pension.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The context of the change must be taken into account. I would not begrudge any pensioner an increase and I firmly believe the pension should be increased and, thereafter, index linked. The Minister’s changes over recent years have ensured that more of those who apply for the State pension will qualify for a reduced amount, given that she has increased the paid contributions required from 260 to 520. She has also changed the rate band, which will mean women will be affected more harshly, given that over recent decades more women are in precarious work and often take time out of paid employment to look after family.
I ask the Minister to address the problems her actions have caused in the changes she introduced in the 2012 budget and consider another type of homemaker’s credit which would plug the gap that has been identified not only by me, but by the National Women’s Council of Ireland, to address the gap in the paid contributions of women who have had to leave work to take care of people or who have had the misfortune to be in low-paid work or on short-term contracts so they can fully qualify for full pensions.

Deputy Joan Burton: For people who have insufficient contributions to qualify for a full contributory State pension, there are supports available in the State pension system which assist qualification for a contributory payment based on factors such as the contributions made by their spouses and other factors likely to impact on their needs. One example is the homemaker’s scheme. I was one of the people in the Fianna Fáil-Labour Party Government of the early 1990s who introduced the homemaker’s scheme that has been mentioned by the Deputy. Together with the then Minister, Michael Woods, I was responsible for bringing in the system of homemaker’s credits to which the Deputy has referred. This system recognises the value of the contribution made by people when they take time out to care for children or elderly relatives. We have also provided for increases for qualified adults and for credits for periods of unemployment. As the Deputy knows, the credits system is now done automatically. In the era about which he spoke, in many cases people did not go for credits. A widow can qualify for the widow’s contributory pension on the basis of her PRSI record. People with insufficient contributions may qualify for a non-contributory means-tested pension to ensure they have a pension of a sufficient level.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: While I welcome the Tánaiste’s statement, I do not think it is entirely accurate. The homemakers credit system gives grossly insufficient protections to women, in particular. It does not go back far enough. As far as I know, it allows for or takes account of just one break. The Tánaiste mentioned that the jobseeker’s credit is available to those who are looking for work. As I have said on a number of occasions, a person not in employment who is a qualified adult does not get a credit for that. That person’s partner gets the credit instead. A number of women, in particular, are the qualified adults in these cases. Even though they are in the system, there is no record or recognition of them. Will the Tánaiste address the shortfalls in the homemakers credit? Will she reconsider the changes she introduced supposedly to save money? It seems that rather than reversing those changes, the Tánaiste intends to throw this money at the pensions system. Will she ensure women, in particular, are not negatively affected by the changes that have been made in the State pension system over the term of this Government?

Deputy Joan Burton: If we had taken the Deputy’s advice, we would have followed the Greek path and we would have bankrupted our pensions system. When I came into office here, the deficit or hole in the Social Insurance Fund was going past €2 billion. It ultimately went to €2.8 billion, but we have now brought it almost completely back into balance.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Government made the pensioners pay for that.

Deputy Joan Burton: I will set out what we actually did for pensioners this year and last year. We brought back the Christmas bonus. This year, we have brought in a modest increase of €3 a week. That has assisted pensioners and pro rata their dependants.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Some pensioners are down €1,100 a year and the Government has not made that up.
An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please. The Tánaiste has the floor.

Deputy Joan Burton: The country lost 330,000 jobs.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Is the Tánaiste blaming the pensioners for that?

Deputy Joan Burton: Sinn Féin’s response was to suggest that we should go down the Greek path, follow Syriza and bankrupt the country.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Sinn Féin has not been in government. We are debating the response of the Government, which was to attack the pensioners.

Deputy Joan Burton: We saw the pictures of the poor pensioners at the ATMs who were not able to-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Government made the poor pensioners poorer. We did not do that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have to go on to the next Deputy.

Deputy Joan Burton: Sinn Féin’s crazy economics would actually see our pensioners follow the Greek path.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: We are talking about the crazy economics of those who are in government.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I want some order now, please.

Deputy Joan Burton: That is what Sinn Féin suggested.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Tánaiste should stand up for the Government’s decisions.

Deputy Joan Burton: That is what Sinn Féin suggested.

Rent Supplement Scheme Payments

3. Deputy Ruth Coppinger asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection the measures she has taken to assist persons presented with massive rent increases by landlords, particularly those in receipt of rent supplement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [1248/16]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I ask the Tánaiste to tell me what she has done to deal with the major problem of rent increases, particularly as they affect people on rent supplement, for which the Tánaiste is directly responsible, but also more generally. The number of families that have fallen into poverty or homelessness is continuing to increase on the Tánaiste’s watch. I would like to mention a number of rent increases that have taken place in the Tánaiste’s constituency. Perhaps she can advise me of what can be done in these cases. A family in Mulhuddart Wood received a Christmas present from the landlord in the form of a rent increase from €850 to €1,400. Two other families had their rents increased from €900 to €1,300 and from €950 to €1,200, respectively. A family in the Gallery today had its rent increased from €900 to €1,300. Maybe the Tánaiste can tell us what she has done.
Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Kevin Humphreys):
I congratulate Mr. Peter Finnegan on his appointment today.

Rent supplement plays a vital role in housing families and individuals, with the scheme supporting approximately 61,000 people for which the Government has provided approximately €267 million for 2016. Properties are being secured under the scheme with over 20,100 rent supplement tenancies awarded during 2015. In view of the reduction of supply in the private rented market and increasing rents at this time, the Department has implemented a policy approach that allows for flexibility where landlords seek rents in excess of the limits for both existing customers and new applicants to the rent supplement scheme. The circumstances of tenants are considered on a case-by-case basis and rents are being increased above prescribed limits, as appropriate. In addition, the Department, in conjunction with Threshold, operates a special protocol in the Dublin and Cork areas where supply issues are particularly acute, with plans under way to extend this to Galway City.

This flexible approach has assisted over 5,800 households nationwide to retain their rented accommodation through increased rent payments. Persons in receipt of rent supplement who may be at risk of losing their tenancy as a result of increases in rent are urged to contact their local welfare services or Threshold, which operates the sustainable services, without delay.

I believe that these measures and the reforms to the private rental sector as recently announced by Government will provide increased stability in what has become a highly volatile rental market. I am continuing to keep this matter under close review.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister of State is saying that the family members who are here today, and who have an increase in their rent from €900 to €1,300, can go to the community welfare officer to get the increase. If they do not get that increase, will the Minister join me in advising these family members to break the law to keep a roof over their heads and to refuse to remain in that property? That is the only advice I can give them.

The Minister of State brought in the Residential Tenancies Act before Christmas. Not only has it proved to be ineffectual but I would argue that it has made the situation worse. Landlords are now bringing in double rent increases, knowing they cannot do it next year. All of the families who have contacted our office, and who I am sure have contacted the Tánaiste’s office in the same constituency, are getting double rent increases rather than a single rent increase.

Another issue is discrimination against people on rent allowance. A law was passed on that with the support of the Labour Party but there are two advertisements on the Daft.ie website, which I can see before me, targeted at people in the local area who are looking for accommodation and which say, “Unfortunately, no rent allowance accepted”. What is the Government going to do about that?

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I hope the Deputy has advised that family not to wait a day to engage with the community welfare officer. Like the Deputy, I deal with this on a weekly, if not daily basis and there is a huge and severe problem relating to supply. This Government has provided over €900 million to be invested in the provision of social housing in 2016 and we will start seeing progress on that in the shape of new houses under construction towards the end of this year. There is a facility to deal with increases in rent on a case-by-case basis and we are actively engaged with the Department of Justice and Equality in connection with the advertisements referred to by the Deputy. I thank her for highlighting them for us.
Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have two more, which I will send on to the Minister of State. Even if those advertisements did not exist people would be given a telephone interview and would be refused for having rent allowance on that basis.

I wish to return to the issue of rent, including those who are not on rent supplement. There is another property, an apartment block, in the Tánaiste’s constituency where a letter was sent just before Christmas to the whole block saying the rent for the apartments would rise from €1,000 to €1,250 per month from a certain date. It said, “If you do not wish to renew your lease at this rent please inform us [before a certain date]”. In other words what it effectively said was, “Accept the increase or get out”. What are those people to do? What is the Labour Party or the Tánaiste and Minister of State going to offer to do for those people? Occupants of a whole apartment block are being told to put up or shut up and to pay this increase.

On the families who have received letters, one is from Fisher Property Management in Cherryfield in Hartstown, which the Tánaiste will know well.

3 o’clock

They are very modest houses but the rent is increasing from €900 to €1,300 per month. Yes, I did think of advising them to go to the community welfare officer, CWO, but why has the Minister not introduced rent controls to stop this type of rack-renting occurring? That family will not be housed by Fingal County Council by the eviction date, as is the case in many councils around the country. Will the Minister of State join me in advising families who are receiving such letters to stay in their homes and to refuse to vacate those houses until they have alternative accommodation, which, unfortunately, due to the way the Government has mismanaged the housing crisis by not acknowledging it as an emergency, will not happen any time soon? People should not make themselves homeless.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I repeat that through active engagement with the community welfare officer we have dealt with numerous cases. There have been over 6,000 cases and they have been dealt with on a case-by-case basis and in a very successful manner. There have been reforms in the private rental sector. Rent review notices have been introduced. Period of rent reviews, a temporary provision which applies for four years, and notice of termination have all been changed.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: None of it is working.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: If we had followed the Deputy’s advice, in many ways we would have been in a far worse position.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: On rent controls-----

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Now, there is hope. We now have money to invest in social housing, and that is being done. As I outlined, the total fund is over €900 million. A sum of €923 million is being invested in 2016 for the provision of social housing. There is €3.8 billion for the programme to supply social housing in the coming years. As the recovery is ongoing the discussion we should have is about dealing with that. If the Deputy had wished to have a proper and positive reaction, she could have forwarded those cases to me before raising them in the House so I could have had time to research them and provide her with a fuller response.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They have been raised with the Minister but they were fobbed
off to her local councillor.

Community Services Programme

4. Deputy Willie O’Dea asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection why she has not increased the contribution to the community services programme in line with the increase in the national minimum wage, given that this increase will put community groups under considerable financial strain; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [1253/16]

Deputy Willie O’Dea: This relates to not-for-profit groups who will have to meet increased wage bills as a result of the increase in the minimum wage. What provision has been made to enable them to absorb the extra expense?

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this. I have visited a number of community services programme, CSP, schemes over the last number of years and I have seen the positive impact of the programme on local communities. We have worked very closely with the community groups that operate it.

The community services programme is one of a number of programmes and schemes operated by the Department. It provides financial support to community companies that provide revenue generating services of a social inclusion nature. Many of these companies are also funded from other sources and generate revenue from the public use of their facilities and services. The CSP provides a contribution to the wage costs of the companies on the basis that the services are not fully self-financing or the cost of provision would be prohibitive on users. The Department does not set the wage rate but requires the payment of appropriate wage rates, consistent with local norms.

At December 2015, some 398 companies employing some 2,800 employees were directly supported by the CSP. The Department estimates that, at the end of 2015, some 60% of these employees were being paid above the level of the minimum wage, in keeping with the social inclusion and social benefit objectives of the programme. The Department is committed to working with the remaining companies to achieve the objective of paying a reasonable wage. The Deputy should note that the CSP accounts for less than a third of the resources generated by these companies.

Contracts of up to three years duration are provided for under the CSP. Arrangements whereby individual companies will be able to access additional financial resources to compensate for the welcome increase in the minimum wage are being put in place, and notices were issued last week. Submissions will be assessed on a case-by-case basis with the annual funding commitment being adjusted accordingly, where it is found to be warranted. An advance of 25% of the contract value for 2016 has been, or is in the course of being, paid to companies currently in the programme. This ensures that immediate cash flow requirements are supported. Overall, I am satisfied at the level of resources available to the CSP in 2016 of just over €45 million, which will be adequate to meet the ongoing funding required for these programmes.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. The position is that those are not-for-profit companies. The Minister of State is correct that only 40% of their employees are on the minimum wage while the other 60% receive wages above that level. If one increases the minimum wage, that increases a company’s costs. If the company is not-for-profit, one is
not talking about reducing its profits but about a reduction in services due to less money being
available. I would be grateful if the Minister of State could clarify it, but I understood him to
say that he will look at the different organisations one by one to study the impact on each and
make the appropriate adjustment. In the interests of fairness, I note that this matter has been
brought to our attention. We have been contacted by a number of the groups involved and
raised their concerns with the Minister of State. I am very glad that he has listened to us. How
long does he think the process will take?

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: It is not good practice simply to allocate funds without an
underlying rationale. Hence, the facility is being provided for those companies which need to
make a case for additional supports. That process is being put in place. The schemes operating
under that are being identified. The level of grant is not related to the value of the minimum
wage. I have visited and spoken to those involved in CSP schemes and I am anxious that they
should not always look at paying the minimum wage. We want to see fair wages paid in regard
to the grant. The managers in most schemes are currently earning approximately €32,000. That
is funded there. Most of the schemes I have visited generate additional income. Unfortunately,
a lot of them have split positions. They have split whole-time equivalents. As I have met them I
have said that we want to assist them and co-operate in lifting the salary base of their employees
where that has not been done. However, 60% of the schemes are paying more, some of them
substantially more, than the minimum wage. In some instances well over €11 per hour is being
paid.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: I fully understand what the Minister of State is saying but some
are paying the minimum wage and if one increases costs by way of wage costs or otherwise,
one will reduce the capacity of the companies to provide the same level of service. One of the
companies sent me a communication in the last week it had received from the Department. It
stated that the Department had requested Pobal to develop a mechanism and process to enable
companies to apply for additional funding on the one-to-one basis to which the Minister of
State referred. Has the process been put in place? This is an ongoing situation. How long is
the process likely to take?

The Tánaiste has already announced that when she is returned as Tánaiste next year, she
will increase the minimum wage again. Good luck to her. How will this be dealt with? Will an
advance be provided? Now that the problem that can arise has been identified will it be dealt
with before it arises in the event of another increase in the minimum wage next year?

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I hope to have the mechanism in place by the end of the
month. That is what we are working towards and that is why we have been communicating with
groups on the putting in place of the process. I want to return to the key point. The grant will
be paid by the Department, regardless of whether I am here after the election. It is not related to
the minimum wage. We want a social enterprise mechanism that pays a good salary to people
so they can have a strong role in society.

If I am returned, I will work with these groups to help put a business plan in place whereby
they can pay all of their employees a reasonable wage while meeting local criteria. This may
not necessarily involve an increase in the grant, but an examination of what the groups are doing
and how we can assist them and build on their strengths. This work has been carried out over
the past year and I have had positive interactions with many community services programme,
CSP, schemes that have considered how to enhance their employees’ salary rates.
5. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection if she will increase funding to CSP schemes to take account of the increase in the minimum wage by 50 cent per hour from 1 January 2016. [1251/16]

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** This question relates to the same issue, namely, the problem that has arisen because of the increase in the minimum wage without a tandem increase in the grant to CSP schemes. Will the Minister of State address this issue?

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for his question, which is on a matter we have already addressed. More than €1 billion was spent on a wide range of employment supports by the Department in 2015. This expenditure is being fully maintained in 2016. The CSP is one of these supports and provides financial support to community companies that supply revenue-generating services of a socially inclusive nature. Many of these companies are also funded from other sources and generate revenue from the public use of their facilities and services.

The CSP provides a contribution to the wage costs of the companies on the basis that the services are not fully self-financing or the cost of provision would be prohibitive on users. The Department does not set the wage rate, but requires the payment of wage rates consistent with local norms. As of December 2015, 398 companies employing 2,800 employees were directly supported by the CSP. The Department estimates that, at the end of last year, some 60% of those employees were being paid above the level of the minimum wage, which is in keeping with the social inclusion and social benefit objectives of the programme. The Department is committed to working with the remaining companies to achieve the objective of paying a reasonable wage. The Deputy should note that the CSP accounts for less than one third of the resources generated by these companies.

Contracts of up to three years’ duration are provided for under the CSP. Arrangements whereby individual companies will be able to access additional financial resources to compensate for the welcome increase in the minimum wage - it is the second such increase under this Government - are being put in place. Submissions will be assessed on a case-by-case basis, with the annual funding commitment being adjusted accordingly where that is found to be warranted. An advance of 25% of the contract value for 2016 has been, or is in the course of being, paid to companies currently in the programme. This ensures that immediate cashflow requirements are supported. Overall, I am satisfied that the level of resources available to the CSP in 2016 at just over €45 million will be adequate to meet its ongoing funding needs.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I heard the Minister of State’s preceding answer and am not asking him to go over all of that ground again, but he mentioned that there were 398 CSP schemes throughout the country. They have been told that, as of last December, the 2016 financial plan will need to incorporate any additional cost necessary to implement the minimum wage requirement. That is why we are discussing the issue. It means the extra amount required to pay employees the increased minimum wage will not be covered by the Department. That is basically what the Minister of State is saying.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** No, it is not.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** The problem with this is that, because CSP schemes must
Dáil Éireann

find funds at short notice to meet the additional cost imposed by the increase in the minimum wage, it threatens the viability of many such programmes. Previously, the contribution to CSP schemes was reduced by €1 per hour when the minimum wage was cut, but the Minister of State and his Department suggest that the grant is only a contribution to payroll costs and is not intended to meet the costs itself.

The Minister of State also mentioned that CSP schemes should not constantly focus on the minimum wage. The proof in the pudding is that only 40% of their employees are on the minimum wage, which means that they already understand and have gone beyond this.

The Minister of State might not be aware that there are 53 payroll weeks in 2016, not 52. Therefore, there is an extra cost to be met in any case that would not normally be incurred.

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys:** The Deputy came just short of trying to put words into my mouth. Had he been listening, he would have noted I told Deputy O’Dea that mechanisms are being put in place within the programme to provide additional resources to any company with a short-term financial difficulty. Deputy O’Dea actually welcomed that. We hope a mechanism to deal with this matter on a case-by-case basis will be put in place by the end of the month. The mechanisms will be notified to all companies to allow access, on the basis of a justifiable case, to additional funding. Deputy O’Dea read earlier a letter that was sent out regarding the funds.

The fact of the matter is that we want people involved in the CSP to be paid a good wage. However, our funding is approximately one third of the requirement. What I want to do, and what I have done, with groups since coming into my Department is work with them to try to ensure people with a career in this area have a reasonable wage. I repeat that mechanisms are being put in place within the programme to provide additional resources to any company with a short-term financial difficulty. We will have the mechanism in place and we will proceed on a case-by-case basis. There are no proposals to provide an across-the-board adjustment. Some are paid well over the minimum wage, which is quite welcome. In this regard, the CSP is being used as we wish it to be used.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I heard the earlier statement. I welcome the fact that there is a stopgap measure. That is all it should be in order to buy the Minister of State and the Department time until after the election. It does not address the fact that many of the companies are dangerously near financial breaking point. I realise the Minister of State knows about the equine project in Cherry Orchard. There was an audit for two years and a financial plan was put together on the basis of predictions about where funding would go in the future. Those concerned were not aware at that stage that they had to come up with another €11,000 in 2016 to pay the minimum wage. That means they will have to increase the cost or let people go. This defeats the purpose. The Minister of State made the point earlier that the services provided must be accessible to the users, which means keeping costs low. Especially with the likes of the equine centre, it means one cannot have extra hours for the horses, as it is already working at full tilt. One cannot squash more horses into the stables because there are none. Therefore, no more can be charged to raise funds. There is no other stream of income. While the centre might be able to apply for the stopgap measure announced, that defeats the purpose. The Minister of State already knows 40% of the workers in the CSP are on the minimum wage. We are not asking the Government to fund an increase for everyone on the CSP, just those on the minimum wage. We are asking it to plan for the future.

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys:** On the Deputy’s comment that this year is a 53-week social
welfare week, we actually made provision-----

Deputy Joan Burton: Last year.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: -----last year for that. The provision has already been made.

Deputy Joan Burton: There are 52 weeks this year.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: This is a 52-week social welfare year.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am not talking about social welfare.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: No, but the Deputy made a comment earlier about 53 payroll weeks.

Deputy Joan Burton: It was in the Estimate.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: It was in the Estimate to make provision-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Regarding wages on the CSP, the companies have to pay wages for 53 weeks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State has the floor.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Provision was made in relation to that.

It is not good practice simply to allocate public funds without an underlying rationale. It is not a stopgap measure. We are putting a process in place.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is a stopgap.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: That process will be in place, I hope, by the end of the month. Certainly, the target is the end of the month. The objective of the programme is to have companies operating on a financially sustainable basis. Transitional financial supports will ensure this objective is pursued. We will work with the centres. With regard to the one the Deputy just mentioned, the Tánaiste herself was actually involved in setting it up. Not only am I aware of it; so, too, is she. Recently, as Deputy Ó Snodaigh will recall, people in his constituency incorrectly claimed that funding was being cut and community centres would close. When people decided to protest the Deputy was among those who pointed out that these claims were factually incorrect. We are putting in place a process to resolve this issue. We will work through a structure and provide a rationale for ensuring the community services programme continues. The CSP works very well, not only in urban areas but nationwide, from Donegal to Cork and from Kerry to Galway.

Other Questions

JobPath Implementation

6. Deputy Ruth Coppinger asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection the progress made in the implementation of the JobPath scheme; and if she will make a statement on the
Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The question asks how JobPath, another of the so-called labour activation measures that have become the stock in trade of the Government, is progressing. Under this scheme, work done previously by FÁS is being outsourced to two large multinational companies, which will bully and harass people on the dole to ensure they accept work of any kind. The companies to which the Department awarded the contracts have a very poor track record in the United Kingdom.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: JobPath is a new approach to employment activation to support long-term unemployed people and those most at risk of becoming long-term unemployed to secure and sustain paid employment. Two companies, Turas Nua and Seetec, have been contracted by the Department to deliver JobPath services.

The roll-out of JobPath began last July on a soft launch basis in Bray and Longford. At the end of 2015, in excess of 7,500 jobseekers from 41 of the Department’s Intreo centres and local offices had been referred to JobPath. It is expected that the roll-out of the scheme to the remaining locations will be undertaken by the end of March.

Jobseekers who are selected for JobPath are invited to attend an initial information session, jointly hosted by the Department and the JobPath company, at which the jobseekers’ rights and responsibilities are explained. Participants on JobPath receive intensive individual support to help them address barriers to employment and find jobs. Each person is assigned a personal adviser who assesses their skills, experience, challenges and work goals and agrees a personal progression plan that includes a schedule of activities, actions and job focused targets. Participants are provided with a range of development supports and may also be referred for further education and training opportunities. They will spend a year on JobPath and if placed into a job, they will continue to receive support for at least three months and up to 12 months while in employment.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is unbelievable that the Labour Party has privatised and outsourced a function that was being carried out by FÁS. The reason given for doing so is that a recruitment embargo has been in place in recent years. It is laughable that the Department charged with creating employment cannot create jobs in the public sector.

The companies to which the Department awarded the contracts, Turas Nua and Seetec, have been involved in scandals in the United Kingdom where they defrauded the government. They were found to have made fraudulent claims that they were unable to back up. An investigation found that 30% of the claims submitted could not be verified and at least 10% were false. Nevertheless, the Government has awarded contracts to these companies.

The second problem I have with JobPath is that it puts a price on the heads of unemployed people. The companies in question are only interested in profit and their profits increase every time they have someone removed from the dole. There is nothing about the types of jobs they create. This is very poor form on the part of the Labour Party.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: What we are doing is very different from what was done in the United Kingdom and, as such, it is wrong to make comparisons. The baseline measurements, for example, are completely different. Further, one of the companies involved is a not-for-profit entity.
I visited the two pilot projects in Bray and Longford. I made it my business to not only meet the staff working there, who were assisting and helping to prepare personal progression plans, but also to meet the people who have access to the facility in that regard. This reminds me of the type of attack first put together in respect of Tús, which has been remarkably successful. Then, I was lobbied heavily, including by Members of the Opposition, to extend Tús to be self-referring. I expanded it to 20%.

We have had an unemployment crisis. We had over 15% of people unemployed. Thankfully, we are now down to 8.8%. As we move out of recession and into recovery I want to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to share in that recovery as well as the opportunity to work with people to ensure they can get the skills and access the opportunities that are now coming into the economy. I am very keen for that to take place.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is very strange that the Government would award this to companies that were under investigation in the United Kingdom. There was no investigation until whistleblowers came forward from within those companies to back up the stories of disabled and unemployed people who were knocked off the dole and forced into jobs that they could not do. There have been countless cases in Britain of disabled people who were assessed by similar companies. They were considered to be not trying or not looking hard enough and had penalties applied to their dole. Basically, the scheme is compulsory.

These companies get paid a referral fee for each person they get taken on. However, there is no quality control in terms of the type of work that people are being allocated or the amount of travel involved for the person in taking that job. There is no minimum age mechanism and such like.

The mantra of this Government is that the best way out of poverty is a job but the best way out of poverty is no longer a job, not with the type of jobs the Government is creating. We have now become the second highest ranking country for low pay. Many of the jobs are impossible for people to survive on. The Government has demeaned and made more undignified the whole concept of work with these schemes by forcing people, young people in particular, to take up work for free or for €50 per month. That is the mantra and the lesson of this Government.

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys:** Deputy Coppinger has her own mantra. If we look at the figures we can see that the vast majority of people who are moving back into employment are moving from part-time to full-time work. The vast majority of people moving into employment are moving into well-paid jobs, not jobs at minimum pay.

I know the Deputy always wants to find the worst in everything. However, I put it to her that this is not a UK scheme. This is designed to operate in Ireland to an Irish model. Everything is paid on the basis of performance but there is also an engagement with our clients to ensure satisfaction is received from the clients. Deputy Coppinger spoke at length about the disabled and disability but that does not apply in this case.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Not yet.

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys:** Deputy Coppinger spent a good deal of time referring to it but it does not apply. The Deputy is criticising what I believe is a good initiative to assist long-term unemployed people who lost their jobs at the beginning of the recession or who came out of college or school and were unfortunate not to get employment. Now, there will be a support service that will assist, help to build people’s confidence and work with them to get back into
The idea that we should not help people back into work is wrong.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle**: Thank you. I have to move on to the next question.

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys**: I want to ensure this works. I will work hard to ensure that as many of the people I represent as possible have an opportunity to share in the recovery by going out to work.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger**: I do not know why the Tánaiste is not answering the questions. She is whispering everything into the ear of the Minister of State.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle**: I have no control over that.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger**: She is choosing not to answer

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**Employment Support Services**

7. **Deputy Seán Kyne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection to report on the operation of Intreo by her Department since its introduction and the level of engagement between her Department, other Departments and State agencies in terms of ensuring availability of access to appropriate training and educational courses for jobseekers, particularly in the sectors for which there is a significant demand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [1208/16]

**Deputy Seán Kyne**: The question relates to the operation of the Intreo offices by the Department and the level of engagement between the Department and other Departments and State agencies in respect of education and training.

**Deputy Joan Burton**: The Department launched Intreo in 2012 to provide a new integrated public employment service whereby people looking for work can access income support and employment services. This involved the merger of community welfare services, Department of Social Protection jobseeker income support services and the former FÁS employment and community services divisions. As part of this service integration, the Department located service provision for all of these services in new or refurbished Intreo centres, providing a much improved customer service environment. I recall that the Deputy attended the launch of the Intreo office in Galway. It is a very fine office and gives people the respect, dignity and space they deserve. It also successfully developed and implemented a range of new service processes, including profiling of jobseekers, group information sessions and case management, and, in parallel, established a new employer relations division. This division works with employers to encourage them to recruit staff from the live register.

When opening the new Balbriggan office last week, I was very pleased to hear that a number of employers in Dublin Airport are now using the services of the Intreo offices in Balbriggan and Swords to source additional employees. This is central to the service Intreo is designed to provide and has contributed to a significant increase in employment in recent years. There are a number of measures for jobseekers, such as JobBridge, JobsPlus, TÚS, Gateway and the back to work family dividend, which was introduced last year, all of which have contributed to a reduction of about 40% in the unemployment rate since 2012. The impact of all these changes
is also seen in the much improved service processing times, the early and more frequent engagement of jobseekers in the activation process and the high levels of customer satisfaction reported through an independent customer survey.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. We will come back to her.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister for her reply. Intreo offices have been a success story of the Government. They were part of the programme for Government and discussed for decades. Thankfully, the Government has established a very valuable service. It is regrettable that this was not done when more money was available in different times.

As the Minister said, the recent jobs figures indicate the success of the job creation initiatives from her Department and the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. I refer to the level of engagement that has taken place with regard to provision of education and training services to match job vacancies. I welcome the improved engagement with employers. How much engagement does the Department have with employers? Is it skewed towards one area or another?

Deputy Joan Burton: I would be grateful if the Deputy passed on information to employers in his constituency, Galway West. We welcome contact from employers who are seeking employees. We now have an employer service, which comprises a series of staff dedicated specifically to contacting employers when they are recruiting. We want to ensure that people who are unemployed have a chance to pitch for those jobs and, it is to be hoped, get them. There are many different examples of that.

If an employer comes to us or we make contact with an employer, we will, for instance, consider the kind of candidate it wants, taking into account age, background and other information. We will consider, in particular, educational qualifications and whether a candidate has any previous work experience. If a new employer coming to an area wants to employ ten or 20 people, we will undertake, together with local education and training boards, the training of potential staff. The employer can then offer such people employment.

We launched the new Intreo pathways programme today. Employers, such as those based at the airport, are now using Intreo services to recruit in areas such as Sligo, where JenaValve Technology worked with St. Angela’s College and the Sligo Intreo office to develop a particular course in technology relating to medical devices. Subsequently, all of the people from the course were successfully employed.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I certainly welcome the initiatives on engagement with employers. The Intreo offices have a great role in client profiling and one-to-one consultation with case officers. What is the role of the IDA, Enterprise Ireland or Údarás na Gaeltachta with regard to the Intreo offices, profiling the jobs they have or engaging with interested participants?

Deputy Joan Burton: We have seen much job recovery in big cities and towns and we want to spread it out to the entire country. In this respect, IDA officials and Enterprise Ireland officers deal with local Irish companies on a county by county basis and in the regions. They can deal with companies and look at Irish people who may have ideas for new enterprises. Where there is a training requirement, and I gave an example with regard to Sligo and I can give other examples also, if we are told about it we will set out to work with whoever is the appropriate education provider. We took in the old FÁS employment services. We have the new education and training boards, colleges and institutes of technology, and in Sligo we have had very suc-
cessful co-operation with St. Angela’s College. We are prepared to be open to what will most help the employer and local unemployed people get matched and get work.

**JobPath Implementation**

8. **Deputy Seán Kyne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection to report on the operation of the JobPath scheme, including the number of participants in counties Galway and Mayo and nationally; the number of persons who have found employment through the service; the level of monitoring by her of the service; and if additional supports are available to jobseekers as they undergo the transition back to work. [1210/16]

**Deputy Seán Kyne:** This relates to the operation of the JobPath scheme, including the number of participants in counties Galway and Mayo and nationally, and the number of persons who have found employment through the service.

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys:** I wish Deputy Kyne a happy new year. It is very unusual for a Government backbencher to have two priority questions, so he should invest in a national lottery ticket tonight.

JobPath is a new approach to employment activation to support long-term unemployed people and those most at risk of becoming long-term unemployed to secure and sustain employment. Two companies, Turas Nua and Seetec, have been contracted by the Department to deliver JobPath services. The roll-out of JobPath began last July on a soft launch basis and, as I stated earlier, the two pilots were in Bray and Longford. At the end of 2015, in excess of 7,500 jobseekers from 41 of the Department’s Intreo centres and local offices had been referred to JobPath. Of the 7,500 jobseekers referred, 1,000 were from the Galway and Mayo area. The JobPath companies have a year to work with each jobseeker in order to secure employment. As the service is in the roll-out phase and as no participant has completed the JobPath programme, there are as yet no meaningful statistics available on employment outcomes.

The JobPath companies will be subject to regular on-site inspections and audits to ensure that JobPath is delivered in accordance with contractual obligations. The Department will also commission customer satisfaction surveys to independently assess if customers are satisfied with the level and quality of service delivered by the contractors. Failure by the contractors to satisfy the Department’s inspectors or to achieve a satisfactory score in the independent survey will result in payment penalties being applied.

Participants on JobPath receive intensive individual support to help them address barriers to employment and to find jobs. Each person is assigned a personal adviser, who assesses the person’s skills, experience, challenges and work goals and agrees a personal progression plan that includes a schedule of activities, actions and job-focused targets. Participants are provided with a range of development supports and may also be referred for further education and training opportunities.

**Deputy Seán Kyne:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply. When I raised this previously in September it was stated that 200 people were referred in Galway, so there has been a huge increase, with 1,000 people in the Galway and Mayo area referred to an initiative which has only been in operation since July. I welcome the progress that has been made. Will the Minister of State explain how the selection process for the scheme works? Is it random or is it
targeted according to certain criteria?

The Minister of State referred to customer satisfaction. In regard to the service level agreement with Seetec, in the case of Galway, how is the Department ensuring JobPath is effective? Will he indicate what performance criteria apply in that regard?

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys:** The first criterion that applies in respect of eligibility for JobPath is that the applicant must be long-term unemployed, that is, more than one year out of work. Selection is random, the objective being to ensure there is no cherry-picking of candidates. There must be equality of opportunity for everybody. Since being rolled out in Galway, the scheme has also gone live in Achill, Ballina, Belmullet, Castlebar, Loughrea and Westport.

In respect of the assessment, especially the early assessment element, it is vital there be a customer satisfaction interaction. However, there simply are not the resources within the Department to give everybody that level of service. We want to ensure people who are long-term unemployed get the best possible supports to help them to access work. We cannot just look at this particular service in isolation. A number of targets have seen set across Government to assist persons who have been out of work long term. These are the people who, in the past, were always the last to receive the benefit of a recovery. We want them to share in the current recovery by accessing the opportunities for work that are coming on stream across the country.

**Deputy Seán Kyne:** The Minister of State indicated that selection for the scheme is on a random basis, with no cherry-picking of candidates. Does he agree that in certain instances, it might be advantageous to prioritise people who are very well suited to a particular job or training initiative? Might such prioritisation be considered in a percentage of cases?

The Minister of State talked about the ongoing roll-out of the JobsPlus scheme. In Connemara, people have to cross Galway city to access the Intreo office. Is the Department taking cognisance of such issues as distances travelled, availability of public transport and so on?

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys:** On the second question, there is ongoing co-operation and engagement through local Intreo offices. Where issues like those the Deputy mentioned have come up, they are covered under the contractual agreement. People are going to great lengths to ensure individuals can access the centres. Where there have been difficulties with transport, for example, minibuses have been hired to collect people and deliver them to the nearest centre. It is a flexible process.

The Deputy’s first question is about self-referral and it is something I expect to be raised more and more as we proceed. In the case of Tús, we responded to demand in this regard by stipulating that 20% of participants could be assigned via self-referral. In the case of JobPath, it is a little early in the process to take that type of approach. We have rolled out the pilot schemes, as I outlined. If the service works well, which I am confident it will, there will be a demand on future Governments to allow some element of self-referral. I am already hearing complaints from people whose neighbour was able to access JobPath but they were not. I see a future demand in that regard and I will encourage a response from Government when it arises.
Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection what amounts to a progression plan under the new Intreo system for applicants for jobseeker’s allowance. [1211/16]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: My question concerns what is contained, or should be contained, within the progression plans that are being offered to jobseeker’s allowance applicants by Intreo offices.

Deputy Joan Burton: A personal progression plan is, as its name suggests, a document setting out the actions a jobseeker should take to enhance his or her prospects of finding employment. The plan is agreed between the jobseeker and an Intreo case officer as part of the activation service offered in Intreo centres. Similar plans are developed and agreed between jobseekers and local employment service providers or JobPath providers in cases where jobseekers are referred to those services.

A plan will typically include details on the jobseeker’s employment experience and educational qualifications, work skills, employment preferences and any identified barriers to employment, such as literacy or numeracy difficulties. The plan will also include any actions agreed between the case officer and the jobseeker and these are, in most cases, divided into two types. First are those that are developmental in nature, such as undertaking a training course. Second are those that are employment-related, such applying for a specific job, considering a community employment or Tús placement, or uploading a CV onto a jobs website. In most cases, the personal progression plan is agreed at the first meeting between a case officer and the unemployed person and forms the basis for discussion at any follow-up meetings. Depending on progress against the agreed actions or any changes in the jobseeker’s circumstances, the plan may be revised at any of those meetings. In other words, it is a living document that is updated as required.

The benefit of developing a structured personal progression plan is that it focuses the discussion between the case officer and the jobseeker on actions that are appropriate to the jobseeker’s circumstances. In doing so, it helps jobseekers to identify the options and actions that are available and most appropriate to them. It also sets a timeframe within which those options and actions should be exercised and, importantly, engages the public employment service, which is Intreo, in helping the jobseeker to take advantage of those options.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Tánaiste and I are often at loggerheads on social welfare issues but moving towards an integrated service is one of the logical steps her Department has taken which should have been done many years ago. There are problems, however, with some of the progression plans being given to jobseekers. In some cases, for instance, they are unhelpful or unrealistic for the applicants for whom they are devised. Is any assessment undertaken with jobseekers who have gone through the process to see whether the system needs to be tweaked to ensure people get the fullest benefit from the positive changes that have been made? We have moved from a system of dole offices to one comprising offices that offer a good deal of other services. The idea was sold that this would involve a one-step process, with people moving directly into education or employment. However, some jobseekers seem to be stuck in the middle and are not moving forward because of the barriers the Tánaiste mentioned, which are apparently not being taken fully on board by some case workers.
Deputy Joan Burton: The purpose of this initiative is to bring the case officer and the unemployed person together and based on the latter’s knowledge of what he or she would like to do, previous experience, educational levels and so on, find the best path to work or training for that individual. If there are particular problems, such as poor numeracy or literacy skills, the employment officer will seek to address them in co-operation with the jobseeker. It is very important to ask people the simple question of what they would like to do. Some jobseekers, particularly younger people, might never have worked before. It is about suggesting that they try this or that, based on their interests, skills and experience.

I have just come from a meeting at Diageo Ireland. Three years ago, in collaboration with Guinness, we set up a scheme whereby young people seeking to work in the hospitality sector could partake of a dedicated education course offering a FETAC qualification, after which they would participate in a similar period of work experience. I met those young people at the outset and the transformation in them since they completed the programme is remarkable. That scheme, which started in St. James’s Gate, has since been rolled out to Dundalk, with the first participants there graduating last year, and to Belfast. We intend to roll it out countrywide, including to Derry. All I can say is that if done well and with support, particularly from employers and likely employers, it has the potential to give people a lot of additional opportunities to get back to work.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Message from Seanad

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Harbours Bill 2015, without amendment. Seanad Éireann has passed the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2015, without amendment. Seanad Éireann has passed the Prisons Bill 2015, without amendment. Seanad Éireann has passed the Garda Síochána (Policing Authority and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2015, without amendment.

Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan - the restoration works on the national monument at Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street in Dublin and the implication for the rest of the terrace; (2) Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - the urgent need to protect buildings of historical significance in Moore Street in Dublin; (3) Deputy Kieran O’Donnell - the Government’s funding plans to deal with flooding-related issues in Limerick; (4) Deputy Brendan Griffin - measures to prevent flooding and flood damage to homes along the River Flesk and elsewhere in County Kerry; (5) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Noel Coonan, Seamus Healy and Michael Lowry - Government measures to address the loss of 120 jobs at the Tipperary Water Bottling Plant in Borrisoleigh, County Tipperary; (6) Deputy Paul J. Connaughton - the operation of and the difficulties with the young farmer scheme; (7) Deputy Jonathan O’Brien - the urgent need to protect the historical buildings on Moore Street in Dublin; (8) Deputy Seán Crowe - to discuss current developments relating to the Moore Street 1916 battlefield site; (9) Deputy Mary Lou McDonald - the threat to our national heritage from developers at the Moore Street Terrace and surrounding area in
Dublin; (10) Deputy Michael P. Kitt - the difficulties for people with flooding issues in relation to assistance, including the question of insurance cover; (11) Deputy Brian Stanley - insurance cover for people affected by the floods; (12) Deputy Joe Carey - the reinstatement of financial supports such as the rural practice allowance and distance coding for rural general practitioners; (13) Deputy Joe Higgins - the establishment of a commission of investigation into alleged serious irregularities regarding the assembly of a site by Wexford Borough Council and the Office of Public Works for offices for the Department of Social Protection and the Revenue Commissioners in Anne Street in Wexford over a 20 year period from 1983; (14) Deputy Thomas Pringle - the need to provide transport for patients referred to Dublin hospitals for treatment from Letterkenny University Hospital in order to clear waiting lists; (15) Deputy Clare Daly - the state of the nation address by the President of the United States of America, Mr. Barack Obama, and the global threat caused by the continuing increased militarism of the United States of America; (16) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the need to preserve the Moore Street terrace as part of the 1916 battle site; (17) Deputy Billy Kelleher - the need for funding to be prioritised for the North Ring Road in Cork city; (18) Deputy Timmy Dooley - the major structural deficits and disrepair in regional and local roads; (19) Deputy Mick Wallace - Ireland’s continuing trade links with Saudi Arabia, given the Saudi Arabian bombing campaign which has killed over 2,800 civilians in Yemen to date; and (20) Deputy Colm Keaveney - the need to replace the mobility allowance.

The matters raised by Deputies Mattie McGrath, Noel Coonan, Seamus Healy and Michael Lowry; Joe Carey; Colm Keaveney; and Joe Higgins have been selected for discussion.

Topical Issue Debate

Job Losses

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing us to raise this very serious issue and I thank the Minister for coming into the Chamber to answer. This is a very serious situation. What makes it more serious is the way it came about. Just days into the new year, when the workforce had returned to work and were working hard, as they always do at the C&C Group all over Ireland, in the Borrisoleigh plant and in Clonmel, a supposed leak of coming job losses was reported in *The Irish Times*. First, I do not believe it was a leak. I believe it was deliberate policy on the part of the company itself, which will not engage.

The Gleeson plant in Borrisoleigh and Bulmers in Clonmel have a huge heritage and a very dedicated and diligent workforce. I salute the workforce there and sympathise with them and their families in their plight, having heard this news in the way they did, through Tipp FM or *The Irish Times* website. They were told today that the group CEO, Mr. Glancey, was flying in from England, but he is not flying anywhere. I have an e-mail here from Tom McCusker, who says there is no one coming into the country today and he is dealing with it. Here we are with a merry-go-round. There is no accountability, no responsibility and no goodwill shown to the workers and their families. It is despicable.

It is a sad state of affairs that these two small, productive companies - there were up to 700 jobs in Bulmers in Clonmel at one stage and up to 300 in Gleesons of Borrisoleigh - could be taken over by C&C and laid to waste. They were plundered and - I do not like using this par-
lance here - they were raped and pillaged. No action the company takes or promise it gives to
us and to the workers is worth the paper it is written on. It now says it is going to relocate 80
jobs to Clonmel, which is an hour’s journey away. The assurances I have got about the Clonmel
plant over the last four years - I have raised it here several times - have not been honoured. How
can we believe or trust this? Are they going to pipe the water from Borrisoleigh to Clonmel, or
are they going to find a spring underneath the factory in Clonmel in order to bottle the water in
Clonmel------

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Walsh):** I have to ask you to conclude. You will have an
opportunity to reply at a later stage.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** We are playing games. I am appealing to the Minister to call
this company and try to get some accountability for this and respect for the diligent workforce
in Tipperary.

**Deputy Noel Coonan:** I acknowledge the Ceann Comhairle’s choice of this topic and I
thank the Minister for coming in personally to deal with this very serious issue, which has a
potentially disastrous outcome for the people of mid- and north Tipperary. I am not going to go
back over many things that have been said, but perhaps I could ask the Minister a few questions
on the 80 jobs that are being approved in Clonmel and the €10 million investment, which is wel-
come. Will the workers in Borrisoleigh who are losing their jobs have priority for those jobs?

Could the Minister outline to the House and the general public the extent to which efforts
were made by the Minister and his Department to dissuade C&C from closing its plant in Borrisoleigh? What carrots were given that might have kept that plant open, which seems to the
general public to be very economical and which has provided magnificent employment for
more than 200 people down through the years? What is going to happen to the plant now? Is
any effort being made to find a new owner and will the company make available the plant and
the machinery so that it is possible for an alternative owner to come in?

The extent to which redundancy, compensation and retraining will be given to the workforce
in Borrisoleigh is critical. We ask that this be maximised. What efforts are the Government and
State bodies making to bring new industry into mid- and north Tipperary? I caution that C&C
still exists in the county. It is fragile. We want it to prosper in the county and to continue giv-
ing employment. We have to be very careful with the language we use regarding the company.
Threatening it is of no help.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Walsh):** You will have an opportunity to speak again.

**Deputy Noel Coonan:** I ask the Minister to give special attention to mid- and north Tipper-
ary, which have suffered seriously from unemployment over the years. Replacement industry
is very slow in being sought for that area.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** The decision by C&C to close the plant in Borrisoleigh and the
manner in which that became public are absolutely deplorable. I can only describe as shameful
the fact that workers and their families learned of the closure from the pages of *The Irish Times*
and local radio. It is a disgraceful way to treat workers who have given loyal service at Glee-
sons for many years - some for as many as 30 years - and their families. The closure is a ham-
mer blow to workers and their families and to the town of Borrisoleigh, which has depended on
this business for generations.
Dáil Éireann

When C&C acquired Bulmers in Clonmel and Gleesons, we were told of a bright future with expansion plans, but in fact the opposite happened and the company shredded jobs, in both Clonmel and Borrisoleigh, and slashed wages and conditions of employment. The closure of the Borrisoleigh plant is completely unnecessary and is being done solely in the pursuit of more profit. It is about greed. This company is already very profitable. Its latest half-year accounts, to the end of September of last year, show a profit of €62.5 million. It has become obvious that the acquisition by C&C of Gleesons was done with the clear intention of closing the plant by stealth.

It is clear from a reply to the Dáil in November of last year, just short of three months ago, that the Minister was aware of the situation with C&C and he had directed his officials to enter discussions with it. What discussions took place, when did the Minister become aware of the proposed closure, what actions has he taken to try to prevent that closure and what actions does he now intend to take to prevent it?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Walsh):** I have to ask you to conclude your remarks.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** We are the best little country in the world in which to do business. Does the Minister condone the decision of the management to close the Borrisoleigh plant? Does he intend to or has he already contacted C&C to express his condemnation of the company, the way it has dealt with its affairs and the way it has treated the workforce with such disrespect in Borrisoleigh? Will he publicly sanction the company for the manner in which it has conducted its affairs in that respect? I have raised this issue here on a number of occasions because, from the time C&C took over M&J Gleeson, it had one purpose and one purpose only, namely, to run it down, take its brands and close the factory. The Minister, all his officials and everybody in the Department were aware that there were problems with this company.

**4 o’clock**

There were problems in that it would not communicate. It would not recognise the workers in terms of having a group forum. Eventually, it reluctantly accepted having a union represent them. Therefore, the motivation of the company was always questionable in terms of what it would do with Gleeson’s of Borrisoleigh.

After they announced the takeover, the then Competition Authority looked at this. I want to ask the Minister what is the role of a competition authority. Why did the Competition Authority not put conditions on a takeover? Effectively, it rubber-stamped this takeover with no protection whatsoever for the workforce. The Competition Authority could not have allowed this to go ahead unless it had a business plan and projections from the company. Did that forward plan that was put before the Competition Authority include the possible closure of this plant? The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission must be questioned on that decision.

Finally, I recognise that the Minister, Deputy Richard Bruton, is making determined efforts to create jobs but we also need to remember that we must sustain the jobs we have. We have lost 140 jobs in Borrisoleigh and I am sure that the Minister and the officials in IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland are out there trying to encourage new jobs to come in. In this instance, we saw the warning signs and we did not do anything about it. Today, senior management in C&C told me that the jobs will be on offer to the workers from Borrisoleigh who are being displaced. They will be offered those jobs as a priority and under the same terms and conditions as C&C operated. They also told me - I ask the Minister how much of this he is aware of - that a party
is interested in purchasing the plant as a going concern. For how long did the discussions take place? Was the Department involved and did the Minister give them enough support and encouragement to make that final decision?

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I thank the Deputies for raising this important issue.

Like all Deputies, our thoughts are with the workers who were affected by this announcement. I am conscious of the impact of this announcement on the workers and their families, and the community in Borrisoleigh. As Deputies have said, the way in which this emerged through leaks in the press was not the way it should have been handled or the way, I understand, the company ever intended that it should be handled.

Since the purchase of M.J. Gleeson and Company a number of years ago, C&C has been engaged in restructuring of certain elements of its business. The decision announced yesterday is part of a company-wide restructuring, particularly of its manufacturing base, which the company has undertaken following the loss of material contracts for private label water which has led to serious underutilisation of capacity in both the Irish and the United Kingdom plants and undermined their competitiveness.

I have spoken to senior management at the company in the past couple of days since this surfaced and urged them to see if the decision could be reconsidered but, unfortunately, this is not possible given the commercial realities they face.

The C&C Group announced yesterday that, following a detailed review of its manufacturing and operational footprint, it intends to consolidate production from sites in Shepton Mallet in England and Borrisoleigh in its manufacturing site in Clonmel. Under this proposal, production and packaging will be transferred on a phased basis from the facility in Borrisoleigh. Consequently, Clonmel will become the core manufacturing site for Bulmers and Magners cider, Tipperary Water and the company’s range of niche premium beers and ciders. In support of the proposal, the company is committed to investing in excess of €10 million in enhancing the packaging and logistics capability in Clonmel and the creation of 80 additional jobs. This is designed to put Irish-based employment in the company on a secure and competitive footing. The company has indicated that Borrisoleigh will remain as a key transport hub and both logistics and warehousing operations will be maintained in the town.

The company has also indicated that where possible the workers at Borrisoleigh will be offered alternative employment at the expansion in Clonmel. Regrettably, net roles lost in Ireland across the company’s operational network are estimated to be 54 jobs.

I note the company’s statement that it will provide support and training for the workers affected, which was raised by Deputy Coonan. In addition, all the supports of the State will be made available. Enterprise Ireland will continue to engage with the company as it undertakes its restructuring. The agency will continue to monitor the situation at the company and will continue to communicate with the group and will offer any assistance that it can within Enterprise Ireland’s remit.

I understand that the company has initiated the consultation process with its employees and their representatives who are impacted by the announcement, and the company plans to meet employee and union representatives over the coming days.
Enterprise Ireland has been in close touch with the company over the past year, and on a number of occasions in recent weeks, to seek to support it. A decision of this nature, where the company has lost a large part of its business, is obviously a commercial one. The company has made its decision. Enterprise Ireland will continue to work with the workers. We will be actively seeking alternative investment in Borrisoleigh. The plant is an asset that we hope will be available to attract new investors and Enterprise Ireland will work with the company in that respect.

Obviously, there will be support for training of workers, as committed to by the company. In addition, the resources of the State to assist workers will be available. In particular, the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, will be available to support workers in respect of their rights and access to other supports.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I also thank the Minister who is making efforts. One of the problems with C&C, the then Competition Authority and others is that they waltzed in and took over a good company, and they have laid it to waste. This is a hammer blow for Tipperary. I am being told that I should be welcoming them, because it is an ill wind that blows no good and it will blow the jobs to Clonmel. A storm is blowing, however, and the jobs will blow to Scotland because the workforce in Clonmel, as well as Borrisoleigh, have been treated disgustingly over the past number of years under C&C.

I attended the past two AGMs of C&C in Dublin. At the first one, I was not allowed in because my vote was wrong. At the second one, I got in and met management, but I was an embarrassment to them. That is why they let me in. They did not want to answer any questions from anybody, let alone at the AGM. Shareholders have major concerns.

If one walks into any bar in Dublin or around the country, one will see that Orchard Thieves is the new cider that is displacing Bulmers. The real thieves are C&C itself. There is an aggressive campaign to exit Bulmers, Magners and all the others, and we will have a wasted plant in Tipperary as well. That is my worry going into the future.

I would like to be positive if I could but I cannot because there is no meaningful engagement with the Minister, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission or anybody else; they just did this. The same happened with the Barlow family in Clonmel when the Quinn Group bought the radiator plant. They bought with one intention, which was to close it down. This is happening too often in Ireland where multinationals and conglomerates are buying up good indigenous companies and laying them to waste. We must wake up here, smell the coffee and see what is going on under our noses.

Deputy Noel Coonan: I thank the Minister for his response and for his commitment that he will make a serious effort to address the imbalance in north Tipperary and mid-Tipperary. I look forward to working with the Minister and with the agencies to replace that industry in Borrisoleigh.

On a general point, does the Department or the Government have any plans to deal with larger companies, such as C&C, which come in, buy up smaller companies with which they compete and then, literally, close them down? That is the major problem. Everybody concerned in Borrisoleigh believes that M.J. Gleeson and Company was a viable company and providing employment to the local people which, in turn, was a significant source of economic activity for the neighbourhood. That issue needs to be addressed so that we can prevent that happening.
The Minister did not respond on what will happen to the plant and machinery in Borriso-leigh, and whether the company is willing to make it available for sale or if somebody has an interest in it. Perhaps he will respond now. There are alternatives, particularly in micro-brewing. Every effort should be made to avail of that plant and machinery.

The Minister might come to Borrisoleigh and meet the people. He might convene a meeting of the State agencies, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and Tipperary County Council to see what we can do to address this horrible crisis that has befallen us.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** The decision to close Borrisoleigh makes me angry because it is quite obvious to everybody that C&C acquired Gleeson’s with the sole intention of closing it down. It had a number of goes at it, including 40 redundancies not too long ago.

The Minister referred to commercial realities. The commercial realities are that this company is very profitable, making in the region of €120 million profit every year. This is an unnecessary closure. To suggest that workers in Borrisoleigh will transfer to Clonmel is probably unrealistic. It is 58 minutes to an hour from Borrisoleigh to Clonmel and it is very unlikely that many of those workers would be able to take up offers of jobs in Clonmel. The priority must be to try to save these jobs. Will the Minister intervene directly with the company, which is to a large degree supported by Enterprise Ireland, to stop this closure and save these jobs?

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** Does the Minister intend to reprimand the company for the manner in which it treated the workforce in Borrisoleigh and the way it made the announcement? Can the Minister put himself in the place of a worker who woke up to hear on the local radio that his or her factory was being closed, without any advance notice or warning? Such conduct should not be tolerated or condoned by any Department, particularly not the Minister’s Department.

When the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission agreed to the takeover, it must have received some indication from the company as to its future and forward plan. Does the Minister see a role for the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission in protecting workers in such takeover situations? C&C purchased M&J Gleeson in Borrisoleigh and gradually ran it down and undermined it to reach the stage at which it could close it. Even with the lack of investment, M&J Gleeson still managed to make a substantial profit out of its day-to-day running in 2015, and would have made a profit in 2013 were it not for the exceptional items that were factored in. We must send a very strong and clear signal to such companies that this type of conduct is unacceptable to the Minister, his Department, the Irish people, the workforce in Borrisoleigh, the people of Tipperary and the local community.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** Again, I express my sympathy with the workers. Job losses are always to be regretted. Job losses in Irish-owned companies are at their lowest level since Enterprise Ireland was established. We are doing more work with companies to sustain them through a difficult trading environment than has been done before. Much of what we are doing is right, and there are more wins than losses.

Deputy Mattie McGrath raised the issue of Clonmel’s future. The company’s commitment is to invest in enhancing the facilities in Clonmel.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** We heard the same promises for Borrisoleigh.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** It has made a clear commitment to invest more than €10 million
in the company and provide additional jobs in a more efficient and higher-utilisation plant.

While the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission has a role in examining any merger and acquisition proposal, it is solely to ascertain whether the merger would create excessive concentration in the market. Its role is to examine the share and the impact on competition and whether it would be bad for the marketplace. It has a limited role. It does not work with development plans.

There are valuable assets in Borrisoleigh, and Enterprise Ireland will work with the company to make them available and seek alternative investors, which the company supports. As Deputy Coonan said, we have been putting a very strong emphasis on regional growth. In Tipperary, Eishtec has created additional jobs, Amneal Pharmaceuticals has recently invested through the IDA, and ABP Food Group has invested in Cahir. These three companies have provided more than 600 jobs. Our regional enterprise strategy is designed to strengthen our regions, and I am encouraged by the progress in both the south east and the mid-west, which has shown that we have a strategy that can work.

Deputies have raised concerns about whether this was wrongly motivated. The company’s statement showed that utilisation in its manufacturing plants had decreased to 34% and that it had lost significant business.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** In America.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** Unfortunately, no level of grant aid can reverse such commercial realities. Restructuring results in difficult times and we must ensure we support the company. As others have said, the company continues to provide good employment in Tipperary, and we are determined to support it. It is encouraging to see that unemployment in Tipperary has decreased by 23% during the past four years. We are making headway and we need to build on this progress.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Australia.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** That is what I am determined to do.

### General Practitioner Contracts

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this important Topical Issue. I compliment and acknowledge the work done by GPs throughout Ireland on a daily basis to look after their patients. They are a key part of the fabric of rural Ireland in particular. The existing general medical services, GMS, contract for public patients was first devised in 1972, and there has been little modification since then. There is a need to reinstate the financial supports available to rural GPs. Some 20 rural practices throughout Ireland are no longer in receipt of the rural practice allowance. There is also a need to restore the distance coding payment.

A total of 147 rural GP practices are in receipt of the rural practice allowance. It is a very restrictive payment. The payment is worth €16,200. In order to qualify for it, a practice must serve a population of fewer than 500 and be located at least 4.8 km away from an urban setting. The payment is tied to a GP, not to a particular area or practice. The withdrawal of the distance coding payment, which was given to rural GPs until 2010, is also undermining the viability of rural practices.
During recent weeks and months, I have worked very closely with Dr. Liam Glynn, a GP based in Ballyvaughan who took a High Court action against the HSE and was successful in having his rural practice allowance restored. I ask that the rural practice allowance be restored to the 20 rural practices that are no longer in receipt of it. I also request that the distance coding payment be reinstated. While I acknowledge that negotiations on a new GMS contract are under way, I ask that, as a gesture of goodwill, the payments be restored. There are two particular areas in County Clare, Feakle in east Clare and Kildysart in west Clare, that are no longer in receipt of the payment. There is a feeling in the GP community that its members are aging and we need to make it more attractive for new GPs to come in and take up practices in rural Ireland. I am asking that these payments be reinstated, and I look forward to hearing the Minister of State’s reply.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): I thank Deputy Joe Carey for raising this issue and providing me with an opportunity to update the House on the matter. The Government is committed to ensuring that patients throughout the country continue to have access to GP services, especially in remote rural areas, and that general practice is sustainable in such areas into the future. On 1 January 2016, 15 GMS lists, out of a national total of more than 2,400, were without a permanent GP, and five of these were in rural areas. However, the full range of GP services continues to be provided to the patients in these areas through either a locum GP or a neighbouring GP. The HSE, the Department of Health and the Irish Medical Organisation are engaged in a comprehensive review of the GMS and other publicly-funded health sector GP contracts. A key objective of the engagement with the IMO is to achieve revised and modernised contractual arrangements which support the sustainable delivery of enhanced GP services in local communities, especially in remote rural areas. As the Deputy pointed out, some 40 years have passed since the original contract was drawn up. Under the current GMS contract, GPs who practise in remote rural areas of low population qualify for special rural practice concessions, including an annual allowance of just over €16,200 and more favourable subsidies for the employment of staff, including practice nurses and secretarial support staff. The HSE recently produced revised rural practice allowance guidelines for remote rural areas. The purpose of the new guidelines is to ensure consistency, transparency and fairness in decision-making regarding rural GP practices and to provide additional options to support GPs. From time to time, HSE local offices offer other incentives, including access to HSE facilities, to attract GPs into rural areas. Such incentives may include offers of additional contracts, such as the contract to provide medical officer services to nursing homes.

I am aware that some isolated rural areas and deprived urban areas may find it difficult to attract GPs to fill vacant posts. I think this is what the Deputy is waiting for. I anticipate that the Department of Health and the HSE will shortly have a proposal to put to the IMO that will help to support and sustain rural practices. Although the existing rate of allowance for a single-handed GP is likely to be maintained, an enhanced allowance might be made available to GPs who are in group practice arrangements, for example, with GMS GPs outside the designated remote area but proximate to that area. In addition, we will propose special items of service to modernise the current arrangements and incentivise the provision of certain primary care services, such as new and emerging contraceptive methods. Having regard to the easing of the State’s financial position, the Department of Health will shortly commence a formal consultation process under the FEMPI Acts in respect of the fees and allowances that are payable to contracted GPs. I emphasise that we feel we will shortly be in a position to make a proposal that - it is hoped - will find favour with the IMO in relation to rural practice and distance codes.
Deputy Joe Carey: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. I agree with what she has said and I am heartened by it. Unfortunately, this issue has dragged on for far too long. I am asking today for the restoration of the payment of rural practice allowances that are tied down to 20 practices that are currently in operation, as well as the restoration of payments in respect of other practices that have fallen away because of the absence of rural practice allowances. I understand that a new proposal for rural general practice will have to be introduced and agreed as part of the negotiations on modernisation that are currently under way. As that will take time, I propose that the payment of these allowances be reinstated as a gesture of goodwill. They were taken away overnight, and I am asking for them to be restored overnight as well.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: While 20 practices may be more affected than others, there are more than 20 practices involved here. On that basis, this package will be offered to everyone in this category. The Deputy has suggested that something should be done “as a gesture of goodwill”, but I believe what we are doing is something that will be sustainable into the future. I suggest that the Deputy should wait to see what the IMO’s response to this proposal will be. I believe the package will help to incentivise GPs who already work in certain rural districts or certain deprived urban and rural areas, as well as those who might wish to take the opportunity to move to such areas. I ask the Deputy to wait to see what the IMO’s response to this proposal will be. I hope it will be accepted by the IMO.

Mobility Allowance Review

Deputy Colm Keaveney: This Government prides itself on putting equality at the front and centre of every decision it makes and every policy it pursues. Almost 1,000 days ago, it abolished the mobility grant scheme, which allowed for transport supports and allowances to be provided to people with disabilities. The Minister of State will be aware that earlier today, disability campaigners from across the country launched their policy objectives for the 2016 general election campaign. One of their objectives with respect to disability relates to the commitment to extend a new mobility scheme that was made by the Government in 2013, or almost 1,000 days ago. I have raised this question on Topical Issues to give the Minister of State an opportunity to explain to the communities and citizens who are involved in the mobility sector and are concerned about isolation and getting to and from work what progress she has made in offering an alternative scheme. What are the hurdles and barriers in this area, if any? The situation at the time was described as atrocious. It was atrocious in 2013 and it is atrocious today. I would be grateful if the Minister of State would use the opportunity of her response to give some light hope to those who are entitled to play a full and active role as citizens in this Republic by engaging in their communities.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I thank the Deputy, who has been persistent in highlighting this issue. I assure him that not a week goes by without some kind of engagement on this issue taking place in the Department. It has been one of the most intractable issues I have come across. I can usually find a solution to most things, but finding a solution has proved to be most difficult in this case. The Government has decided that the Minister for Health should make progress with the detailed preparatory work needed for a new transport support scheme and associated statutory provisions. I am sure Deputy Keaveney accepts that the language used in this area will be important into the future.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Yes.
Deputy Kathleen Lynch: The Department is seeking the solution that will best meet its aim of supporting people with severe disabilities who require additional income to contribute towards the cost of their mobility needs, while remaining within the available budget and satisfying all legal and equality concerns. Work is ongoing on the policy proposals to be brought to the Government for the drafting of primary legislation for a new scheme. The proposals seek to ensure there is a firm statutory basis to the scheme’s operation. As I am sure the Deputy already knows, this was not the case in the past. We are also seeking to ensure there is transparency and equality in the eligibility criteria attaching to the scheme, which previously was very much piecemeal. The success of one’s application depended on where one was living. We want to ensure resources are targeted at those with the greatest needs and the scheme is capable of being costed and is affordable on its introduction and on an ongoing basis.

The draft general scheme and heads of a Bill have been the subject of very detailed discussions with the Department’s legal advisers. Deputy Keaveney will be glad to hear it is intended to submit legislative proposals to the Government for consideration in a matter of weeks, following finalisation of legal considerations and consultation with other key Departments. On foot of a Government decision, the HSE has continued to make monthly payments to the 4,700 people who were previously in receipt of this allowance. That was my key consideration. I was seriously worried about those who were receiving this payment, which, as we are all aware, had become part of their incomes. I am not puritanical about what people do with their money when they receive it. I insisted that this payment would not be removed. It has been very difficult to ensure those who currently receive it continue to be protected while at the same time allowing for criteria and a pathway to be put in place nationally to ensure those who wish to enter a new scheme have access to such a scheme.

I wish to inform the Deputy - maybe I should not be saying this - that the amount of money which has been allocated for what we already do will not be enough. As we know it will not be enough, we have made provision to ensure additional money can be made available where it is necessary. It is not that I am not conscious of this. I am very conscious of it. I believe a person who cannot access the outside world cannot participate in society. We are determined that the necessary legislation to underpin a scheme like this, which should have been there in the first place but was not, will be brought to Government very shortly.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: I am disappointed it has taken three years. This scheme, and the Minister of State’s response, is the same as the response she gave in February 2013. It is the same number of citizens with a disability who are ring-fenced by the current arrangement, or by inertia. My concern is for the many other citizens in society who do not have the same capacity to fully integrate and play an active role as citizens as a consequence. I come from a very rural constituency and have had an opportunity in the recent past to travel the constituency and meet people who are gravely concerned about the inequality created by this inaction. The Minister of State has ring-fenced the payment to 4,700 people and I would be grateful if she would, in her response, give hope with a prompt legislative response for those citizens who are emerging with a disability and who have no access to the current arrangement.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: Most people who know me know that I am not one to hang around and keep looking at a problem. My philosophy in life is to find a solution as quickly as possible. This one has been more difficult than most. We would have preferred it if we could have retained the old scheme and perhaps put a legislative framework around it and allowed it to expand. That was not possible because of circumstances outside of this House of which the Deputy is aware. However, it is also important to note that the disabled drivers’ and disabled
Dáil Éireann

passengers’ scheme operated by the Revenue Commissioners remains in place. This scheme provides VRT and VAT relief, an exemption from road tax and a fuel grant to drivers and passengers with a disability who qualify under the relevant criteria set out in the governing regulations made by the Minister for Finance. I assure the Deputy that the development of legislative proposals to replace the mobility allowance and the motorised transport grant remains a priority for this Government.

We think differently now about disability and that is a good thing as we are more open and more challenged by putting services in place that allow people to make decisions for themselves. The capacity legislation was a major step along the road in that area. What we will put in place needs to have the flexibility to ensure we will be able to meet people’s different needs as they emerge in the future. This is something that appears on our radar every week and will continue to do so. I agree with the Deputy that it needs to be dealt with but, unfortunately, it has proved to be very difficult. I hope, however, that we have a mechanism with the new legislation which will ensure that can happen.

Office of Public Works Properties

Deputy Joe Higgins: There have been the most serious irregularities in the assembly of the site for significant public offices which are now occupied by the Department of Social Protection and the Revenue Commissioners in Anne Street, Wexford. That assembly took place over a 20-year period from 1983. I was made aware of the issue as far back as 2008 and I have investigated it at different times in the years since. My concern has grown significantly. I have engaged in significant correspondence with State bodies, including Wexford Borough Council and the Revenue Commissioners, but I have not received satisfactory answers. Deputies Maureen O’Sullivan and Finian McGrath have equally made inquiries to agencies such as the Office of Public Works and I understand that no satisfactory explanation has been forthcoming.

I am satisfied that there are serious unanswered questions and anomalies surrounding the assembling of this site involving public bodies. The site was funded by taxpayers and there must be full transparency by the public bodies involved in how taxpayers’ money was spent and in the methods of the assembly of that site where we have substantial government offices. The issue is complex and convoluted but documents that I have seen are prima facie evidence of very serious irregularities, giving rise to serious unanswered questions by public bodies in the matter of the assembly of the site. This irregularity has had a serious detrimental effect on the lives of innocent individuals and caused an injustice to them and to their civil and human rights, so it is critical that the answers are provided.

I do not lightly raise instances of specific wrongdoing or irregularities and I have only very rarely done so since I came into the Dáil. I did so in 2005 with regard to the multinational Gama construction company, alleging very serious irregularities after careful scrutiny. Those allegations were greeted with incredulity but, upon examination, they stood up and a lot more wrongdoing was uncovered as result of my standing in this spot to make those revelations. Wexford Borough Council and the Office of Public Works must disclose all the facts about this development and put them into the public domain.

The putting together of this site for public offices was concluded in the late 1990s. Given the complex nature of how this site was assembled, I believe a commission of investigation set up under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 is the appropriate mechanism, not a tri-
bunal and not a Garda inquiry but a specific and targeted commission of investigation inquiry. From the documentation I have seen, and in consonance with the legislation whereby people of concern would be consulted about the terms of reference and the evidence, I believe very tight but comprehensive terms of reference could be quickly assembled and I ask the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government to begin the process, even in the dying days of this Dáil.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Ann Phelan): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and assure him that how taxpayers’ money is spent is extremely important and should be open and transparent. At the outset, I wish to clarify that the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government has no direct responsibility for, or involvement in, the assembly of land by local authorities for the purpose of the provision of offices for Departments or other offices of the State. Section 213(2)(a) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, provides that a local authority may for the purposes of performing any of its functions, including giving effect to or implementing its development plan, acquire land by agreement, or in certain circumstances, compulsorily.

In this case, I understand that the Office of Public Works acquired two sites from Wexford Borough Council in the 1990s. These sites now accommodate Government offices in Anne Street. One of these sites was acquired by way of an agreement with Wexford Borough Council dated 22 May 1995 for IR£145,000. The other site was acquired by the OPW from Wexford Borough Council under agreement dated 2 January 1997 in exchange for a site owned by the OPW in King Street. The site transferred to the OPW had been assembled by Wexford Borough Council by compulsory purchase order. The OPW was not a party to the assembly of these sites, which were bought directly from Wexford Borough Council. Therefore, if there are issues with the manner in which these sites were assembled by Wexford Borough Council, they should be raised in the first instance with its successor Wexford County Council.

It might be helpful in this regard if I set out some of the key elements of the ethical framework for local authorities. Part 15 of the Local Government Act 2001 provides an ethics framework for both elected members and officials working in local government. The ethics framework imposes a statutory duty on all in the service to maintain proper standards of integrity, conduct and concern for the public interest. Section 171 of the Act obliges elected members to prepare and furnish to the ethics registrar an annual written declaration containing particulars of their “declarable interests”. Section 174(8) of the Act requires that the chief executive and-or the cathaoirleach of a local authority consider what action should be taken on becoming aware of a possible contravention of the ethical framework. This action can include investigative or disciplinary procedures considered appropriate in the circumstances and-or referral of the matter to the Standards in Public Office Commission, SIPO. SIPO is an independent body which reports to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. While the functions of SIPO are mainly inquisitional, the commission has the power under section 24(2) of the Ethics in Public Office Act to refer cases to the Director of Public Prosecutions where it is of the opinion that an offence may have been committed.

Deputy Joe Higgins: I am grateful to the Minister for outlining the responsibilities of Wexford Borough Council in the assembly of this site. Unfortunately, however, she did not answer the specific request I made in this Topical Issue, which is that a commission of investigation is required to unravel serious irregularities in the assembly of the site. Even if what the Minister of State says about the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government’s re-
sponsibilities holds, that does not preclude the Minister from acting under the law. I am obliged
to a Law Reform Commission report which informs me that a commission of investigation may
be established by the Government, based on a proposal by a Minister with the approval of the
Minister for Finance, to investigate any matter considered by the Government to be of signifi-
cant public concern. Happily, the head of the Government, the Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny,
is sitting beside the Minister of State as I speak. He is now informed of the serious concern I
have raised about irregularities which have seriously affected the economic and social rights as
well as the livelihoods of innocent people.

What the Minister of State outlined with regard to the Ethics in Public Office Act is not suf-
ficient. I have examined this. It is complex, even Byzantine, but it must be investigated. I call
on the Minister of State, the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government
and the Taoiseach to take what I am saying seriously. It will be confirmed when it is examined,
and they should not be found negligent by not assisting in seeking the answers that are badly
needed in respect of this issue.

Deputy Ann Phelan: I reiterate what I said earlier. If there are issues with the manner in
which these sites were assembled by Wexford Borough Council, they should be raised in the
first instance with its successor, Wexford County Council. However, I undertake to speak to my
line Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, and I will refer back to the Deputy with a reply.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Walsh): I would be happy to take Leaders’ Questions
but the Standing Orders do not allow me to do so. We will wait for the Ceann Comhairle to
join us.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Deputy Butttimer might volunteer.

Leaders’ Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: I wish you a happy new year, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. The same to you, Deputy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I wish the Taoiseach a happy new year too, apart from the elec-
toral situation.

Storms Desmond, Eva and Frank have devastated many communities across this island. They caused immense damage to homes, businesses and vital infrastructure, particularly road infrastructure. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the council staff who did heroic work in many communities, the staff of other agencies and the Army, whose members were called out in emergency situations and who worked well. Above all, it was communities on the ground who responded in solidarity to help their beleaguered neighbours, colleagues and townspeople. Farmers and civil contractors, in particular, did heroic work.

However, many people are very angry at the lack of preparation for these storms, par-
ticularly between the first and last storms, on basic matters such as protocols regarding the
 provision of pumps and the lack of council staff. The cuts to council staff were so severe that
councils were incredibly stretched during this difficult period. The abolition of town councils
was a mistake, as was starkly shown up in the context of the response to the flooding. “Who is
in charge?” was the most often repeated catchcry or refrain as one travelled from one flood area
to another. Between 2014 and 2015 there was an underspend of approximately €34.5 million on flood defence schemes and repairs to flood defences. The money was provided but was not spent. The core national framework for emergency management has not been updated since 2007. Limerick City Council is still mentioned in it, although it is a year and a half since it was abolished.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question please, Deputy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Until yesterday, there was no discussion on insurance cover for flood risk for homes and businesses. I asked the Taoiseach about that a month ago. Today, instead of statements on flooding, we should be debating legislation during Government time on a single agency for the Shannon region, which everybody in that region is now adamant is required to deal with the flooding issues.

Why was there a lack of preparation in terms of the response to the damage caused by these storms? Can the Taoiseach indicate why the Government underspent to the tune of €34 million on flood defences in the last two years? Why has the national framework for emergency response not been updated? Why has there been no proactive work on the insurance issue until now? Why are we not discussing legislation on a single agency for the Shannon region today?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his questions and I wish him good luck for 2016, outside the electoral contest.

The rains in December were the heaviest for 52 years in many places around the country. Cork Airport had 400 mm, more than it ever had. Places in the south east such as Carlow had between 150% and 300% more than average rainfall. This was absolutely devastating for many communities and very distressing for householders, business people and people in the agricultural sector. I agree that the community response was absolutely magnificent. Obviously assistance was given by Civil Defence, Army personnel and local authorities to everybody involved in attempting to cope with elements that in many cases just wiped away road structures, bridges and culverts and caused serious damage.

I called together all of the chief executives of the statutory authorities with responsibility for the Shannon basin. They had never been called together previously. If one reads the Official Report of the debate held in this House on 30 June 1948 one will find the same complaints and issues being raised about flooding, and the Shannon in particular, at that time. However, as far as I am concerned, one could be debating legislation on a single entity. Many of these are very important statutory entities. What is much more important is that the action is taken that can be taken and to have an effective working strategy to deal with the Shannon basin from estuary to source, including the tributaries of the rivers Hind, the Brosna, the Suck and the Inny. The answer to the problem is multifaceted and includes flood plains and works that can be carried out under the flexibility of the Habitats and Water Framework Directives.

I wish to advise Deputy Martin that what Government did before Christmas was make two decisions on the humanitarian issue. That affected Bandon with €10 million being made available to address humanitarian issues. Also, a €5 million fund was decided for businesses in flood plains which did not have insurance and were ratably valued. It is a very simple and effective proposition to get €5,000 paid before Christmas and a further €15,000 unvouched costs to be administered by local authorities and the Red Cross. The local authorities confirmed that they turned around the applications within 24 hours.
The emergency co-ordination group has met 30 times since 3 December. It is a body of representative people with great experience in their fields. Deputy Martin raises a valid question as to more adequate preparation. One of the decisions made by Government was to invest in detailed capacity for far greater information on long-range weather forecasting so that authorities and communities would be aware as far in advance as possible of what might happen. I understand the concept of wanting a single legal authority. Some of these authorities were in situ before the State was founded. An effective working strategy is what is needed.

The insurance companies were not called together before now. We had a good meeting with them yesterday. It was not meant to be either an inquisition or a meeting out of which final decisions would be made. What was agreed was that the companies would explain and forward to the Office of Public Works by the end of next week the information on the houses and businesses they insure and come back with, to coin a phrase, a more mature reflection on the issue of demountable defences which are allowed, insured and reinsured on the Continent but not in Ireland. In Fermoy for instance, such defences were put up on seven different occasions during the recent floods and worked exceptionally well. As far as we are concerned, they stand the test of time. In that sense, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport will produce, in so far as he can, an accurate summary from all local authorities of the extent of structural damage to roads, bridges, culverts and so on. We hope to deal with that during the course of the coming year.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach’s reply confirms my basic point that there was a lack of preparation at Government level for the emergencies that occurred. I refer to very basic issues, such as the hiring of pumps. I was in Midleton where hours after the shocking flooding, people were still looking for the proper pumps to pump out the water. I was in Portumna in Galway where it was down to the six council staff. Deputy Keaveney was with me and we met Councillor Anne Rabbitte who led the charge with the council staff to simply put up a basic defence to save the town from flooding. A €200,000 spend some time back would have prevented that necessity. Many people on the ground say that minor works, from drainage and reinforcing of walls and ditches, would have done a great deal to prevent a lot of the damage that was done. In Bandon and other towns, people are adamant that if it was not for farmers and civil contractors, the situation would have been a great deal worse.

However, some civil contractors were told they should not be doing the work and that they did not have insurance for it. There were no protocols in place. Some people were told they should not be doing the work when the whole place was under water. Talking to traders, I heard that it was those people who made the essential difference in the eye of the storm. In Clare at New Quay, Clonlara and Tubber, basic interventions in advance could have kept connectivity between townlands and villages.

There is an issue around the lack of preparation. I mentioned to the Taoiseach that the emergency response plan has not been updated since 2007, which is a serious indictment. On the insurance front, I asked the Taoiseach a month ago to consider the British approach in terms of legislation and otherwise in providing a not-for-profit fund to deal with houses at risk from flooding.

All of the Taoiseach’s response was post-event. It was a commentary on the event and its aftermath. Very little of what he said has answered the set of questions I put to him on the state of preparedness of people on the ground and at Government level directing matters before and between the storms.
An Ceann Comhairle: I remind the House that we have statements on flooding immediately after the Order of Business.

The Taoiseach: I am not God and I cannot predict the extent of rainfall. That is one of the reasons we have invested in far more sophisticated long-term weather forecasting.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That should have been done three years ago. It was recommended three years ago.

An Ceann Comhairle: Hold on.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is another confirmation of the lack of preparation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

Deputy Gabrielle McFadden: Why did Fianna Fáil not do it in 2009 when in government?

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Taoiseach should call in the Minister of State, Deputy Simon Harris.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: After you start, Deputy Martin, we now have a chorus.

The Taoiseach: I point out to Deputy Martin that the scheme in England is only going live now. It took five years to put together and it excludes small businesses and houses built since 2009. Some £40 million was spent on Carlisle but it did not work. The Minister of State at the Department of Finance with responsibility for the Office of Public Works is developing the CFRAM detailed response which includes 66 locations on the Shannon and 300 nationally. Some €420 million is to be spent over the next five years and €1 billion over the next decade to deal with flood defences in various locations nationally. Bandon would have been done by now but there were objections and it is a similar situation in Enniscorthy. I was in Craughwell the other day where people were very distraught. The new bridge acted as a dam. The old bridge never blocked. Houses were flooded and there was damage, frustration and great annoyance.

Lessons are learned from all of these floods. The first point of emergency contact must be the local authority. The representative of all the local authorities, Mr. Brendan McGrath, gave a detailed response at each of the 30 meetings of the national co-ordination group.

Deputy Micheál Martin: He does not have the staff.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is all chief, no Indians.

The Taoiseach: Army personnel were available and at the end of a telephone, day or night, to man pumps, fill sandbags and assist communities to keep flood waters in abeyance. In the complex area between the Slieve Auughty mountains and Kinvara, where fractured limestone results in underground streams and turloughs which emerge in winter, flexibility must be shown under the Habitats Directive and water directive to take excess surface water from these turloughs and allow houses, dairy farms and agricultural sheds which are currently flooded to carry on business as normal.

Lessons are being learned. Clearly, one cannot predict the extent of rainfall that nature sends to us. I understand exactly the frustration of so many people but all of these agencies are
working flat out to bring about solutions. The period ahead is a very important time for rectifying some of these problems in preparation for what might happen again next winter.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** Ba mhaith liom bliain úr a chabháil leatsa, a Cheann Comhairle, agus leis an Taoiseach freisin. Deputy Brian Stanley and I are moving a Bill for a single management agency for the River Shannon later this afternoon. I invite the Fianna Fáil leader and Government Deputies to support it.

For now, I am very sad to be raising again the issue of Moore Street in the first Dáil sitting of 2016. In the very first week of the centenary year of the Easter Rising, relatives of those who took part in the Rising and other activists were forced to prevent irreparable damage to the historic terrace at the national monument on Moore Street by occupying buildings there. It is damning after the long battle to save Moore Street that the relatives have had to take legal proceedings against the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in order for work to be halted at the last battlefield site of the most significant event in this nation’s modern history, when a handful of republican volunteers went out against the biggest empire in human history.

5 o’clock

The Taoiseach has acknowledged that Moore Street is one of the most important historical and cultural locations on the island. The National Museum has described it as the most important site in modern Irish history. When the Taoiseach was in opposition and took a tour of it, he referred to it as the “lanes of history”. Now, the national monument - the entire battlefield site - is in State ownership, but the Minister persists in carrying out a plan that was devised by discredited developers Chartered Land in conjunction with the retail developer Hammerson. Developers should not set the agenda. The Government must ensure that the historic quarter at Moore Street is redeveloped in the respectful, dignified and appropriate manner that befits its status. Will the Taoiseach give a commitment to ensure that all necessary steps are taken to develop the entire battlefield site at the historic quarter? If he considered it for a second, he would accept that such an initiative would be a major economic boost for Dublin, in particular for the north inner city’s community. It would be a tourist mecca, educational hub and fitting memorial to the men and women of 1916.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank Deputy Adams, agus guim ádh de shaghas éigin leis i mbliana freisin.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** Go raibh maith agat.

**The Taoiseach:** I went down there a few times to look at this. Obviously, the location where those who were involved in the GPO issued the final call for surrender is an historical monument. Now, this has dragged on since 1922. It has dragged on all those years. This Government decided to purchase the three dwellings - the three houses - that are now the national monument owned by the State. What the Deputy seems to want is for the State to acquire everything from the corner of the GPO up as far as the Rotunda, which is where the final surrender took place on the footpath opposite.

This is a matter for Dublin City Council. It has been bandied about for years in terms of who should do what, what developer owned it, what planning permission was approved, refused and objected to and all the rest of it. The Government looked at this and said that we were approaching 2016, the centenary of a seminal moment in Irish history. We are one of the first small countries of the 20th century to achieve independence. The Government considered
that the State should purchase the houses involved, and did so. The State wants to put together a very sensitive commemorative feature in those houses that would be the centrepiece of the historical monument.

I understand from the Minister that the house was occupied just the other night and that quite a collection of bedding, sleeping bags, beds and so on donated by a charity were collected there after the people left. I am not sure what the relevance of that was or what point wanted to be made here.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Then why is the Taoiseach making it?

**The Taoiseach:** The State does not own the properties right up along Moore Street where the O’Rahilly was shot up as far as the Rotunda. The State now owns the national monument and has responsibility for it. The State wants to do a very sensitive, authentic revising of the quality of the buildings that were there. As Deputy Adams will be aware from recent press comments and from confirmation in those press comments, the buildings on either side were either in ruins or were not authentic in previous years. For the State and the Office of Public Works to do a very sensitive job here is, in my view, an important consideration as part of the overall contributions to the centenary commemorations of 1916.

It is a matter for the elected representatives of the city council to deal with the plan-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is-----

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** They-----

**The Taoiseach:** Yes, it is: to deal with the plan that they have presented to them and the planning applications that go in for that, whether those take into account the existing laneways and existing streets or not. That is not a function of the Government. The Government purchased, with public money, the buildings involved. The Government wants, with public money, to do a really important, sensitive restoration of these buildings. Occupying them does not help that. I know that people have divided loyalties in the community down there about what should be done, but the State wants to fulfil its remit and its responsibility in a proper and fitting fashion.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** The Taoiseach is right that this has gone on for too long, but he is wrong about everything else. He stated that it appeared that we wanted the area from the GPO, but we want an historic 1916 quarter, cearnóg stairiúil nó cearnóg na saoirse. The Taoiseach knows his history and has walked these laneways. The garrison came out of the GPO. Among its number was Michael Collins. He took over one house. Three hundred men and 30 women occupied the entire terrace. Elizabeth Farrell went up Moore Street and parlayed with the British on Parnell Street. The O’Rahilly was killed in one of the laneways. When the Volunteers surrendered, they were taken to the garden outside the Rotunda. Tom Clarke’s shop was on the opposite side of O’Connell Street as Parnell Street. We want to see all of that developed. The local community is not divided in this regard.

The Government is the custodian of national monuments. It clearly has the power and authority to do this. What is lacking is the political will. Yes, successive Governments have failed, but I could not imagine any other state in the world in which this could happen. Whatever one thinks about the political complexion or leaderships of other states, this would not happen there. These are the Taoiseach’s last few weeks as outgoing Taoiseach. I appeal to him to use his authority and intervene.
If I may remind the Taoiseach, we have yet to achieve our independence.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** Our nation is still divided. Partition is still a fact. We now have a peaceful and democratic way to work that out and we all should be doing that. However, this issue should be above party politics. This entire Oireachtas should be united in ensuring that an appropriate 1916 quarter is developed. We do not want a commemorative shopping mall. That is the last thing that we want.

**The Taoiseach:** I think that the Deputy’s party, with respect, does not want to associate itself with the national commemorative ceremonies that are going on.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** That is not true.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** We have been at them.

**The Taoiseach:** The party seems to want to have its own issues, and that is its own business.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** We have been at them all. Did the Taoiseach not see us?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** We would not see Deputy Adams at them.

**The Taoiseach:** I would say this to Deputy Adams: the State, with public money, has invested in the provision of military archives, has invested in the transformation of the mezzanine in the General Post Office, has invested in the courthouse in Kilmainham, has invested in Richmond Barracks and in the tenement buildings-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Kilmainham was saved because the State was forced to save it.

**The Taoiseach:** ----and also purchased this national monument. I do not think the-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach could put a shopping mall there as well.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, please.

**The Taoiseach:** ----authority in Washington bought the entire terrace where President Lincoln was assassinated, but the State has purchased these buildings here and wants to restore them as a national monument, which they now are, in State ownership in a sensitive, authentic restoration. People occupying it are not helping that case and may well be a danger to themselves, given the fragility of some of the buildings there. I have said to Deputy Adams before that the reason that people had to burrow through the gables of the houses to get to 15, 16 and 17 was the machine gun on the top of the Rotunda. They could not use Moore Street. The O’Rahilly was shot and his memory is enshrined on the wall there, as the Deputy is well aware.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** It will be a car park.

**The Taoiseach:** The issue is whether Deputy Adams agrees that it is the right and proper thing for the State, the national Government of Ireland, to have purchased these dwellings-----

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** The State Government, not the national government of Ireland. Catch yourself on.
Deputy Simon Harris: Cop on.

Deputy Patrick O’Donovan: Deputy Adams is-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: -----and to have transformed them into an authentic restoration of the place as far as which-----

A Deputy: The Deputies should read the Proclamation.

The Taoiseach: -----the leaders of the 1916 Rising in the GPO tunnelled and burrowed before Elizabeth Farrell went to deliver the surrender on the footpath opposite the Rotunda. I think it is. It is part of the commemorative centenary celebrations-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: A commemorative shopping mall.

Deputy Simon Harris: That is a great soundbite.

The Taoiseach: ----which are sensitive, inclusive and open to everybody. Deputy Adams does not seem to want that. He may have purposes of his own.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We do not want a commemorative shopping mall. Fine Gael does, and-----

The Taoiseach: The State does not own the other properties-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----Labour does, I presume.

The Taoiseach: -----and the State does not have the authority to say, “These are the buildings and the kinds of developments that we want here”.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach can do it in Mayo.

The Taoiseach: It is a matter for representatives, including Sinn Féin’s own, to participate in that discussion so that this kind of development can take place in the locality of the State monument here at 15, 16 and 17.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: A shopping mall.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Yesterday, we learned of the closure of the C&C plant, formerly Gleeson’s, at Borrisoleigh, County Tipperary, with the loss of 140 jobs. I can only describe as shameful the fact that the workers and their families learned of this closure in the pages of The Irish Times and on local radio. It is a disgraceful way to treat workers who have been loyal to the company for many years, and up to 30 years in many cases. The closure is a hammer blow to the workers, their families and the town of Borrisoleigh, which has depended on the business for generations.

When C&C acquired Bulmers in Clonmel and Gleeson’s in Borrisoleigh, we were told there was a bright future for the company and that there were expansion plans. Of course, the opposite happened. The company shredded jobs at both locations and slashed wages and the terms and conditions of employment. We now hear about the closure of Gleeson’s, with 140 job losses. That closure is completely unnecessary and is being effected solely for the purpose of making more profit. In other words, it is a case of greed. The company C&C is very profit-
able. Its last set of accounts, for the half year to 30 September 2015, show a profit of €62.5 million. It is now very obvious to everybody that the company acquired Gleeson’s with the clear intention of closing it by stealth. There were 40 job losses and redundancies previously. The company has, and continues to have, support from Enterprise Ireland. The Government was aware of circumstances in C&C in Borrisoleigh. In November 2015, which is less than three months ago, the Dáil was told the Minister had directed his officials to enter into discussions with C&C. What action did the Government take to prevent the closure? Does the Taoiseach condone the conduct of the company? Will he tell the company that its conduct is absolutely unacceptable? Does he agree that it is socially irresponsible for a company to take a decision that has the effect of devastating a town? As I stated, the company is supported significantly by Enterprise Ireland. Will the Taoiseach now intervene, even at this late stage, to save these jobs?

The Taoiseach: The Deputies from Tipperary raised this matter with the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, earlier today as a topical issue with the authorisation of the Ceann Comhairle. The Minister answered questions on this for the Deputies concerned.

It is always tough when a company decides to make a decision that involves taking jobs from a location or job losses. In this case, C&C has made the decision that the operations in Shepton Mallet and Borrisoleigh will be transferred to Clonmel, with an added investment of €10 million. This will include Bulmers, Magners, Tipperary Water and various niche beers and ciders. There is to be an expansion of the facility in Clonmel, bringing it to 75% capacity. That is tough on the workers in Borrisoleigh, which I understand. Obviously, if some of the workers in Borrisoleigh decide to work in Clonmel, they will have to travel a distance.

The Minister spoke to senior management at the company in recent days and urged it to reconsider its decision. However, it has made its decision and, unfortunately, it was not possible to hold the jobs in Borrisoleigh.

Enterprise Ireland will obviously continue to engage with the company on a range of issues associated with the marketing of the facility in Borrisoleigh. It is obviously not possible, in such a short period, to have a replacement facility put in place. While it is difficult for the workers involved directly, the closure comes at a time when 1,000 jobs have been created per week throughout the country. While it is no consolation today, I hope the marketing of the facility in Borrisoleigh will attract some other company such that it will set up there and provide gainful employment for the people in the area.

I note the company’s statement that it will continue to provide support and training for the workers who are affected. Clearly, all the supports from the State will be available also. The Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, will continue to remain interested in this matter to determine what can be done following the company’s announcement. I thank Deputy Healy for raising the matter again.

Deputy Seamus Healy: This closure comes on the back of job losses in Intellicom, Grant’s, Supervalu in Tipperary town, the Fairgreen supermarket in Carrick-on-Suir and Supervalu in Clonmel. The Government has forgotten Tipperary. Like the Minister earlier this afternoon, the Taoiseach has washed his hands of the situation in Borrisoleigh.

The number of unemployed in Tipperary, 13,000, is significantly higher than the national average. The rate is probably 13%. We have lost a net 321 IDA Ireland jobs in the past three
years. Disposable income in Tipperary is 5% lower than the national average. The Government has deliberately excluded every town in Tipperary from IDA Ireland’s programme of building advance factories and offices.

I ask the Taoiseach again whether he will intervene to save the jobs. This is a totally unnecessary closure. Will he reverse the decision, which is a deliberate snub to Tipperary and deliberate discrimination against towns in the county? Every town in Tipperary has been excluded from IDA Ireland’s proposal to build advance factories and advance offices. The Government took this decision. Will it reverse it now and ensure Borrisoleigh gets an advance factory?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy is now asking me a different question.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** It is the same question.

**The Taoiseach:** Obviously, the Government has set out a proposal to have the areas outside the main urban areas become more attractive for investment and support, through Enterprise Ireland’s local enterprise offices, to deal with small and medium enterprises exporting from the country.

With respect, circumstances would be different if the company were to close down completely, with the loss of all the investment and jobs. I recall many occasions in the west when some of the bigger firms closed, with the loss of 1,000 jobs, thus causing economic devastation, yet it is peculiar how many small new enterprises can grow from this.

I understand C&C has made its decision and will not reverse it. It will expand in Clonmel, with an additional investment of €10 million and the creation of 80 additional jobs. The first option will be given to workers from Borrisoleigh who might wish to travel there. Obviously, they will have the option of travelling together in pooled groups, if that is their choice.

While news such as this is very tough on workers, the investment is not lost to Tipperary. As I said, the opportunity exists in so many other places where, for whatever reason, companies either consolidate or move. Thus, an opportunity could present itself to another company to set up in Borrisoleigh, hopefully to provide gainful employment.

I will refer the request in respect of IDA Ireland plants to the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. IDA Ireland has its own programme, and it has set out for the coming years a series of planned investments in greenfield plants, which I am sure will be very attractive to companies from all over Europe and beyond. While it is a tough day for the workers in Borrisoleigh, those who wish to travel to Clonmel will have the first option on the 80 positions that will become available there. I hope the entity can be marketed as a suitable location for other employment.

**Order of Business**

**The Taoiseach:** It is proposed to take No. 39, statements on flooding. It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the Dáil shall sit later than 9 p.m. tonight and shall adjourn on the conclusion of No. 39; the proceedings on No. 39 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion not later than 11 p.m. tonight and the following arrangements shall apply: the statement of the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and leaders of Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, or a person nominated in their stead, who shall be called upon in that
order, shall not exceed ten minutes in each case and such Members may share time; the state-
ment of the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government and of the main
spokespersons for Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, who shall be called in that
order, shall not exceed ten minutes in each case and such Members may share time; the state-
ment of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Defence and of the main spokes-
persons for Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, who shall be called in that order,
shall not exceed ten minutes in each case and such Members may share time; and a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed ten minutes; Private Members’ business shall not be taken today,
shall be taken tomorrow at 10.45 a.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a
conclusion after three hours on that day; and tomorrow’s business after Oral Questions shall be
No. 218, motion re hospital emergency departments.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal
for dealing with the late sitting agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 39,
statements on flooding, agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Private Members’
business tomorrow agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I propose to raise three issues. On the business before the House,
will the Taoiseach confirm that no legislation will come before the House today or tomorrow
and that the Dáil, on its return, has no legislative proposals before it? I understand the House
will deal with the Constitutional Convention tomorrow. That Members will debate three re-
ports in one day and at the 11th hour, in other words, at the end of this Dáil, speaks volumes
about the degree of commitment and respect the Government has shown to the Constitutional
Convention whose reports were allowed to languish, without debate, for a long time after its
work had been completed.

A significant number of the Bills on the Order Paper are on Second Stage, Committee Stage
or Report Stage. Will the Taoiseach confirm that the House will sit for three days next week?
Will legislation come before the House for debate next week? Is it the Government’s intention
to bring some of the Bills on the Order Paper before the House next week? I refer to legislation
such as the Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions) Bill and Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill,
which are on Committee Stage in the Seanad. Will the Taoiseach give some indication of what
legislation we can expect next week?

Before Christmas, I discussed with the Taoiseach a ground-breaking drug on the market for
cystic fibrosis, Orkambi. Given that time is being provided for statements on many issues, it is
important to debate the issue of frontier drugs and new technologies in medicine that can make
a fundamental difference to people’s lives. I disagree with the Government’s policy approach
on this issue. Orkambi has been described as a game-changer for the treatment of cystic fibro-
sis, yet many patients cannot avail of it. I ask the Taoiseach to provide time next week for a
debate on this drug and the wider issue of the availability of drugs of this nature.

I had to highlight drugs such as Soliris and others on Leaders’ Questions a number of times
in the past year. The impact of these drugs on the people concerned was dramatic but they met
official resistance until we raised the issues on the floor of the House. As the country with the
highest prevalence of cystic fibrosis and where the various strains are of the greatest severity, it
is incumbent on us to be at the forefront of developing new drugs in partnership with industry
and to have them on the market and available to patients as quickly as possible. Will the Gov-
The third issue relates to correspondence the Taoiseach sent to me late last evening concerning the commission of investigation into Irish Bank Resolution Corporation. This follows on from the meeting just before Christmas between the Taoiseach and leaders of the Opposition as well as Deputy Catherine Murphy and others. The documentation outlines potential heads of a Bill. This would be new, bespoke and separate legislation rather than a simple amendment to the Commissions of Investigation Act and would be for the specific purposes of the investigation into IBRC, the sale of Siteserv and Topaz and other transactions that occurred. The Taoiseach, in his correspondence, states that he would be grateful if we could treat this paper in a confidential manner. This statement creates a difficulty for us in that this is a matter for transparent public debate. Will the Taoiseach indicate the reasons he believes the subject matter of this documentation should be confidential given that it relates to potential legislation? As the Chief Whip was unable to do so on “Morning Ireland” earlier, will the Taoiseach indicate whether it is the Government’s intention to submit a Bill or heads of a Bill to a committee before the Dáil is dissolved or will this be done after the general election? Will it fall to a new Dáil or Government to do this or does the Government intend to have the heads of a Bill discussed by a committee before the end of this Oireachtas term?

This is an important issue and serious public concern has arisen regarding the issues covered by the commission of investigation, which has been dragging on for one and a half years. It began with parliamentary questions that were not answered properly or to which full answers were not given.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Freedom of information requests suddenly revealed serious concern among Department of Finance officials about the sale of Siteserv and other transactions. All of this led to the establishment of the commission of investigation. The Government was aware of major difficulties a long time ago and did not act on them. This culminated in an 11th hour meeting before Christmas which was to cover consultation with the Opposition. This correspondence, which we are told we have to keep secret, is further evidence of this. There is a need for a comprehensive, transparent presentation of all of the issues surrounding this matter. I ask the Taoiseach to consider having this documentation placed in the Oireachtas Library for other Deputies to weigh up because, as Members of the House, it concerns them.

The Taoiseach: The Dáil is due to sit for three days next week. Some 19 of the 34 Bills on the autumn 2015 list have been published along with six other Bills.

The reason for not having legislation today is the demand from Deputies for statements to deal with the flooding issue, which continues to be of critical importance and a great priority. I understand the legislation taken next week will be the Credit Guarantee (Amendment) Bill, Horse Racing Bill Ireland 2015 and Public Sector Standards Bill. A Whips’ meeting will take place this evening and the position may change depending on requests made by the Whips. While I understand this is the legislation that it is intended to take next week, if Members want to change this at the Whips’ meeting, it will be a different matter.

In respect of the cystic fibrosis drug, this is not a singular issue. New drugs regularly come through for clearance, some of which are exceptionally expensive, as the Deputy is aware. It is very difficult to balance life-saving new drugs - “frontier medicines” as the Deputy described...
them - against the costs involved. There is a process to be gone through in that regard.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I asked for a debate.

**The Taoiseach:** For instance, a drug in respect of hepatitis C, which cures rather than treats the condition, came through a facility in Sligo and is extraordinary in terms of the quality of life it can bring about for people. The Minister for Health is pursuing this matter through the proper channels. The changes made and investments made in facilities for cystic fibrosis patients speak for themselves. I refer to isolation units and the increased quality of life that patients have. That is a matter that is proceeding.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Will the Government provide time for a debate on the issue?

**The Taoiseach:** I am sure the Fianna Fáil Party Whip will raise that issue at this evening’s meeting.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** But I am asking the Taoiseach on the Order of Business.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Martin is asking me. That is what his Whip is for. The Whip makes the requests on behalf of Deputy Martin’s party, I assume.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is a derogation of duty.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** This is not really suitable for the Order of Business.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not determine every issue that is discussed in the Dáil.

In regard to the commission of investigation on the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, I wrote to Deputy Martin and the other leaders with a proposition for a possible approach to legislation to address issues relating to the work of the IBRC commission. This followed a request and a set of propositions from Mr. Justice Cregan. One of those propositions was to extend the timeframe of the commission until the end of April 2016. I have granted the judge that in so far as the relevant section of the Act is concerned. I wrote to Deputy Martin and said I was sending him the letter in a confidential manner. The same letter went to Deputy Adams and the other leaders of the different groups. However, it is different in that the Government has actually sent Deputy Martin and the others a proposition in respect of the type of heads of Bill that we would propose to consider, given the proposition that the justice put to us in order that his commission would be able to do its duty. Some of these things are quite complex. I have asked Deputy Martin to respond to that. This is not by any means a secret mission, because once the Government approves the heads, they go to an Oireachtas committee.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Government has not approved them.

**The Taoiseach:** If Deputy Martin read it-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Yes, I have.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Martin did not read it. Section 1 referred to a possible approach.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Exactly. It was “possible”, and therefore the Government has not approved it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are not having a debate on this issue.
The Taoiseach: If Deputy Martin read it------

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: We are now 12 minutes into the Order of Business.

The Taoiseach: I said I would welcome their views in response to the attached paper.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy. Please.

The Taoiseach: What views has Deputy Martin given me? He has given me none. I said I was also copying the letter to Mr. Justice Cregan following his recommendations.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach would not have done this only for the fact that we forced him to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, through the Chair.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am asking the Taoiseach if he will confirm whether it will be this session, before the House is dissolved. If it is not, we will have to wait for the next Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, you will not ask anything that is out of order. Thank you. Deputy Adams is entitled to his time and a number of other Deputies have also indicated that they wish to speak.

The Taoiseach: Let me repeat it for Deputy Martin. If he wants to listen, I might be able to give him some information. I said to Deputy Martin that I requested his views on the paper that I circulated. I said they were possible heads for consideration.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is neither here nor there.

The Taoiseach: I met the leaders of the parties and I asked them for their views. I have now set out the consequence of that in nine heads and I have asked the leaders for their views on the document. Deputy Martin does not seem to want to give me his views. I would appreciate if he would forward them to me.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach got them last night.

The Taoiseach: The Government will consider the responses from the leaders of the groups and make its decision in approving the heads of a Bill which will then be sent to the Oireachtas committee in the normal fashion. That is a process that was not there before.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Dáil is up in two weeks.

The Taoiseach: I sent the leaders the possible heads before we approved them at Cabinet level. Thereafter, of course, it is not in any way confidential. It will be public knowledge and everyone here who wants to can find an answer to those questions.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Tá trí cheist agam, ceann amháin faoin IBRC, ceann eile faoi oideachas agus páistí agus an ceann deireanach faoi na seirbhísí sláinte. I, too, was taken by the use of the Taoiseach’s word “confidential,” particularly given that the morning after our meet-
ing a former member of the Taoiseach’s party, trying to make herself relevant, told the world of what had happened at the meeting. I imagine the Taoiseach will reflect and recollect that the meeting was marked by juvenile squabbling between him and the Fianna Fáil leader. It was of the kind that we have become used to seeing here.

Anyway, I will move on to the more important business at hand. It is very clear that the Government has made a mess of this issue of a commission dealing with the IBRC from the very beginning.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was just a bit of juvenile kneecapping.

Deputy Gerry Adams: It was clear that the Government would not listen to the Opposition and, in particular, that it would not listen to Sinn Féin. In fact, when it got to the point of the terms of reference, we voted against it. I believe that the Government, by its actions, has prevented a full and proper commission of investigation from getting on with its work. I believe the Government has pushed this back to beyond the election. I think perhaps that was the objective all along. Anyway, when does the Taoiseach expect a Bill to be published?

I have some other questions. The Government made clear commitments on promoting the best outcomes for children and families, particularly in respect of investing in early childhood education for disadvantaged children. I imagine all of us would support that objective. In my constituency, representatives of the Louth-Meath branch of Down Syndrome Ireland have just been told that early intervention home teacher programmes for preschool children will no longer be funded.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I am coming to my point.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is the Order of Business. Thank you.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The point is that 53 Down’s syndrome children will be denied what is a very small sum of money, some €25,000. The families raised €50,000 themselves. Does the Taoiseach accept that this is at odds with his commitment? Will he reverse it?

A Cheann Comhairle, you will notice how short I am in my questions. The Government’s five-point plan has now been destroyed by the current Minister for Health. Prior to Christmas, he said that there would be and should be no more than 70 patients a day on trolleys. He said he had zero tolerance of patients waiting more than nine hours on trolleys. Yesterday, there were 200 patients on trolleys for longer than nine hours. Today, there are 424 patients on trolleys. Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, once again, has among the highest numbers. Last year, there were 93,000 patients on trolleys, the highest figure since records began. Does the Taoiseach accept that the Government has created absolute chaos within our hospital system and that there is no stability whatsoever?

An Ceann Comhairle: What legislation are you talking about?

Deputy Gerry Adams: Does the Government intend to bring forward a new health policy before this term ends?

The Taoiseach: In respect of the last question, it is not satisfactory that the numbers are the way they are. They are better than they were last year. Investment is increasing again. We
were left with a position in which 2,000 beds were taken out of circulation by the previous Administration. That is not easy to deal with. In so far as that is concerned, I am glad that the INMO and management have agreed on a set of protocols to deal with emergency departments and patients on trolleys. This should show the seriousness of intent of management in making the changes that will allow for better work facilities for nurses, particularly those who work in emergency departments in hospitals throughout the country, including Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. I hope that the protocol now in place, which is very strict and mandatory in a number of respects when numbers rise in emergency departments, can be implemented in the best interests of every patient who has to go to an emergency department, including those who have to spend time on trolleys.

Deputy Adams will be aware of the increased expenditure of €117 million for the opening of beds that were closed and for the opening of new beds this month. There has been a reduction in the numbers. While still not satisfactory, we need more investment and personnel. Clearly, we can only have those facilities when we have a growing economy that provides the resources to deal with the demand. That means more and better employment and a situation in which work is clearly seen to pay.

I commend all those who spent long hours over the weekend putting together an agreement to a protocol to deal with emergency departments. I hope that can deal with the situation from here on. I hope those in the management measure up to the challenges, which are different in every hospital.

I will come back to Deputy Adams in respect of the question he asked about early childhood.

The Deputy also asked a question in respect of IBRC. Having met the leaders, I wrote to them and said that arising from the discussion I agreed to circulate draft heads of possible legislation to them in January for their views. That is what they have got. I also said, following consultation with the Opposition Members, that one viable approach had been identified. This would be to draft bespoke legislation to provide a new legal basis for the Cregan commission while also amending the terms of reference to provide for a modular and more focused approach. That was certainly one element identified as being possible. The questions raised at our meeting, such as the restoration of Siteserv to the register of companies and the provision of resources, have already been resolved. The discussion paper on the possible heads sets out an approach on these lines for consultation purposes, and some of the risks are identified. It should be noted that it is still technically possible to consider other options, including amending the Commissions of Investigation Act and referring matters raised in the determinations by the commissions to the High Court to obtain legal clarity in the public interest or the establishment of a tribunal of inquiry. As the Deputy knows, they are pretty serious matters. I wanted to give the leaders of the different groups an opportunity to respond to possible heads of legislation which are identified as one way of dealing with the propositions and requests that Mr. Justice Cregan made. As the Deputy knows, he requested an extension of time to the end of April and, in accordance with the relevant section of the Act, I have granted him that extension.

**Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl:** The Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions) Bill was published, I understand, in 2012. In the intervening period it has gone through various Stages in the House. Committee Stage has been dealt with and it is currently on Report Stage. We all realise the importance of the Bill to people who have made mistakes, received convictions and want to restart their lives. Given the importance of the Bill, which I have raised on many occasions in the House, can the Taoiseach give us a commitment that he will prioritise it and that it will
complete its journey through the House before it rises?

**The Taoiseach:** It is a valid question. The Bill is on Report Stage and is on the Dáil Order Paper. There are ten or 12 Bills on the list. I am not sure, following Committee Stage, whether there is any further work to be done on the Bill. I will ask the Minister for Justice and Equality about whether this is an issue Members feel should be dealt with. It is due to be taken in the Dáil, if not next week then the week after. If it is a priority that Members feel should be dealt with, I will have the Deputy revert to the Fianna Fáil Whip as a matter of some urgency. It is an important Bill and I would like to see it passed.

**Deputy Arthur Spring:** I refer to the Technological Universities Bill, which came before the House before Christmas. Given the relevance it has for a town such as Tralee, will it be passed by the House before the election? It would provide financial, institutional and educational benefits.

Deputy Martin referred to the cystic fibrosis drug Orkambi. If we cannot have a debate on it in the House, I suggest the Joint Committee on Health and Children debate the issue over the next couple of weeks. It has the potential to save a lot of lives and is of enormous importance to the nation.

**The Taoiseach:** I understand Committee Stage of the Technological Universities Bill will be taken tomorrow. The House might move through that quickly. I cannot speak for the Deputies who will attend the debate.

In respect of the cystic fibrosis drug to which the Deputy referred, Deputy Ó Fearghaíl will raise the issue today. If it is not possible to fit such a debate into the Dáil schedule, we will consult with the Chairman of the Joint Committee on Health and Children to determine whether it could debate the matter.

**Deputy Arthur Spring:** Can we deal with the Technological Universities Bill?

**The Taoiseach:** It is on Committee Stage. If the committee is prepared to finalise it quickly, I do not see any objection to it being moved through. Some people may find complications with it, as often happens in here.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I refer to wind energy guidelines. It was promised that they would be published in advance of the local elections. We are now in advance of the general election. Will the Taoiseach and Government publish them?

I refer to two items relating to children. In 2012, the children’s referendum, which was supported by all political parties in the House, was passed. We are still waiting on legislation to give effect to those in long-term foster care to be eligible for adoption. Will that legislation be brought before the House before the general election? Will the legislation to give effect to the information and tracing procedures, something we all support, come before the Dáil before the election? Can we expect the interim report on the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes before the general election?

**The Taoiseach:** I will have to come back to the Deputy on his last question. The Adoption (Amendment) Bill and the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill are priority Bills for publication. In respect of wind energy guidelines, there will be enough wind around the country generated from human resources. There might be a need for guidelines.
Deputy Micheál Martin: It is a serious matter.

The Taoiseach: I will discuss the matter with the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Alex White, and come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Robert Troy: If the Taoiseach makes all the promises he did the last time they will be needed.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy did not open his mouth in Athlone.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: On promised legislation.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Pardon?

An Ceann Comhairle: On promised legislation.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Yes. I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Patrick O’Donovan: It makes a change.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Just before Christmas, the European Parliament, by an overwhelming majority of over 500 to 11, passed a motion that there were serious transgressions in the case of Ibrahim Halawa, whose case has been again deferred. I appeal to the Taoiseach to save a life, intervene and lift the phone to the Egyptian President. It is not right. I admire-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy-----

Deputy Peter Mathews: I admire Ms Lynn Boylan, MEP, for getting the cross-party support of all Irish MEPs to advocate on his behalf.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. Does the Taoiseach have any comment to make?

Deputy Peter Mathews: The Taoiseach’s son is the same age as Ibrahim Halawa. He would not have stood by this long-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy. You know yourself that you are out of order. This is not about promised legislation.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I am not out of order.

An Ceann Comhairle: If the Taoiseach wishes to comment, I will allow him to do so, just to satisfy you. Please resume your seat. Thank you. You have made your point.

Deputy Peter Mathews: There is a life in the balance.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three minutes left and other Deputies wish to speak. The Deputy has to stick to Standing Orders.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The leader has had a very good run.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Taoiseach have a comment to make?

Deputy Peter Mathews: That is the first thing. I will ask about the second thing in a min-
The Taoiseach: As I have said on many occasions, the objective of the Government is two-fold, first to secure the release of Ibrahim Halawa so that he can return to his family in Ireland and second to provide consular support for him while he is in detention. I am disappointed that his case has been postponed until 6 March.

Deputy Peter Mathews: That is not good enough.

The Taoiseach: I wish to inform the House that the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade met the Egyptian ambassador today to discuss this case further.

Deputy Peter Mathews: My second question concerns the Gambling Control Bill. The advertising intensity over the Christmas period was nothing short of shameful. It is harmful and addictive, and gambling companies are giving people free bets. It is like giving out free cigarettes. It is wrong.

A Deputy: Deputy Mathews should take a gamble on it.

Deputy Peter Mathews: That is not funny.

The Taoiseach: It is on the agenda, but I would not bet on it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will the Taoiseach allow time for a debate on Moore Street? I listened to his response to Deputy Adams. Only that I know his form on these matters I would have found his response very shocking. A number of Deputies, including myself, submitted a Topical Issue Matter today on the issue of Moore Street, its proper development and the protection of the national monument. None of us were selected for a Topical Issue Debate-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should wait for tomorrow.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I propose to resubmit the matter tomorrow and thank the Ceann Comhairle for his advice, which is very helpful. In the absence of that, and given the seriousness of the situation, the year that is in it and the fact that he is the sitting Taoiseach, I would think it is in all of our interests that we have a debate and resolved position of support for the proper development of the revolutionary quarter in Dublin’s inner city.

The Taoiseach: As an oftentimes forceful representative for her community, I am quite sure Deputy McDonald would agree that it is a right and proper thing for this State to have acquired Nos. 15, 16 and 17 Moore Street and to address the proper restoration of the historic buildings concerned with public moneys in the interests of preserving them in the best way possible for the generations after us.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: With a shopping mall.

The Taoiseach: I am quite sure that can be done without occupying the building or engaging in that kind of activity. I am not opposed to legitimate protest in our country.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The leaders occupied it.

The Taoiseach: Deputy McDonald is in a position to influence communities about the possibilities that are the responsibilities of others in Dublin City Council and the planning process, and also the plan in place for the area around the buildings concerned. She should say that it is
important, in the context of 2016 and 1916, that the historic monument, purchased by the State for the people, should be allowed to be restored and sensitively presented for the people for future generations.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach should allow time on the floor of the Dáil for the matter to be debated. That is what I have asked for.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy’s actions and words do not seem to commend this activity and I am disappointed as a senior representative of her party that this is the attitude she has taken.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** So there will be no debate. I am disappointed the Taoiseach cannot answer the questions asked.

### Pension Fund (Prohibition of Levies) Bill 2016: First Stage

**Deputy Willie O’Dea:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for a prohibition on legislation which would unilaterally impose a levy, or similar charge, on pension funds.

This Bill would provide for a constitutional referendum to prevent any future levy on private pension funds. I do this in the context of a very serious looming crisis for pensions in this country. The context is an ageing population and a situation in which the ratio of workers to people over 65, which at present is 6:1, will be 2:1 by 2050. It will be impossible for the State to sustain our State pension system, even at present levels, when this comes about. It is almost upon us. The situation is changing as we speak.

I propose that in future the Government be prohibited from raiding private pension funds. We must encourage people to save. We cannot have a situation in which people sit back, do what they like and depend on the State to sustain them in their old age. This will not be financially possible as we go forward. Various systems are in place to encourage people to save, such as tax relief on pension contributions, although there are arguments about that, and it has been contended that it has unduly favoured the wealthy and has been very expensive for the State.

If we cannot afford to do what we can to encourage people to save, at least we should stop discouraging people. The one thing that discourages people from providing for their pensions and for retirement is the possibility that at a moment’s notice the Government can expropriate part of the pension pots they have built up. This is precisely what has been done over the past five years, as €2.5 billion has been prised out of people’s private savings. As the Taoiseach is well aware, these are people who scrimped and saved and sacrificed to make provision for themselves so they would not be unduly reliant on the State. They have denied themselves holidays and lowered their standard of living simply to be able to provide for themselves in old age. It is grossly perverse and immoral for the State to move in and seize part of their private savings. All of us in the House were shocked by the actions of the Government in Cyprus some time ago when it seized bank deposits held by its citizens. This is exactly the same. There is no material difference between what this State has done over the past five years and what the Government of Cyprus has done.

I have been in government myself and I know the pressures and the temptations. Other gov-
Governments have resorted to similar methods, including in Hungary and Poland, to a lesser extent recently in France, and also in Russia. When there is a huge pot of private savings, a government is naturally tempted in times of financial crisis to raid this resource to avoid the more difficult decision of raising taxes or cutting expenditure. I do not think it is an option that should be open to any government. I propose this legislation, which would provide for a constitutional referendum to ensure in future that any government that wants to raid the savings people have built up for their retirement due to their own sacrifice and hard work can only do so with the consent of the people. That is the least those savers can expect.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**The Taoiseach:** No, it is not being opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

**Deputy Willie O’Dea:** I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

**Flood Insurance Bill 2016: First Stage**

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for fairness in the market for property insurance, and to provide for related matters.

The Bill is designed to deal with a situation which the Taoiseach discussed as recently as yesterday with the insurance industry. It relates to circumstances whereby the OPW has completed flood relief schemes to the required European standard under the 2007 directive. The OPW is the national competent authority for the delivery of such flood relief schemes. In my view, it is not acceptable that once the schemes have been completed the insurance industry can continue to refuse to reinstate flood cover for homeowners and businesses in the affected areas.

I welcome the meeting held yesterday, but the proof will be in the pudding. The insurance industry has a week or so to come back to the Taoiseach, and I hope there will be decisive action to deal with this issue. The absence of flood insurance is not only a matter of grave concern for homeowners and their peace of mind, but also a very important issue for the lifeblood of the local economy and the communities affected. Businesses that cannot access flood insurance, even if there is now little or no risk of flood events given the successful implementation of those schemes, will be denied credit from financial institutions and may not be able to expand. The very livelihood of the people involved in the businesses is under real threat.

The insurance industry has said it provides cover in 86% of cases where there are fixed defences and 67% of cases where defences are removable or demountable. The fact of the matter is that even if these figures are accurate, the 67% of homeowners and businesses that had insurance in place prior to the flood relief works are the same 67% that have cover afterwards. In other words, the insurance industry is not taking into account the fact the OPW has com-
completed such flood relief schemes. This is not an acceptable situation. As the next Government, whoever is elected to office, intends to roll out a major flood relief programme over the coming years, these communities deserve to know that once the schemes have been completed, flood cover will be put place.

I do not accept the distinction drawn by the insurance industry between demountable defences and permanent flood defences. Permanent flood defences are simply impractical in many communities affected. As we all know, demountable flood defences are used successfully throughout the world and have been used and tested in local communities in Ireland over recent weeks. The Bill would require the industry not to discriminate against those who live in areas which OPW flood hazard maps designate as having a one-in-100-year risk or better, or which the OPW otherwise certifies as having a one-in-100-year risk or better. An insurer would still be entitled to charge a premium that could be reasonably justified by the current risk profile associated with the property. Under the legislation, property owners would be entitled to complain to the financial services ombudsman if they were unreasonably refused insurance or were offered it at an unreasonable premium when the current risk profile of the property was taken into account. The same process could also be used by property owners where an insurance policy was offered subject to unreasonable terms and conditions.

The Bill also sets out the role of the Central Bank in the application of the legislation. It would be empowered to carry out an assessment of the manner in which an individual insurer, which is a regulated entity, deals with applications for insurance by people who live in relevant areas. The bank would also have extensive powers to direct an insurer to change its practices or take any other steps necessary to ensure compliance with the legislation. If necessary, the Central Bank could seek an enforcement order in the High Court and an insurer could be subject to significant fines.

The situation facing communities that remain prone to flooding in future is more difficult, and this is why a much more extensive body of work is to be done, for example, to examine the Flood Re scheme in the UK. I am opposed to the introduction of any new levies, because levies introduced, perhaps with good intentions, on a temporary basis become permanent. All policyholders have to do is look at the 3% levy introduced many moons ago with regard to the rescue of PMPA, which ultimately became a permanent stamp duty on the books. People will not tolerate this.

6 o’clock

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

The Taoiseach: No, we are not opposing the Bill. We have requested the insurance companies to come back to us by the end of next week with precisely the information the Deputy is seeking. That information will be fed into the Department of Finance, which is currently doing an assessment of international insurance models. I hope the insurance companies will reflect carefully on the question of demountable flood relief defences, which have proved effective in circumstances where, in many cases, we have seen the highest level of rainfall since 1952.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members’ Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members’ time.
Deputy Michael McGrath: I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

River Shannon Management Agency Bill 2016: First Stage

Deputy Gerry Adams: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to create a single competent authority to co-ordinate flood risk and management along the River Shannon and to provide for matters connected therewith.

Tá mé buíoch den Cheann Comhairle as an seans a thug sé dom an Bille seo a chur os comhair na Dála. Like colleagues, I have visited home owners and business owners in various parts of the State who have been very badly affected by the latest floods. We have witnessed the devastation of family homes and the destruction of people’s livelihoods. Many farms, too, have been badly affected.

In Clonlara, County Clare, which is situated beside the River Shannon, Geraldine and Joe Quinlivan have to put on life-jackets and travel a mile by boat to get to and from their home. They are utterly exasperated. Joe has lived beside and worked on the river all his life and is able to explain the problem clearly. He told me: “If you have a coal or wood fire and you do not clean your chimney then you will be in trouble. If you do not clean the river then you should not be surprised if it leads to flooding”. Excess water has to go somewhere. If the water channel has narrowed because it has not been cleaned, adjoining lands will flood.

Joe is critical, too, of the refusal of the authorities to listen to the concerns of local people with local knowledge. I was pleasantly surprised by the degree of knowledge that is there among people living in the affected areas, which is essential to combating flooding. I support the suggestion from many property owners, including the Quinlivans, that local communities should be represented on the agency the Government is proposing to establish or any other agency that is put in place.

Geraldine and Joe have lived in their home in Springfield, Clonlara for 150 years. Rugadh athair Geraldine ansin i 1929. It was 65 years later before the first flood hit and, subsequently, there were floods in 2000, 2006, 2009, 2014 and again this year. I am sure the Taoiseach has seen the psychological distress and sheer mental and physical exhaustion that is visited upon people in these circumstances. Every year, from November to March, 60 families in Clonlara are living in dread of decisions taken by the ESB at Parteen Weir, especially if a wet summer has left the water table high.

Successive Governments have failed to deal in a co-ordinated and strategic fashion with the problem of flooding. Most of the repeated flooding has been in the Shannon region. Téann an tSionainn go mall, agus tá 10% d’úiseach ar fáil ann. The catchment flood risk assessment and management report identifies 300 locations where flood defences need to be provided, 66 of which are located along the River Shannon. The problem of organising a co-ordinated response to flooding is exacerbated by the myriad bodies and agencies with statutory authority for managing the river. The fact there is no single agency to manage the Shannon and co-ordinate the response to flooding in the region is an indictment of successive governments. In December,
I asked the Taoiseach to establish a single agency to perform that role. He gave no rational explanation for his rejection of my proposal and I ask that he reconsider his position now. The recently announced task force for managing flood risk along the Shannon will not have a legislative basis. The Government could and should have acted sooner and what is proposed does not go far enough.

A Shannon river authority is needed to ensure proper co-ordination and a robust response to all flooding events in order to minimise flood risk and damage. The Bill Teachta Stanley and I are introducing today proposes to establish an agency with overall responsibility for the assessment and management of flood risk and flood defences along the River Shannon, co-ordination of the work of key stakeholders and the preparation of a strategic plan for the management of the river. It should be properly and adequately resourced under the auspices of the Office of Public Works.

The Taoiseach has said previously that the problems associated with the management of the Shannon have been discussed since as far back as the foundation of the State. For all we know, they might even have been discussed when the British were here. This Bill will ensure positive and constructive action is finally taken.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**The Taoiseach:** No. For the Deputy’s information, back in 1909, the reason given for flooding of the Shannon was the very low drop level over a distance of 15 miles. The terms of reference for the Shannon river basin management co-ordination group will be published by the Minister of State next week. I do not oppose the Deputy’s Bill but I consider that we can have a much more effective management strategy by working in conjunction with the relevant agencies. Each body will know its responsibilities and which of them is supposed to carry out particular works. That might mean flooding of bog basins in some places and other works being carried out.

Question put and agreed to.

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

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

**Shannon River Agency Bill 2016: First Stage**

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to co-ordinate the activities of authorities, agencies, and bodies connected with the protection, conservation, management, water management and control of pollution of the Shannon River catchment, to establish a body to be known as the Shannon River Agency, to define its functions, and to provide for other matters connected with the matters aforesaid.

I welcome the opportunity to introduce this Bill. The devastation and havoc heaped upon
our citizens over the past seven weeks and the slow response from Government have clearly demonstrated the urgent need for a single authority, with a statutory basis, to co-ordinate the management of the River Shannon. It is the longest river in the British Isles, stretching for 360 km and touching 18 counties. Numerous agencies and competing interests are involved in its management, including the ESB, Bord na Móna, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Waterways Ireland. Each of these agencies has shown in the past that it will prioritise its own interests ahead of the common interest.

That can no longer be allowed to continue. We cannot again have a situation where it takes the Taoiseach six weeks to bring all the agencies together. Now that is finally done, we must wait a further two weeks to hear what the terms and conditions of the co-ordinating group will be. The group will not be established on a statutory basis and will, therefore, lack sufficient powers to deal effectively with the management of the river and direct and manage the multiple agencies currently overseeing that function. Anecdotal evidence suggests the National Parks and Wildlife Service puts the preservation of the corncrake ahead of the welfare of citizens living along the banks of the Shannon. The ESB manipulates water levels to ensure its power stations operate at their greatest efficiencies. As recently as last October, Lough Ree was at its lowest level on record. Bord na Móna continued to pump excess water into the Shannon while properties in Athlone were flooding.

The Government is simply copying the model of the 1989 River Shannon Forum, which a subsequent Government, led by Fine Gael, scrapped in 1994. It is deeply disappointing that the Government is ignoring the local community in the Shannon region. People living there have made abundantly clear what is needed to manage the river and prevent further flooding. These are the people who are there, day in, day out, and have intimate local knowledge. Not only has the community along the Shannon made it abundantly clear, but one of the Taoiseach’s own Government backbenchers said in relation to a previous flooding that conditions in flooded areas each year made it imperative that a single statutory agency be established. The difference is that he was in opposition when he made that statement and now that he is in government, he seems to have a different view.

This Bill creates a single agency to manage the river Shannon. The agency will be based in Athlone and will administer the river to help cut through the bureaucratic silos that have developed across the various agencies. It will develop a new river management plan in conjunction with other bodies that have the legislative authority to make decisions. Issues such as flood preparation, emergency action and developing the river as a major recreation and tourism resource will be its core duties. The Government argued this legislation would take too long and that the Shannon co-ordination group would suffice. I remind the Taoiseach that we sat here one morning until 5 a.m. to debate the liquidation of the IBRC. This is an emergency and if there were a political will to introduce legislation, it could be done.

I thank the many people who worked voluntarily. If it were not for the voluntary effort, scores more houses would have been flooded. Why did it take six weeks for the Army to be called in to man the pumps? The men and women were willing and had the capacity to do so much earlier. The Taoiseach visited and he saw the destruction, devastation, frustration and heartbreak of all the people who were directly affected by this. This is an opportunity for all of us in this House to set aside politics as usual. It is an opportunity to treat this issue as the national emergency that it is and to leave in place a lasting solution for all our citizens, and to ensure this issue remains a priority and no families ever have to live through this again.
An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Troy asked that this-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have to let you in now with Deputy Troy-----

The Taoiseach: -----not be political, yet he made a very political speech.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is this in order?

The Taoiseach: I remind him that the 129 corncrakes have vanished from the Shannon callows because of summer floods-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have allowed the Taoiseach in on the last-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It has never happened before. I do not think it is on.

The Taoiseach: -----not because of anything to do with the habitats directive.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Troy had asked some questions. Perhaps the Taoiseach will answer them.

The Taoiseach: Second, the ESB levels are determined by Lough Derg and by nothing else. Obviously, water will flow to its own level.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is completely out of order that the Taoiseach should be commenting on the moving of a Private Members’ Bill. It is out of order.

The Taoiseach: Third, there are 29 billion litres of water in flooded bogs at the moment and more will come onstream, literally, as Bord na Móna moves out of the milling of peat and that area. It has been clarified both by the European Commission and by the National Parks and Wildlife Service that in an emergency where people, their property or their livelihoods are affected, action can be taken. We want these waters to subside somewhat before that can happen. This Bill is not being opposed and I repeat for Deputy Troy that his Bill seems to be a direct copy of what Deputy Penrose brought in here ten years ago.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy was against it then, when he was in government.

The Taoiseach: The terms of reference for the co-ordination group for the Shannon will be published next week.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On a point of order, the Taoiseach is deliberately abusing the Standing Orders of the House.

The Taoiseach: I am not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Bill is not being opposed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach is abusing them. He has no right to do what he is doing.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy is very good at it himself, making up the laws as he goes on.
The Taoiseach: Deputy Troy made all sorts of comments.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could I have order, please? As the Bill is not being opposed, I declare the motion for leave to introduce agreed.

Question put and agreed to.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach is out of order. He is abusing Standing Orders.

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

Deputy Micheál Martin: He has no right to do it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy will therefore move that Second Stage be taken in Private Members’ time.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: How is the Deputy’s billboard going?

Deputy Micheál Martin: Sorry?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: How is his billboard?

Deputy Micheál Martin: How is the what?

Deputy Robert Troy: I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The billboard.

Deputy Simon Harris: They would not even put the Deputy on a billboard.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is going very well.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: After four years in opposition, he could not put himself up on a poster.

Deputy Robert Troy: It is not him who is afraid to go on television, Deputy Butttimer.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy does not look bad on the back of a bus.

Deputy Robert Troy: Vincent Browne.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If we could have order, please, we are going on to the next item-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The back of a bus is probably the right place for Deputy Butttimer.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, could I have order?

The Taoiseach: I did not hear much talk from the Deputy below in Athlone.
Flooding: Statements

The Taoiseach: Today, my first thoughts and words must be with those who have suffered so much because of the storms of the last month: the men and women whose farms and homes have been flooded, isolated or evacuated, whose livelihoods have been threatened, and who have spent long, anxious days and nights afraid of and mesmerised by the weather forecast of rain, rain, rain, and the heartbreak it brought. As a country and as a Government, our hearts went out to them in every community so affected.

On my visits to those people - in Athlone, Foxford, Gort, Labane, Craughwell and south Galway - I saw for myself the devastation, both of their peace of mind and their property. From young mothers to older people, many were upset at what happened. I made it clear then, as I do now, together with the Tánaiste, that the Government stands with them and that we will give them every support and assistance possible as they rebuild their lives. From the outset, the Government’s priority has been to protect life and then infrastructure, property and businesses. The national co-ordination group, which is composed of really good people, has met 30 times since 3 of December. Our response has involved almost every arm of the State.

Today, as well as recognising the magnificent resilience of the people directly affected, I want to acknowledge the outstanding work and dedication of the staff of the local authorities, the Office of Public Works, the Defence Forces, the Civil Defence, the Coast Guard and the Red Cross, who worked endlessly and tirelessly throughout Christmas in the most difficult and atrocious circumstances. I want to mention especially the local volunteers, who gave up their own comfort, families and Christmas to give practical, emotional and psychological support to their neighbours and their communities. It meant giving up houses, transferring animals and making, day after day and night after night, sacrifices they would not normally have to make. Often it takes the worst of circumstances to bring out the best in people. They filled and transported sandbags and they gave out warm, dry clothes, hot drinks, meals, and beds not just for the night, but for the duration. In many cases they coped in battling with nature itself, their efforts sparing businesses and homes from being flooded. Those Members who were involved will have seen at first hand the enormous power of the swollen rivers. These volunteers were the difference and made the difference, and in doing so, made their country proud. The community response was and is magnificent. The Government is responding and will continue to respond.

This crisis came from most unusual and unprecedented levels of rainfall over the past month. November saw average rainfall levels of between 130% and 190% across Met Éireann’s network of weather stations. In December, we had an entire winter’s rain in just one month, making it the wettest December on record. The rainfall was also exceptional in its persistence and its force. In addition to flooding, the storms had a major impact on essential services, including supplies of power and clean drinking water. Since the start of December, ESB Networks has reconnected over 350,000 customers, frequently in atrocious weather conditions. Great credit is due to those people. When people were being warned to stay put, the ESB crews were putting on the weather-proofs and heading out to do essential work. Irish Water responded to over 200 incidents where there was a risk to the delivery of drinking water and wastewater services. The storms resulted in 15,000 calls for assistance to local authority helplines. As the waters rose, almost 600 households were evacuated. Almost half of these houses have now been reoccupied, but that is cold comfort to those who are still waiting to come home.

From the start of these storms, the Government has been crystal clear that we will provide
all necessary help and support to the communities affected not alone in terms of the practical and physical immediate help, but, for example, in the Department of Social Protection being on the ground to advise on vital financial help available through the humanitarian assistance scheme. To date and already, the scheme has paid €235,000 in emergency payments to over 270 households for white goods, clothes, beds, essential furniture and so on. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has introduced several critical measures to address the impact of the storms and flooding on farms. These include relaxing the rules around the movement of livestock, guidance on flooded slurry tanks, the deferral of inspections and the provision of emergency feed, by airlift if necessary. In view of the likely long-term damage to fodder supplies, a fodder aid scheme for flooded areas has also been introduced, with compensation at market level for losses. As we know, small businesses have been badly hit. That is why a simple but effective scheme has been introduced and is operated by the Red Cross and local authorities. This fund, which has access to €5 million, has received over 130 applications to date. Undoubtedly, the greatest burden and responsibility for the clean-up will fall on local authorities. In addition to the €18 million already allocated, we have asked local authorities to estimate the damage caused to public infrastructure. Many roads, bridges and culverts were washed away or damaged to a great degree. Once the information and accurate costs are presented to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Government will respond to the need so that local authorities can carry out these works, be that raising roads, fixing roads, fixing potholes, or restoring bridges or road structures where they are damaged.

To date, there have been 2,686 deployments by the Defence Forces to assist local authorities. In addition, local authorities are working together to share resources, staff, plant and equipment, including pumps and sandbags. Lessons are learned in all of these events. Clearly, every flood brings its own consequence. The co-ordination group and emergency groups have now got a really effective plan together and that became apparent during the course of the recent floods.

Since 1995, the Office of Public Works, OPW, in co-operation with local authorities, has constructed 36 major flood defence schemes at a cost of €500 million. Five further schemes are currently under construction, with 26 more at the stage of planning and design. Of the 7,000 properties protected by the OPW’s completed major urban schemes, fewer than 20 were affected by flooding, which shows the impact of constructing a flood defence to the highest standard. For example, across the water in Carlisle, where nearly £40 million was spent on flood defences that just did not work, thousands of homes were flooded. In fact, despite record river levels, towns that were previously vulnerable, such as Clonmel, Mallow and Fermoy, avoided any significant flooding. That was due to defences that were well built. In Fermoy, these defences were put in place on seven occasions during the recent floods.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Built by the previous Government. The Taoiseach should admit it.

The Taoiseach: Yes, of course. I respect that. I thank Deputy Martin.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach should state it.

The Taoiseach: Obviously, the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, has 66 locations on the Shannon, and 300 nationwide.

Deputy Micheál Martin: They cannot even bring themselves to say it.

The Taoiseach: We have €1 billion on the table for this, including, as Deputy Martin will
be aware, major defences for Cork.

**Deputy Dara Murphy:** Deputy Martin did not put anything into Blackpool or Cork city.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Neither did Deputy Murphy.

**The Taoiseach:** I am glad to say we will spend more in the next five years than was spent in the previous 20 years - €430 million.

**Deputy Dara Murphy:** Deputy Martin’s Government put nothing into Cork city.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Neither did this Government. It had five years to do it.

**The Taoiseach:** Perhaps Deputy Martin might like to say that at the weekend.

There is €430 million earmarked for flood defences, including in Deputy Martin’s native city, by 2021. There is a €60 million plan to protect the Deputy and his people from tidal surges down there in that historic city. That will be the biggest single flood protection scheme in the history of the State.

As a country, we have to prepare ourselves for extreme weather and become more resilient to the impacts of climate change. Good progress has been made by the OPW on the catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme. This includes 300 locations where flood defence measures are required. The programme is central to the assessment of flood risk, the planning of flood risk management and the subsequent implementation of flood mitigation measures. Following extensive public consultation, it will be finalised later in the year. The Shannon is central to this. Some 2,075 km of river have been modelled and 10,000 flood maps have been prepared by the OPW. Next week the River Shannon co-ordination group will meet again and terms of reference will be given to it. This group will draw on the full technical expertise of the OPW and co-ordinate the work of relevant bodies, from local level right through to Departments and other State agencies.

Work on the CFRAM programme will contribute to the new flood forecasting and warning service announced by the Government on 5 January. This involves really detailed capacity for longer-range, more accurate information for communities and agencies alike.

We must also ensure that the planning system gives sufficient consideration to flood risk. The OPW’s CFRAM maps will be central to informing people of the risks of development on flood plains. It means more evidence and greater common sense must be applied to planning applications in the future.

The State’s investment in new flood defences and its reform of planning will deliver benefits to local communities that have traditionally been affected by flooding. Yesterday, the Tánaiste and I, along with other Ministers, met the CEOs of the insurance sector to communicate the benefits of the new flood defence schemes. The meeting was constructive. We agreed that they should provide additional data on what they insure and reflect on the capacity of demountable defences to protect communities in urban areas, such as towns, where flood protection defences have been put in place. A broader review by the Department of Finance of options for insurance of properties in flood areas will take account of the outcome of the current phase of engagement with the sector, and will be published later in the year.

On Saturday last, I spent eight hours in south Galway. Clearly, the solutions are multifac-
Some areas require channels for taking surface water from turlough to turlough. Others require engineering works to raise roads and to put protection ditches around businesses. One cannot have a situation in which farmers are distraught, in some cases, because their dairies are flooded and cattle are out in the field again. Others have had to move their cows, many of which are now in calving season, which puts a great deal of pressure on them. Clearly, in the small towns and villages I visited, people are distraught.

Obviously, we need a strong and growing economy in order to have the resources to invest in these matters. I would like to think that the Dáil, in a non-political sense, can set out its view of how we can deal with this over the longer term. I refer to the debate here on 30 June 1948. Only for it is so serious, one could say that it was a remark made by the late Deputy T. F. O’Higgins, who represented Laoighis-Offaly with great distinction, that brought a bit of levity to that debate. The late Deputy described how the river in Offaly had changed course and was now flowing down the road between Kinnitty and Kilcormac. He said that the young children were fishing on the public road and the only action taken at the time was “the erection of a notice by the county council saying ‘Danger! Water ahead’.” We like to be different here, working with both communities and agencies to provide protection for people, for their homes, for their businesses and for their agricultural investments. It may mean some voluntary relocation in a small number of cases and it may mean a scheme to shift some agricultural sheds and dairies in areas that are prone to flooding in the future. It is a serious debate and I look forward to the constructive suggestions of the Deputies. The Ministers will outline details of the response from the Government in their areas of responsibility.

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): When any of us thinks of those who have been suffering from the flooding, we only see the exhaustion, the pain and the emotion that they have been through over a prolonged period. It really is dreadful what has happened to different communities and individual families right around the country, not to mention the stress and the fear in homes where there was a danger of flooding, which in many cases, thankfully, did not materialise to the extent that was feared. We all will be aware that the weather events of this winter, in the case of rainfall, have been truly extraordinary in a historical context, and it requires all of us to think afresh as to how best we can prepare ourselves to deal with potential recurrences in the future.

I will talk about the role of the Department of Social Protection but, first, I want to pay tribute to all the families and individuals who have fought so long and so valiantly to save houses, businesses and animals, for how hard they have worked. I also pay tribute to those involved in public services, from the staff of the local authorities to the gardaí and the firemen in different counties, all of whom have worked over and over again. I also pay tribute to those involved in local radio and other local communications networks and social media, because the messaging systems which have given citizens more information than would otherwise be available have been genuinely helpful.

With regard to the role of the Department of Social Protection, I was with Deputy Arthur Spring in Tralee in the first week of December when there was a serious flooding episode which affected up to 15 families, quite a few of whom had to leave their houses. At that point the Department initiated its humanitarian assistance scheme based, obviously, on those forecasts that were available to us and also on episodes that had already occurred by then on a more limited scale in counties such as Clare. Every year, but not really to any national media fanfare, there are localised floods which cause severe damage to families. Every year, and sometimes four times in a year, I have had the opportunity to meet families in different counties affected by the
The Department’s humanitarian aid scheme is available to individuals and families affected by the floods, particularly those who are without insurance. It is available through our community welfare service. Throughout Ireland, immediately after any of this year’s episodes, we have run special clinics where people can call and discuss with the community welfare service any support that they may require and that may be made available to them. This is available regardless of whether a person is in receipt of a social welfare income. The income limits for a family with two children are approximately €70,000, and even if it is more than that, there is a small reduction in the amount available. All the support is and has been available to family homes on farms. While we are not involved in the business side, we assist many farm families, unfortunately, on an annual basis in all the areas with which Deputies are familiar and that can be affected by flooding, even in a good year.

Having initiated the scheme, we have made payments to approximately 270 households around the country, with a modest expenditure of approximately €250,000. I dealt with the aftermath of the 2009 and 2010 floods after we came into government. In my five-year experience of dealing with floods, the immediate needs in the stage one payments are for items such as clothing, bedding and food that have been destroyed or contaminated. Generally, these payments are relatively small. In stage two, the month after flooding, particularly after the waters recede, we generally receive applications for support for larger items, including white goods such as fridges and freezers, other electrical equipment, flooring and furniture that may have been destroyed. It is impossible to predict exactly how families will be affected. They can come and set out what has happened to them and the second stage is normally some time after the flooding. The support is there for people. Initially, some members of a family may leave a flooded house and go to the house of a parent or child, leaving, maybe, one person looking after the house, and they may not return to the house until the flooding has receded.

Stage three is later, when it is possible to identify the longer-term financial support or works that are required. This might include plastering, laying floors, electrical wiring, painting and decorating. If people are covered by insurance, they will apply to their insurance companies, not us, or they can reimburse us after they have received money from the insurance company. I anticipate that the number of claims and costs coming in will be significantly higher over the coming months as people assess the damage. They may need help from a builder, engineer or the local authority to assess what needs to be done.

I would like Deputies to make this information available at a local level. I am grateful to all the Deputies across the House who have done so and who have let people know that urgent needs payments may be considered, in exceptional circumstances, for landlords to cover essential items that have been damaged by flooding, as happened in Enniscorthy. The centre of Enniscorthy became almost impassable and a number of rented homes were severely flooded. We have been considering a special structure to assist landlords in such situations when items such as fridges and freezers in the rented accommodation have been destroyed and the landlord does not have the insurance or resources to replace them.

The aid scheme will be particularly welcome in communities in which flooding has damaged community resources, ranging from GAA clubs to community centres and halls. The scheme to which the Taoiseach referred in respect of the Red Cross is open to such organisations to seek support. The community hall in Thomastown was severely damaged and we will be in a position to support its restoration through the Red Cross scheme.
We must have a wider debate about climate change. We must make use of the wisdom of different people involved in local communities and their different takes on land and rivers and how to best deal with it. The proposal by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, to have dedicated teams in local authorities to deal with flooding-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: It was our proposal.

Deputy Joan Burton: If it was, good for you. The Labour Party has also discussed it at length. Teams would take into account work on keeping rivers, ditches and drains clear, which is important. Flooding should not be a political football. What has happened to people is just so dreadful. Stand in a flooded house and you will know about it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuilimid ag plé an cheist seo mar bhaí-neann sé le an-chuid daoine ar fud na tíre. Bhí an damáiste a tharla go dona ar fad, rud atá soiléir agus a bheidh soiléir go ceann cúpla mí eile.

As the country settled into the peace and quiet of the Christmas period, many families found themselves desperately battling to save their homes. Instead of closing up for a few days, businesses were caught in a desperate struggle to save their premises and businesses. The triple threat of Storms Desmond, Eva and Frank wrought devastation across the island and shattered the hopes of hundreds of families. As the storms have abated and the waters begin slowly to recede, the images of stranded homes and ruined businesses remain. As the media attention begins to fade and the story slips into the back pages, we must remember the scale and seriousness of the floods.

Today’s statements must be about more than just expressions of sympathy. They must be about taking action. I have witnessed this before. While I do not want to be political in any sense, I remember a previous Minister of State, former Deputy Brian Hayes, who probably knew more than most that he was going to Europe, doing a tour of Ireland in 2014. He gave the same commitments across the country, and they were not followed through with action. The increased ferocity and frequency of the storms hitting this island demand that politicians do more than just turn up to survey the damage.

When the storms happen, there is an outcry, people are concerned and there is much attention. When the waters recede and the storms abate, it tends to go off the headlines. One gets the sense that the Government goes from year to year hoping there will be no storms this year and it will get away with it. The Taoiseach’s mealy-mouthed and poor speech on climate change in Paris is evidence of the Government’s reluctance to accept the full impact of this issue. Many people agree with my view that the Taoiseach’s contribution to that debate was not a statesman-like one. It was clear from the noises he was making that he was more concerned with pursuing domestic electoral agendas than with making a solid and significant contribution to the climate change debate in its entirety.

I believe we must focus on three main areas: the immediate response that is needed to help families and businesses, the critical issue of insurance for those affected or threatened by flooding and the need for long-term flood defence planning in this era of climate change. First and foremost must be our efforts to assist those families and businesses that have battled and are continuing to struggle with floods over recent weeks. Financial support is a vital component in reducing the scale and depth of the damage done. As Deputies Troy and Cowen and oth-
ers have said, businesspeople who are not paying commercial rates, for example because they
are not in a commercial area, do not qualify. Many people with tourism businesses, including
the owners of chalets and bed and breakfasts, do not qualify for any compensation because of
that provision. Some of the other anomalies that have arisen in certain towns are very harsh in
their implementation. The compensation package needs to be revisited. I will give a concrete
example. I was in a shop in Bandon in respect of which no compensation is to be paid, even
though the whole premises is destroyed, because it ceased trading a month or so ago. We need
some practical common sense on the ground. If one is not in a rateable area and is not paying
rates, one is out and one will not get compensation. The Taoiseach needs to look at this again.

The Government’s record in delivering promised support is quite shocking. Much was
promised after the 2014 floods, but little was delivered. It is a damning indictment of the
Government that some €20 million of the emergency support and repair fund which was put in
place after the floods of January 2014, including €19.6 million that was provided for the repair
of coastal protections and flood defences in badly affected areas, remains unspent. This was
followed by a further underspend of €14.5 million in 2015. We are looking at a massive under-
spend of €34.5 million which had been allocated for flood relief. I do not know what is going
on, but there is something wrong somewhere. When one travels the country, as I did when I
went to south Galway, Clare, Cork and elsewhere, one learns that a relatively small level of
expenditure would have helped to avoid much of the damage.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Yes.

Deputy Micheál Martin: People are quite tolerant when big schemes do not arrive. If
€200,000 had been spent in Portumna, it would have done an awful lot to assist with the channel
or canal that comes in from the river. Relatively small amounts of money could be provided
for the reinforcement of ditches and the clearing of drains, etc. If a comprehensive and proac-
tive system of prevention had been consistently deployed, we could have avoided many of the
situations that developed. When the figure of €34 million that I have mentioned is examined by
the families and volunteers who have been working pumps and hauling sandbags to save their
homes and the shop owners who have been sweeping out the debris of their lost stock, they will
ask what is or will be different this time.

I would like to make a point about preparation. We heard a great deal about the key issue
of who is in charge. We kept hearing that there was no sense of anyone being in charge on the
ground. The staff on the ground were fantastic, but there was no protocol around pumps, for
example.

The Taoiseach: There was.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There was no protocol.

The Taoiseach: The co-ordination group has met 30 times since 3 December 2015.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Without the civil contractors and farmers who went into the town
of Bandon, the place would have been ten times worse.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is wrong.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Some of the contractors were told “you should not be here be-
cause you have no insurance”.

69
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Yes.

The Taoiseach: They met every day.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is what they were told. I have to say that. I am not making this up.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is wrong and he knows he is wrong.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: He is not wrong.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is what people were saying on the ground.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The Deputy is right.

The Taoiseach: They met every day.

Deputy Micheál Martin: If the contractors did not get up and do this for their colleagues, we would have been in deep trouble.

The Taoiseach: They have met 30 times since 3 December 2015.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I was in Midleton for three hours. People were looking around frantically for pumps at 5 p.m., a full eight or nine hours after large sections of the main trading street and many housing estates in the town were destroyed and flooded. That is just the reality of what happened. A very basic thing like that-----

The Taoiseach: Some 2,500 Army personnel came in.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Eventually.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am talking about the pumps. I am not talking about the Army personnel coming in late. Why are the pumps not stored in the council yards? Alternatively, arrangements could be made in advance for civil contractors to go in and do what they have to do when something like this happens. Anything else that needs to be sorted out with them could be sorted out at a later stage. That is what should be done, but it just did not happen on this occasion.

The Taoiseach: Nor did it happen in 2009.

Deputy Barry Cowen: That does not make it right.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach and his colleagues are responsible. My point is that we should have learned from 2009 and other storms. It is a very basic thing.

The Taoiseach: We are learning.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Deputies Cowen, Fitzmaurice and Naughten were part of a delegation of public representatives who went to Brussels today to explore how the EU solidarity fund might be accessed and to examine the deployment of the habitats directives.

The Taoiseach: Mairead McGuinness MEP was there too.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I will let Deputy Cowen speak about that later. All is not as it
The Taoiseach: What does Deputy Martin mean by that?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Government has approximately 12 weeks from the date of the disaster to apply for funding. It should use this fund to help the communities in east Galway, Clare, Athlone, Bandon, Midleton, Graiguenamanagh and other areas that are grappling with the aftermath of the recent floods. The Irish Government secured €13 million under the EU solidarity fund following the devastating flooding that occurred in November 2009. If the Government could secure additional funds on this occasion, it would help with the repair of roads and other forms of infrastructure.

I raised the insurance issue with the Taoiseach last month. There does not appear to have been a proactive engagement with the industry, other than what is happening this week. I ask the House to forgive me for saying there is an awful sense of sabre-rattling in advance of the election that is looming. I suggest that a few hard-hitting statements will be made to the industry, which will make a few hard-hitting statements in response, before the election comes and goes.

Deputy Simon Harris: The interdepartmental group has been in place for a year.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We genuinely need to address the issue of insurance for flood-affected areas. I think the Taoiseach should take a lead in this regard. Perhaps the Government should have been more proactive in engaging with the insurance industry long before this happened.

Deputy Simon Harris: We have done that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Sorry?

Deputy Simon Harris: We have had the memorandum of understanding since last year.

Deputy Micheál Martin: What has all of this week’s sabre-rattling, shouting, roaring and megaphone diplomacy been about? A system is necessary to give assurances to businesses and families that they will get the insurance cover they need without the shadow of financial catastrophe hanging over them. When one meets the owners of businesses that have flooded two or three times, one hears that they can take the first time but the second time puts the viability of their businesses at stake. They feel that they cannot get up again. It is a very serious issue. As we saw earlier, legislation has been published to deal with some of these issues.

A long-term response is needed to deal with flooding in the era of climate change. As an island on the fringes of Europe that is surrounded by the turbulent Atlantic, Ireland is at the front line of the repercussions of climate change. We need to adapt and reform our institutions and agencies to fast-track the construction of flood defences. We need to cut through bureaucratic silos and protect communities. The emptiness of the Government’s response to recent events was summed up when it announced its solution to the problem of Shannon flooding. It is proposing to revive a talking shop that it scrapped in 1994 when it was last in power. The Taoiseach was a member of the Government that scrapped the last Shannon forum. The lack of urgency in putting in place a long-term solution is all too evident in the Government’s failure to update the national emergency plans.

As I criticise elements of the response, I want to make it clear that I do not believe the indi-
individual agencies are responsible. There is a more systemic problem that can be traced directly to the Government’s neglect and inaction in failing to update its emergency response policies or invest in basic preparations. It is in this context that the Government has failed yet again to pay attention to an area unless or until it becomes engulfed in a crisis. Despite the imperative to update policies, the core national framework for emergency management today is unchanged from 2007. Ministers have been happy to change nothing in this regard. Bizarrely, they did not even change the relevant documents to reflect the fact that certain bodies have been abolished since 2007. For example, the major emergency management framework that is available on a dedicated Government website shows that Limerick City Council is supposed to be a major responder to emergencies, even though the council was abolished a year and a half ago.

The catchment flood risk assessment and management initiative has been under way since 2009. It was committed to and initiated by the previous Government. Martin Mansergh did some significant work in that regard. It is mandated by the EU floods directive. I think Ministers have been desperately hiding behind it as evidence of their action. I think it is absurd for Ministers to claim this activity as evidence of their interest in this matter. It does nothing to cover up the wider truth that the whole issue has been unfortunately neglected. There has been no investment in major information campaigns. No structures have been revised and no extra staff have been allocated. We can talk about investing in public services, but what I came across as I went around the country was a reflection of the degree to which council staff levels have been pared back. I am told that four of the six staff in Portumna will retire next year. If more floods occur next year, there will be just two staff members to man the defences and put up sandbags in Portumna.

**The Taoiseach:** The moratorium has been lifted.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** There were 15 staff in Midleton two or three years ago, but there are just six now, four of whom had to work overnight. The working time directive plays havoc with their capacity to go out again the following morning. The need for councils to be given more staff is a big issue. The Taoiseach has met the people in the Shannon region. They have experience because they have been going through this for quite some time. They believe a single agency is an absolute prerequisite for coming to grips with the issues all along the Shannon. The Taoiseach said he did not have time to do it but Deputy Troy’s and Deputy Stanley’s Bills are the way to go. In fairness the Minister of State, Deputy Simon Harris, has publicly said he is open to the idea. The Taoiseach should move away from the talking and go for it. We would facilitate the Government in bringing forward legislation to deal with this. It would be a concrete response because it is only when one meets the people and hears their exasperation and despair that one realises they are fed up with the annual toing and froing and the photocalls with boats being towed along the river.

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

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It is time to put in place an enduring infrastructure that will stand strong in the face of the challenge of climate change. Climate change is a very real issue and one this Government, for domestic electoral reasons, put on the backburner. The EU Commissioner, Phil Hogan, made sure of that when he was Minister, for his own electoral considerations and for those of Fine Gael. Behind the scenes they have badmouthed people left, right and centre about climate change. That needs to be put to one side because climate change is a reality. I have been saying that, along with others, for quite a long time. As a country we need to face up to that reality and to prioritise our response to this issue on a consistent basis because
what has been missing is consistent prioritisation of the issue of flood defences, protection and prevention.

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for his tolerance in letting me go over my time.

The Taoiseach: It was a statesmanlike speech.

Deputy Gerry Adams: A Cheann Chomhairle, cuirim fáilte roimh an deis seo labhairt ar na tuilte uafásacha a bhuail go leor saoránach. The scenes of utter devastation and the distress of families and communities across large parts of the island of Ireland as a result of flooding have been shocking. There has been a succession of storms and successive Governments have failed to take account of the warnings, to co-ordinate the relevant State agencies effectively and speedily, or to adequately plan for a future in which these storms are regular features of our autumns and winters.

Before Christmas I visited Carrick-on-Shannon, Leitrim and Roscommon and spent some time with people whose homes and businesses were flooded. Last week I met families in the Mounthamilton area of Dundalk in my own constituency and I subsequently travelled to St. Mary’s Park in Limerick and to O’Brien’s Bridge and Clonlara in County Clare. Despite the widespread media coverage, nothing actually prepares one for the scenes of desolation and devastation or the trauma and, particularly, the psychological distress of the families, some of whom are now experiencing their eighth flood. Those families and business people, and the small and bigger farmers to whom I spoke, were mentally and physically exhausted with the daily battle against the floods. Many were frustrated by the Government’s poor response.

This is more than just the loss of property and possessions. The people I met have had their whole lives turned upside down. In one case the teenage children of a family do not want to return home as the house is destroyed. They spoke about the loss of photographs of holy communions and confirmations and of weddings, as well as memorial cards for their parents or children’s jotters. They live in Mounthamilton and this is the second time their home has been flooded in recent years. The last time they spent a huge amount of money on refurbishment. Two out of 13 homes are flooded there and none of the residents has vehicular access to their homes because the roadway was submerged. There are also issues with sewage and rubbish collections.

Mounthamilton was also badly flooded in 2014. One home has now been flooded six times – in 1979, 1992, 2000, 2014, in December 2015 and again this month. As I said earlier when, on behalf of Deputy Stanley and myself, I moved a Bill for a single agency for the Shannon, I met Geraldine and Joe Quinlivan who have to travel a mile by boat to get to their home. They are exasperated beyond belief. They have a family of strong sons who are fit young men but, as their mother told me, they are mentally and physically exhausted because they were manning pumps 24-7 for three and a half weeks before the welcome arrival of the Defence Forces to take up this challenging chore. They are also critical of the refusal to listen to residents who have the local knowledge essential to help combat flooding. This family has lived in their home in Springfield, Clonlara for 150 years and they were flooded in 2000, 2006, 2009, 2014 and again this year. All the people in this river basin live in dread from November to March each year, especially if it has been a wet summer and the water table is high. Geraldine rightly says, “We should never have to go through this again”. No one should.

At O’Brien’s Bridge the Shannon is wider than in the living memory of locals. It was plain
for all to see. D’imigh páirceanna as radharc agus tá an abhainn ag rith go han-tapa. At St. Mary’s Park in Limerick, the flood defences put in place after the disastrous flood two years ago amounted to two rows of breeze blocks on top of a porous wall, which is totally inadequate. The Taoiseach may recall my raising this issue with him in 2014 when I visited that area. It is a small working-class neighbourhood and the community rallied although in some of the small terraced homes the water was ceiling high. They could not get insurance and I remember raising this in the House and being given all sorts of promises. They still have not got insurance. The commitments made about defences being put in place have still not been honoured.

Climate change is a major factor in all of this, something we are all smart about now. Six of the warmest years we have ever experienced occurred in the past 25 years and there has been a reduction in the number of frost days and a shortening of the frost season. We have also witnessed an increase in the annual rainfall in northern and western parts of the island with decreases or small increases in the south and east. The Government’s approach to climate change has been inadequate and the State will not reach the 20% reduction in emissions by 2020 that it signed up to. When I raised this issue with the Taoiseach last November he acknowledged that the State faces fines of between €5 billion and €6 billion if it cannot meet climate change goals. I see little evidence of planning for this. I raise this fraternally because I would like to see evidence of planning.

The planning laws passed by successive Governments have contributed to this crisis. Developers have been allowed, even encouraged, to build on flood plains. Even someone who has no experience in this can see that there are buildings in places where they should not have been given planning permission to be built - it is as obvious as the eyes in one’s head. In 2003 a proposal to introduce a ban on building on flood plains was rejected by the Fianna Fáil Government and five years later another report produced more draft guidelines which local councils were free to ignore.

We need to get real on this issue. Last month, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht urged a ban on future building on flood plains but there has been no evidence so far of the Government bringing forward the necessary measures to protect homes and towns or to tackle the insufficient planning regulations which have contributed to this crisis. A report at the weekend in the *The Sunday Business Post* revealed that the Office of Public Works has identified 70,000 homes at risk of flooding. Almost half of these are not included in the Government’s flood defence plan which is currently being drafted.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Not true.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** I stand to be corrected if I am wrong. Many of these 70,000 homeowners and businesses cannot get flood insurance. In parts of Dublin, where major flood defences have been constructed, insurance companies will still not provide insurance or will do so only at a cost that is prohibitive. Yesterday the Taoiseach finally met the major insurance companies but it was slow. It took too long and those affected by flooding, as well as the Oireachtas, need to be assured that this was no more than a publicity stunt. We need to see results as it is results that count. I am sure the Taoiseach and the Minister of State were moved by the people they met as they are compassionate politicians but we need to see results.

*7 o’clock*

Last year the European Commission approved a British reinsurance scheme called Flood
Re, aimed at ensuring the availability of domestic and SME insurance at affordable prices for flood-related damage. Has the Taoiseach examined the memorandum of understanding agreed between the British Government and the Association of British Insurers? Under that agreement a sum of money now exists, funded by the British property insurance industry through premiums passed on by the insurers but kept, as well as a levy charged to all insurance companies active in the market.

Like others I have been impressed by the spirit of the meitheal. It still lives and is beo among the people - neighbours supporting neighbours. I commend all the communities, the members of the Defence Forces and the Garda Síochána, the Civil Defence, local government staff and the many people who helped. Many battled to help their neighbours, often in the most difficult and dangerous conditions. I thank them for their example, courage and resolve. That is what we must reflect as well. This issue should be one on which all of the Oireachtas unites. It should be above party politics. It is not acceptable that families who are driven from their homes must liaise with a raft of agencies to access supports, including to make their homes and businesses fit for habitation. There must be emergency action to help sanitise homes and businesses contaminated by dirty water. Accessible compensation packages must be rolled out urgently.

When no short-term measures are taken there must be a long-term holistic strategy that takes account of all of the issues with which we are now familiar. We must also acknowledge that storms and floods, unlike others in this House, do not recognise the Border. There must be an all-island approach to tackle flood risk, and the management of that should be at the top of the agenda. Today, with Deputy Brian Stanley, I introduced Sinn Féin’s River Shannon Management Agency Bill. This provides for a single agency. Many propositions have emerged from the Opposition during the Taoiseach’s term of office, but most of them have been ignored. I wish to put it firmly on the record that we will co-operate with other parties and with Independents in a united manner to bring about a single management agency. It need not be a Bill from Sinn Féin or Fianna Fáil, but a Bill we can all sign up to that will deliver for the people so badly affected by the floods.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Nobody would consider it an overstatement to point out that when somebody’s home is flooded it is quite devastating. People who have been in flooded homes can see that. There is the clean-up afterwards, the debris that ends up in the house, the possibility of spores and damage to people’s health and trying to dehumidify the house before one tries to put it back together. The one question people always ask is: “What if it happens again?” That is their major concern.

Undoubtedly, the extent of the rainfall in the last month to six weeks was exceptional. When one considers the major floods that are occurring quite regularly now there is no doubt that it will be the pattern we will continue to see. That is due to a change in our climate. In my area I have seen a 100-year flood occur on several occasions since 2000. While I understand the reason that the Shannon region was the focus of most attention recently, the Liffey catchment also experienced some difficulties. Indeed, the Morell river in my constituency caused some houses and roads in the area to be flooded quite badly, and not for the first time. There is an advanced proposal to remediate that which is very much in harmony with the surrounding environment.

Previously, there were remedial works in Maynooth, Leixlip and Johnstown and all of those designs and investments stood up well to the test. The problem is that often a whole-of-catchment approach is not taken. When the Maynooth remedial works were carried out the next
place to flood was Leixlip. When Leixlip was remediated the next place to flood was the Strawberry Beds. That is an indication that one must consider the total catchment area or problems could be caused in other areas. The sequence of the works is extremely important. If one does the work lower on the river first, there is a stronger flow of water and sometimes there can be a great deal of sediment in areas of the river. That clogs the river. That has happened in the Straffan area in Kildare. There is a virtual mountain in the middle of the Liffey. I have tried to find out who has responsibility for it but it is very difficult to find anybody with that responsibility. That is part of the problem.

I am a member of the environment committee. Representatives of the insurance industry appeared before that committee on 25 September 2012 to discuss this issue following an earlier flood. The catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, study is not complete yet, although it should be. However, where CFRAM studies have been done the insurance companies appear to use the information that is gathered. The information is required so a strategic environmental assessment can be carried out in advance of drafting a development plan to ensure one has the information required so land is not inappropriately zoned. The CFRAM studies were being used - we challenged the insurance companies about it at the time - to code areas and exclude them from insurance.

Somebody contacted me about this last November. Her home has never been flooded but because she lives within 500 metres of the canal she was excluded from flood insurance. There is no prospect of her home being flooded. I can also point to places that are on hillsides. The water would have to flow up the hill to flood them. Using that information as a way to exclude people from flood insurance is absolutely inappropriate. We are gathering information for the insurance companies. They tell us, as they said in the report that the committee published before Christmas, that if there is big investment in flood defences they will look at it again. However, the same problem exists now as existed in 2012, so the insurance companies are not acting ethically. They must stop inappropriately using the information that is collected. They must be told that and if they do not do it, there must be some mechanism to ensure it is enforced.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Government is not directly responsible for the rain, but it does have responsibilities in dealing with it. There have been many calls for the dredging of rivers and there have been statements from the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government about the provision of the greatest response ever seen to the flooding crisis.

There has been something of a panic attack about dredging. Like many others, I do not believe that dredging necessarily acts as a flood prevention mechanism. A study by Britain’s Environment Agency states that a river channel is not large enough to contain extreme floods, even after dredging, and that the dredging of river channels does not prevent flooding during extreme flows. Only a fraction of the water ever occupies the channel. Also, if one embarks on a policy of dredging, every time there is a serious flood one will have to re-dredge. It will be an endless task.

With regard to the greatest response ever seen that was mentioned by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, that might have seen this and previous Governments fulfilling promises to put flooding defences in place years ago. There has been a huge lack of interest in this area. One could argue that the lack of investment in infrastructure in general over the last number of years is a serious concern. I tried to get some finance for coastal erosion on Bannow Island in Wexford a while ago, but I was told there was zero money available for it either at central or local level. It was not entertained. There is no interest in dealing
with long-term projects like this because they do not see past the next election. Flood defences were designed for Enniscorthy in 2009. It is reckoned now that they might be in place in 2019. As such, forward planning is seriously lacking.

The real cause of flooding relates, aside from climate change issues which were not as relevant in the past, to the loss of flood lands and willow tree planting. Lands where willows were sown were very good at holding water whereas the huge move to drain every square inch of available land has meant doing away with the practical use of certain lands for tanking water. Under that system, the water did not arrive at the channel quite so quickly. That works. If we want to deal with flooding in the long term, aside from building flood defences in the towns that are most badly affected, we must also look at recreating flood lands. If that means providing grants to farmers to allow land in certain areas to hold water, so be it. It needs to be done. For as long as I can remember, the EU has only wanted land free from unwanted vegetation. The subsidy industry it runs is geared in that direction. Anyone who was prepared to keep land that would hold water would never get a subsidy from the EU. This has to change. It is a very short-sighted policy on the part of the EU.

Just before Christmas, we debated the climate change legislation. It beggars belief how little interest there was in it. The Taoiseach stood up on a world stage last year and said countries needed to show leadership and courage in addressing the climate change crisis. The Government then put forward some of the most meaningless and toothless climate change legislation on the planet. Deputy Clare Daly and I submitted 33 amendments, none of which was accepted and the debate was guillotined. There has been little long-term interest in dealing with climate change in Ireland as if it is a problem for the rest of the world and something that happens out in the Pacific. It happens here too. We have seen it over the last month. Unless the Government takes a more long-term view and starts to look past the next election, we will continue to have problems like this.

Dealing with floods and water, I raise again a point I have raised with the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, who has joined us. I never received much of a response but I always found it interesting that Irish Water was taking over water supply and sewerage but did not want to know about surface water and flooding. Local authorities had been dealing with all four up to now but Irish Water has taken over the two that are most attractive, measurable and easily charged for. Flooding and surface water are unpredictable and Irish Water did not want to know about them. It is an indication that the whole idea behind designing Irish Water was always geared towards making it an entity which could eventually be sold. That is one of the main reasons Irish Water does not want to know anything about surface water or flooding. They are too unpredictable and hard to measure and no private industry on the planet would want to be involved with them.

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): During December and early January, many parts of the country were beset by severe flooding which caused widespread disruption and damage to homes and property nationally, as well as a great deal of hardship. I visited many of the affected areas and spent a significant amount of time across the country where I saw distraught people whose homes were uninhabitable. I saw people who were marooned and businesses which were destroyed. A great deal of financial hardship and disruption was endured over Christmas and the new year and a lot of families were left in a very bad way. We share concern collectively for them. I express my sympathy to those who were affected, particularly those who were affected a second and more times. They have been affected in many different ways but there has in particular been significant financial loss
to homeowners, families and businesses.

For the majority of Met Éireann weather stations, December 2015 was the wettest December on record. That is something none of us, whether on this or the other side of the House, will ever be able to control. The length of records in many cases extends back beyond 50 years. The rainfall was exceptional both for its persistence, with many stations recording rain on each of the 31 days in the month, for its intensity and for the prolonged nature of many of the intense falls. I remember driving home one night when the intensity of the rain was the worst I have ever seen. The rain went on for longer periods than most Members will ever have experienced. By any definition, this was an extreme weather event.

It is clear that there is a link between the frequency of these extreme weather events and climate change. No one can dispute that. We have to plan and act to become more resilient to the impact of climate change and adapt to the new realities that Ireland and everywhere else will face in the coming years. While we cannot stop the weather, we can better prepare for escalating impacts and we can improve co-ordination and planning across the different sectors. Following the passing of climate change legislation late last year, work is well advanced in preparing adaptation plans at national and sectoral levels which will provide the overall framework for Government, key agencies and, of course, local authorities to integrate climate considerations and adaptation measures into policies and practical measures. This is an area my Department will seek to progress further over the months ahead.

To underpin this work, and recognising the central implementing role of the local government sector, I have written to all local authority chief executives this week asking them to accelerate the establishment of climate change adaptation teams within each of their authorities. These cross-cutting teams, which will also include personnel responsible for the co-ordination of flood management and response, will be key to developing and implementing an effective local and regional response to the challenges which lie ahead in adapting to the effects of climate change. On that note, I take this opportunity to once again thank and commend the incredible dedication shown by local authority staff, volunteers and all other personnel in dealing with the flooding events over the past weeks. I am sure all Members agree. As a result of their dedication, homes were saved, properties were protected and families were able to stay in their homes for Christmas. As a country, we owe these staff and volunteers a debt of gratitude and I want that to be acknowledged here again in Dáil Éireann. I met many of these people nationally. Their determination and work ethic was incredible.

The response to the recent severe flooding has been led at national level by my Department, which is designated as lead Department for the co-ordination of response to flooding and other severe weather emergencies. As the lead Department for response, my Department has been convening a national co-ordination group, or NCG, for flooding since 3 December 2015. The primary purpose of these daily meetings is to assess the threat level based on weather forecasts and to share information on river levels and flood forecasts across all bodies, especially the local authorities. The NCG also deals with emergent issues arising which require a co-ordinated whole-of-Government national response. It should be noted that the national co-ordination group met first on 3 December 2015 in anticipation of the adverse weather which became Storm Desmond on 5 and 6 December. It has continued to meet on a daily basis, including over the Christmas and new year holiday period. The early activation of the national co-ordination group greatly assisted cross-Government preparedness and this translated down to an effective response at a local level.
At local level, local authority flood assessment teams in all affected areas were activated and have been operating on a daily basis since the beginning of December. These teams, whose members I have met in many places, anticipate problem areas based on Met Éireann’s weather forecasts and OPW flood warnings and put local response and co-ordination arrangements in place. Protocols for inter-agency collaboration with the other principal response agencies, namely An Garda Síochána and the HSE, were also activated to co-ordinate the local response. It is estimated that local authorities have received and responded to some 20,000 calls for assistance since the beginning of December. It must also be acknowledged that local authority staff in the worst affected areas have worked non-stop since 4 December. The voluntary emergency services, Civil Defence, the Coast Guard, mountain rescue and many others were mobilised to assist the principal response agencies. At the height of the flooding over the Christmas period, up to 3,000 local authority and support staff were involved in the response to the flooding across the country. As the extent of the flooding increased, local authorities were also assisted by the Defence Forces, which brought their considerable resources to bear in assisting in the response and in defending homes and property. They further supported local communities by providing transport services in areas that had become inaccessible and helping many vulnerable people. Despite this effort, it is estimated that approximately 550 houses were evacuated. However, some 285 of these have since been reoccupied.

It is an undeniable fact that, without this massive and co-ordinated effort, a great many more homes and businesses would have been ruined. In one town where 200 homes were flooded in 2009, flood damage on this occasion was limited to nine houses. Regarding flooded homes, Deputies will be aware of the issues that have arisen in terms of the insurance industry. Yesterday, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, other Ministers and I met the industry and emphasised how critical it was that all citizens had access to insurance to cover unforeseen events, including flooding. It strikes me that a fully functioning insurance sector should be able to provide this at a reasonable cost. The Government intends to deal with this issue, in particular given the demountable flood defence systems, a matter that needs to be addressed quickly.

As well as the response, local authorities have been leading on the clean-up following the flooding and acted swiftly in its aftermath to undertake necessary and urgent repair work. In recognition of this, €8 million in funding was made available by my Department for clean-up work. Almost €6.5 million was recouped by the end of the year. A further €10 million has since been made available by my Department for clean-up work.

An assessment of the total damages will be presented to the Cabinet. It will cover a range of issues, in particular roads, bridges and the like, which have taken a severe battering. It must be noted, however, that the full extent of the damage will not be known for some time until the water recedes. Once that information is compiled, we will bring it to the Government and take the appropriate actions.

Working with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, plans for a new flood forecasting and warning system are being put in place. I look forward to this, as it will provide a valuable service in terms of flood mitigation. This new service will enable timely and focused warnings to be issued to facilitate effective mitigation across many areas by individuals, local authorities and other agencies. A great deal can be achieved through helping communities to prepare for and minimise the humanitarian and financial impact before a flood strikes.

A high level of community resilience was absolutely demonstrated during the recent flooding, where communities and individuals worked with local authorities and other bodies to de-
fend their homes, properties and businesses. Locals came to the assistance of their neighbours and helped in any way that they could, which made a substantial difference in communities across the country. Supporting communities to become more aware of, and build resilience to, flood events is an important lesson from which we can learn. My Department is researching and considering how best community resilience may be advanced.

The generic response and co-ordination arrangements set out in A Framework for Major Emergency Management have been adapted and honed following other major emergencies that have occurred since their adoption in 2006. The framework’s arrangements were severely tested during the recent flooding, but it proved its effectiveness, since the response at local and national levels worked effectively despite the scale and prolonged nature of the recent emergency. My Department, through the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management, will conduct a full review of the response over the coming months to identify learning points and make recommendations to enhance its future effectiveness.

While weather and rainfall patterns in recent days have been more settled, the ground remains saturated. As such, any further rainfall is a cause for concern. In the case of the River Shannon, flood waters will not recede for a considerable period yet. The national emergency co-ordination group will continue to monitor and co-ordinate the interagency response for as long as necessary.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the extraordinary efforts that have been, and are being, made by everyone involved, both statutorily and voluntarily, in response to the flooding. As someone who was born and still lives on the shores of the Shannon at Lough Derg, I know the misery that flooding can inflict and the scale of the challenge that lies ahead of us all. I wish to extend my sympathies to those whose homes and businesses have been flooded and who are facing into difficult times. I am aware of the devastation to communities, having visited many of them and listened to people in recent weeks. Collectively, Members of these and future Houses of the Oireachtas face the major challenge of preparing for extreme weather events and climate change. I have no doubt that, given the dedication, determination and community spirit shown in dealing with these floods, we will be up to the challenge once we make the right decisions in the coming years.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I welcome this debate, which I called for during the recess. I was disappointed that the Government did not take heed, hold an emergency Cabinet meeting and thereafter arrange for a meeting of the Dáil. It was important that those with responsibility be held to account and that proposals be sought and made in an effort to respond appropriately to a crisis that had become a national emergency and remains ongoing.

Like other Deputies, I pay tribute to all emergency service and local authority staff as well as to various members of communities throughout the affected regions who selflessly gave of their time, expertise, equipment and plant in an effort to help those most affected. The Tánaiste stated that we should not politicise this unfortunate event, but we are politicians. We are duty-bound to represent those who give us the privilege to do so, to hold the Government to account, to make and seek proposals and to ensure that policy in this regard is strengthened and the lessons of 2009, irrespective of who was responsible then, have been learned appropriately. Some successful defence mechanisms have been put in place in the meantime, for example, in Clonmel and Fermoy, but it is not right for Government Members, including Ministers, to assert that no Deputy should politicise this event. Of course I do not blame the Government for the weather, but I blame it for its lack of preparedness for the damage that has been and continues
to be caused.

Since this event began, we have all heard anecdotal stories in our constituencies of a lack of sandbags. This is despite the fact that a local company in my town produced 60,000 sandbags. There was a lack of pumps. There was also a lack of leadership and the type of co-ordinated approach that would have ensured that such issues did not arise. While the Army was rightly called on, that happened late in the day. It is amazing that it took chaos abounding in Kilkenny or Cork at 3 a.m. before the Army was called.

The emergency plan that the Government has in place on behalf of citizens has not been updated since 2008. One of the first responder bodies that it mentions is “North Tipperary County Council”, which has been abolished. This is a clear indication that there was no preparedness, which led to what happened.

Local authorities should have been resourced through funds and personnel from the relevant Departments in the form of a flood office. I was glad to hear in the past hour the Tánaiste eventually saying that the Government had learned this lesson from the debacle, but the Minister with responsibility in this regard could have put an office in place immediately. He should have shown that leadership and direction. A flood office would have relevant personnel from relevant Departments, be they from the Department of Social Protection or those charged with responsibility for addressing inadequate compensatory measures, who would be available to assist those affected. We are hearing stories about obtaining funding. The Minister will have heard stories from previous speakers about those who cannot gain access to funding. They are told that if they are not ratepayers, they cannot gain access to it. We are aware of farmers whose lands have been decimated and who have hundreds of acres under water. Last week, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Simon Coveney, announced a fund of €2 million. We need more details on this. The staff of his Department should also have been available. I was disappointed over the response and believe there is a lesson to be learned in this regard. I hope that, in the future, an office such as the one I propose will be put in place in the local authority, with key personnel available and a telephone number the public can ring so staff can deal with their concerns properly and effectively.

In order to deal with the consequences of the most recent damage caused by flooding and storms, the Minister and the preceding speaker mentioned the cost of repairing roads. Unfortunately, much of the funding that was normally geared towards road maintenance was lost in recent years. There was a cut of up to 50% in the amount required in the past five years. Irish Water got €0.5 billion in road tax receipts. Property tax receipts were given to Irish Water initially. After the major storm in January 2014, the then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Mr. Phil Hogan, called on local authorities to determine the cost of reinstating roads. Some 37% of what was applied for was not drawn down. In my county, €440,000 was sought and €40,000 was given. When I put a parliamentary question to the current Minister before Christmas, I received a response from the Department stating that €15,000 was sought and given. That is incorrect, and that is why local authority members and their staff fear the authorities will not be adequately funded.

With regard to CFRAM studies, it is important that the public be made aware of the status of the EU initiative to be published later this year. The Government and the Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Simon Harris, would have us believe it will be implementable from June 2016. The draft will be published in June of this year. Statutorily, this must involve a six-month consultation process. If there are amendments, there
will be further consultation. With regard to the recommendations for the 60 hot spots along the River Shannon and the 300 nationwide, if it is felt that some of the mitigation measures, including dredging, are such that an environmental impact assessment will be obligatory, when will the EU Structural Funds worth €450 million be available for the Government to spend? It is up to the Government to show the sort of leadership that is necessary to take decisions. I have been speaking to officials in the environment section of the EU today and, having done so, I am quite certain they will not be found wanting if the Government can prove the need for adequate compensatory measures based on an impact associated with the EU habitats and water framework directives, with provisions that are made in the CFRAM studies, and provide a public interest statement on the safety of people and property. Therefore, there is no need for more years of consultation in regard to environmental impact statements.

That is the sort of leadership that the Government should have shown in Bandon. It was too easy to hide behind the fact that there was a legal challenge concerning the awarding of the contract. The common good and the good of the people in that community should have been served by the Government deciding to plough on with the project and face the consequences of the legal challenge in the courts. That is the sort of leadership the Government needs to show in regard to EU directives on habitats and water frameworks. I hope the Government will give a commitment in this vein. The Minister is to meet the Commissioner in the coming weeks or, I hope, the coming days, if he has not done so already. That is the sort of response the Minister needs to be able to announce publicly so people will know where they stand.

I am conscious of the rural development programme and the review mechanisms therein. The Minister should initiate a review of that in order to ensure there are management plans for areas susceptible to flooding, such as the Shannon Callows in my constituency and along the borders of other constituencies. If this were done, we could have a quicker and more meaningful response, and dredging could be part of the solution. However, the type of leadership the Government needs to demonstrate, but which it has shied away from, including by putting in place a quango that is merely a talking shop to get it to the election and beyond, involves the establishment of a single authority with jurisdiction and the power to make decisions and recommendations and enforce Government policy on rectification measures in the Shannon region. During the course of the debate I had with Minister of State, Deputy Simon Harris, last week, he said this has not yet been ruled out. I want the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government to expand on that. Has he ruled it out? When will he make a decision on it? There are people in the Shannon region and the rest of the country who have been waiting too long for a decision in this regard. The spotlight has been placed on it in recent weeks and months. A decision must be made if there is to be an effective and real response that results in solutions.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. Here we are, after seven storms and at the start of the new year, discussing this issue. What happened is unfortunate. The rainfall and storms we have experienced are not the Government’s fault. There has been a good response in some areas but there have been problems. Many of these problems arose in 2009 also and, to a lesser extent, in 2014 with regard to procedures and protocols. While the Government has announced funding to address the crisis, the response needs to be in line with the full scale of the problem and the resulting damage. I hope the Minister will provide more clarity on what resources are available and from where they can be obtained. I would like the Minister to clarify the conditions people will have to meet in order to draw down some of the emergency funding.
In February 2014, I raised in the House the possibility of assistance from the European Union. I know the criteria for disaster aid may not apply to the circumstances we are in.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** They do.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** However, we should be making a case at Government level and to the European Commission to alter the threshold for emergency aid, if necessary, in order for the flooding to be deemed a natural disaster and an emergency. We are in a strong position to argue for EU funding.

It would have been good had the House been sitting last week because we would have had a better opportunity to address the issue of local authority staff. During the term of Mr. Phil Hogan as Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, a significant issue arose over the number of outdoor staff and local authorities. As with other speakers, I pay tribute to the local authority staff on the Trojan work they have done over the past six weeks along with the Civil Defence volunteers, Defence Forces and staff of all the agencies that helped. In some counties, more than 30% of the outdoor staff are gone, thus creating a major problem in respect of maintenance and the implementation of preventive measures.

I have seen where bushes, pallets and waste thrown into streams have blocked culverts, thereby flooding a whole area, including farmland and houses. We need to be mindful of that. I appeal to the Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, to consider this in the short time remaining for the Government. Good value for money is to be obtained from local authority staff. One gets good bang for one’s buck. With the modern systems employed by the outdoor staff and the training of the overseers and engineers, they can get a lot of work done in a short period.

Some of the damage caused by the recent floods could have been averted if more staff had been in place. The ability of local authorities to address the negative impact of the flooding was hampered in some areas by staffing issues. Furthermore, the €460 million of revenue from the local property tax allocated to Irish Water in the past year or two was supposed to be used for local services. Members of local authorities have raised with me concerns that some of the emergency funding announced to undo damage caused by flooding will be raised from local authorities’ own resources and will not be a top-up. I ask the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government to clarify the position on that matter.

The €450 million to be spent on flood defences must be spent in a co-ordinated manner. I acknowledge that some of the flood defences that have been erected have worked well. It is good that flood defences have been shown to work. Deputy Adams stated earlier that we should not use this debate to engage in Punch and Judy politics. Members must speak honestly on this issue, rather than having a go at each other for the sake of it. People whose properties have been flooded do not want to hear that type of debate. They want to know what we will do to resolve the problem. Sinn Féin’s contribution to this debate is being made with that in mind.

My party introduced the River Shannon Management Agency Bill today because we believe the co-ordination group or task force proposed by the Government will not have the teeth it needs to be able to effect change. We have a serious concern that everyone and no one will be responsible for the River Shannon. Nevertheless, we will study the terms of reference to be produced next week.

To address the position in County Laois, a large area of farmland between Mountmellick and Portarlington is flooded. Hundreds of acres in the Barrow basin are flooded and the Nore
basin is flooded from Castletown south to Attanagh on the Kilkenny border and through Shanahoe, Boley, Killaney, Cloncough and many other townlands. Thousands of acres are under water and roadways are now flooding, which is causing more damage.

I am informed that some years ago, when the local authority sought to carry out dredging work on the River Barrow, it was prevented from doing so by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. As a result, Spa Street and Botley Lane in Portarlington were flooded in recent weeks. In areas such as Killaney, Shanahoe and Boley, one can see that the River Nore is being slowed down and blocked by trees and silt banks. As far as I can determine, the Office of Public Works is responsible for maintaining the river, although there is a question mark about which agency is responsible. I ask the Minister to clarify the matter. County Laois no longer has drainage boards for its rivers, with the Barrow drainage board being the last to be abolished. As a result, maintenance work is no longer being done on the rivers and it is unclear which agency is responsible for maintenance. The local authority believes it is responsible for smaller rivers. Will the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government instruct the Office of Public Works to inspect the River Nore? Will he provide funding to assist the local authority in having the river cleaned? Will he also ensure that the habitats and water directives are not used to prevent necessary work from being carried out on the River Nore? While I accept that this work cannot be done this week or next week, it must be done in drier periods of the year.

I welcome the presence of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine because farmers have raised with me the flooding they are experiencing. In Killaney, large sections of road have been flooded. The problems being experienced in Portarlington, a low-lying town, as a result of flooding of the River Barrow must be addressed. The town’s population of approximately 7,000 people cannot be left at risk of flooding. Action must be taken to protect communities, businesses and households in the town.

There is a problem with the CFRAM mapping. I have met farmers living in Garryhedder outside Clonaslee who cannot obtain insurance, yet part of the townland lies on the slopes of the Slieve Bloom Mountains. When one drives on the main road from Clonaslee through Cadamstown into County Offaly towards Coolacrease, the slopes of the Slieve Bloom Mountains are visible on the left-hand side. These areas are zoned as being at risk of flooding because they are in the townland of Garryhedder. In addition, the Esker Ridge on the Ridge Road in Portlaoise is included in the at-risk zone, yet anyone standing on it can look down across the town. This is ludicrous. The Bianconi Way housing estate, which has never flooded, and the Lake Glen and Wood Lawn housing estates are also included, as are many other housing estates. The CFRAM mapping was done by someone sitting at a desk who did not take the trouble to visit the areas being included in the at-risk zones. I understand the process is being done again.

I ask the Ministers to ensure the areas zoned as at-risk in County Laois are reviewed because farmers, business people and householders in areas that have never flooded are unable to obtain insurance. If the Esker Ridge in Portlaoise were to be flooded, the entire town would be under water and water levels would reach the chimney of my home. Whole townlands cannot be designated flood zones when some areas are 40 ft., 50 ft. or 80 ft. higher than other areas. This information needs to be fed into the process and I ask the Ministers to use their influence to ensure this is done.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: County Donegal experienced its most recent flooding events at the start of the current crisis. One of the fortunate developments for the population of the county was that the flood waters receded quickly. Unfortunately for the county, this probably
means that priority will shift to the south and Donegal may be left behind in terms of funding to alleviate flooding problems in future. County Donegal must remain a priority for the Government because irrespective of whether flood waters recede quickly or slowly, the damage done by flooding is devastating for the families who have experienced it. The damage to property and homes still needs to be repaired and the requirement to prevent flooding events in future remains.

In early December, the River Eske in Donegal town burst its banks and flooded a number of homes, forcing families out of their houses until repairs have been carried out, which will take several months. It has been soul-destroying for those affected to have their homes flooded twice in three weeks. Some householders were carrying out repairs when their homes were flooded a second time, destroying the earlier repair works.

Ballybofey, Castlefinn, Killygordon and Lifford experienced severe flooding when the River Finn burst its banks. While the floods receded quickly, significant damage was done and a number of bridges were left in need of repair. However, the council does not have sufficient resources to carry out the necessary works. It is vital, therefore, that the Government makes emergency funding available to local authorities to repair flood damage.

The village of Pettigo has suffered repeated flooding and often experiences flash floods. County Donegal has an additional problem in that some rivers straddle the Border and there is confusion as to who is responsible for them and how works can be carried out. Co-ordination is needed on both sides of the Border to ensure alleviation works can be done quickly.

I acknowledge the work done by the fire service, council staff and members of the public who worked valiantly throughout the recent flooding events to try to save property and alleviate the extent of the damage done. They are to be commended on the work they did. There is a need for an officer to be appointed with responsibility for planning for flood events in every county. The Minister alluded to this earlier in his contribution. While the CFRAM process is ongoing, it is a long-term solution or programme to put in place long-term measures for the mitigation of floods. There needs to be a person designated with responsibility to co-ordinate council works who will plan for flooding events and ensure that certain measures are in place. For example, the person would ensure that adequate numbers of sandbags are available, flood defences are available to be deployed at short notice and staff are available. The relevant officer should co-ordinate all that work. This should happen as a matter of urgency throughout the country. Whoever is designated with this responsibility in each county, the roles should be their sole purpose. Other bodies should be required to report to them and respond to the reports and works they recommend.

The recent ministerial meetings with insurance companies will only result in insurance companies taking a lead in the issue and negotiating on their terms. I do not believe they will do anything to resolve the problems and issues. It is also a distraction from the real issue of responsibility for bad planning in the past, coupled with a lack of oversight in flood prevention measures and the lack of Government-sponsored schemes to support those who cannot get flood cover.

Bad planning in the past has led to huge numbers of homes being built on flood plains. The Government and local authorities have to take responsibility for this. The issue of planning reform has taken a back seat. That fact that we have gone through a recession has solved the problems of building on flood plains. However, I heard reports on the radio during the week
of a development on a site in County Meath. The foundations have been built for 380 houses there but the site is currently under water because of flooding. We cannot allow these types of problems to continue. Construction should be stopped in that case to ensure houses are not built in a place where people move in and then, all of a sudden, they are flooded again and destroyed.

**Deputy Tom Fleming:** There is widespread consensus that the failure to dredge rivers and clear drains is the main contributor in the recent flood episode. National and local government authorities constantly refer to how EU directives, including the water framework directive and EU nature directive, are the main stumbling blocks to dredging rivers and general drainage. However, the European Commission has recently refuted this. It issued a statement on 5 December clarifying that any suggestion to the effect that environmental rules are somehow to blame for recent flooding in Ireland is completely without foundation. The Commission has stated that EU law does not ban dredging. The water framework and floods directives do not include detailed rules on how member states manage their watercourses. Such decisions are decided by the member states themselves. This was contained in the statement by the EU Commission. The Commission further stated that the Irish Government does not need to notify the European Commission about plans to dredge rivers since there is no such obligation in EU legislation. The EU nature directives for birds and habitats do not prevent measures being taken to protect lives and property. In particular, they provide for situations of overriding public interest to permit activities that may damage a Natura 2000 site but which are necessary for human welfare. The directives do however require an assessment of the options available before a conclusion is reached that such damage is unavoidable.

The general objective of the water framework directive is to achieve good ecological status in water bodies but it provides for exceptions, such as flood protection. It is up to each member state to apply such exceptions according to the conditions provided in the directive. These directives do not prevent measures. For example, the habitats directive does not prevent measures being taken to protect lives and property. In particular, the directive provides for situations of over-riding public interest to permit activities that might damage a Natura 2000 site, but which are necessary for human welfare. The directives do however require an assessment of the options available before a conclusion is reached that such damage is unavoidable, as well as a consideration of any compensatory measures that will be taken. The directives also permit derogation from species protection measures in the interests of public safety as well as other reasons, including socioeconomic reasons. Again, this is provided no satisfactory alternative is available. Therefore, EU environmental legislation does not prevent taking action to address the problems of flooding, but rather provides a framework to help ensure the environmental sustainability of any such measures.

In my county, County Kerry, practical drainage measures to mitigate the future risk of floods could be immediately carried out in the worst flood-damaged areas of the county. These are financially feasible measures. The areas affected include the River Flesk, stretching from Clonkeen, Glenflesk into the lakes of Killarney, the River Lee catchment area in Tralee town and, in Kenmare town, the River Finnihy catchment area, which primarily affects Market Square with continuous flooding. The Finnihy Court area is also affected in that town. These three flood-affected areas are deemed to be definitely the worst in the county. Up to 500 properties are at risk of flooding there. Several families have had to be rescued from their homes in these areas. They evacuated their houses during the course of the floods in December and January.

At this stage, Kerry County Council has estimated costs to be in the region of €4 million, including the cost of materials and staff overtime etc. This costing has been submitted to the
two Ministers present in the House tonight, namely, the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, and the Minister for Defence, Deputy Simon Coveney, who also has responsibility for the agriculture Ministry. A wide-ranging submission has been made to both Departments. I call on the Ministers to recognise and respond in a substantial way to the submission in the amount of €4 million to both Ministries by Kerry County Council.

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am glad to have an opportunity to outline a number of measures taken to support those affected by recent floods throughout the country. I have personally visited a number of locations affected. I appreciate the difficult and distressing circumstances that many people and families have found themselves in. Still this evening, many families are in distressing and difficult circumstances. The same applies to some businesses and those involved are trying to put their businesses back together.

As the chair of the Government’s task force on emergency planning, supported by the Office of Emergency Planning, I have a role in ensuring that arrangements are in place for the co-ordination of emergencies at a national level. As part of the agreed arrangements, a national emergency co-ordination group is convened in response to a threatened or ongoing national-level emergency. The NECG on severe weather, chaired by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, was convened on 3 December in advance of the anticipated heavy rainfall predicted from Storm Desmond. Since the initial meeting of the NECG on 3 December a total of 30 meetings have been convened. There has been a meeting virtually every day, with only a couple of days over Christmas when the group did not meet.

As the Minister for Defence, I am pleased to report that all the available resources of the Defence Forces and the Civil Defence have been made available 24 hours per day, seven days per week upon request to support local authorities, An Garda Síochána and the Health Service Executive in emergency situations without charge for severe weather events. In other words, we foot the bill rather than local authorities.

During the recent period of severe weather from 4 December to date, the Defence Forces have responded positively to all requests for support from local authorities and others. The extent of support provided has been considerable, with the Defence Forces being deployed in Donegal, Sligo, Mayo, Galway, Kerry, Clare, Kilkenny, Wexford, Westmeath, Limerick, Tipperary and Cork. The Defence Forces have provided a range of supports from assisting with the evacuation of people, assisting nurses and patients to get to hospital from flooded areas, maintaining flood defences and the making and placing of sandbags.

8 o’clock

On one evening we got a request from near Clonmel for over 1,000 sandbags. The Defence Forces worked through the night to make sure that happened by the morning.

It also involved the provision of pumps and maintaining pumping infrastructure, trying to give people and volunteers a break from what has become exhausting work for a lot of them, delivery of fodder for livestock - I will discuss agriculture in a moment - and assisting the OPW with air inspections of rivers and coastal areas. As of yesterday, 2,686 members of the Defence Forces have been deployed. In addition, 428 Defence Forces vehicles have been provided to support the response effort.

In terms of the Civil Defence, since 4 December around 700 volunteers from the Civil De-
fence have been activated in a range of flood relief activities, providing vital support for local communities. They have filled, distributed and deployed sandbags, pumped flood waters, rescued people from cars trapped in high waters, assisted in the evacuation of families, transported food and fuel, distributed public health notices, checked on elderly people in isolated areas, something which was badly needed in some isolated rural locations, provided transport for health care workers, community welfare officers and postal deliveries and transported children to school in recent days. The Civil Defence is reliant on the volunteer ethos of its members and I want to sincerely thank all of the Civil Defence officers and volunteers for their efforts over the past few weeks. They have worked with hundreds of local authority personnel across many counties.

As Deputies will be aware, the Government approved the allocation of €5 million to be distributed as emergency humanitarian support for small businesses and community, voluntary and sporting organisations which, through no fault of their own, have been unable to secure flood insurance and have been flooded recently. At the request of the Government, the Red Cross agreed to administer the scheme. It is aimed at providing a contribution to the costs of returning businesses to their pre-flooded condition, including the replacement of flooring, fixtures and fittings and damaged stock. Applications for amounts of up to €5,000 are being paid following a rapid verification process, which is essentially a self-declaration process, and over 100 applications have been paid to date. In the event that applicants have incurred significant damages above €5,000, the scheme provides a means to seek further support for an amount up to €20,000. The Red Cross has appointed loss assessors to undertake damage assessment for applications and these assessments are due to start this week. I want to sincerely thank the Red Cross for its co-operation in administering the scheme and for agreeing to administer the expansion of the scheme to community, voluntary and sporting organisations, which was a decision made by the Government last week.

From an agricultural perspective, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has also been closely involved in responding to the many farmers affected by flooding. Clearly, farms in western counties, but also those in the midlands and in the catchment areas of large rivers, in particular the Shannon, have been most significantly affected. The main issues affecting farmers are losses of fodder, damage to sheds and milking parlours, flooded lands, serious animal welfare issues in a number of cases and, in a very small number of cases, the loss of stock to the floods through drowning. My Department has responded as swiftly as it can. On the animal welfare side, the animal welfare helpline has been operating throughout the period of the floods, including on Christmas Day and New Year’s Day. Approximately 100 flood related calls have been received to date.

Teagasc carried out a survey of flooded areas on 21 December, and as a result personnel from my Department undertook to immediately inspect up to 80 farms to assist them with the pressures they were under. Arrangements were put in place for the farmers concerned to collect supplies and feed from local co-ops under the existing Department emergency feed provision arrangements. The Air Corps and Defence Forces also assisted in the airlift and transportation of emergency feed supplies to some very isolated and cut-off farms in south Galway.

I want to thank volunteers for their role in helping us to do this work and, in particular, the role of farming organisations and the IFA which have been of significant assistance in coordinating responses and helping us to find and assist farmers that have been in real difficulty. People who know the ground are of real assistance, as are Teagasc and the farm advisory service.
Emergency feed provisions on animal welfare grounds are continuing. Almost 300 tonnes of concentrate feed have now been provided to over 100 farms, helping to avoid welfare issues from arising. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Teagasc personnel are continuing to visit farms affected by floods. We are showing as much flexibility as possible in terms of the inspection requirements that we are obliged to undertake. In effect, farms that have significant flooding have been shown total flexibility in that regard.

A number of the rules around the movement of animals have been relaxed where their welfare is threatened. This is to facilitate the temporary movement of livestock where needed. In some of the worst affected holdings, slurry storage tanks, which normally have capacity for the full winter period, have now been filled because of very intense rainfall. We have agreed guidance with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government on how farmers should deal with that situation.

In regard to the current targeted agricultural modernisation schemes, TAMS, we want to prioritise farmers affected by floods and who have had buildings or facilities damaged to make sure that they get financial assistance and grant aid under TAMS as a priority. Teagasc is fully engaged in helping affected farmers through this difficult period and has provided a dedicated advice helpline, which I encourage farmers to use. Advisers are providing critical guidance to farmers on protecting animals at risk, minimising the impact of flooding and making the best use of available forage to maintain healthy livestock. In truth, this is a team effort. It involves farming organisations, neighbours, farmers, Teagasc and the Department. A group of us travelled on the back of a trailer to visit farms in the past number of days. Everybody was trying to do his or her best in terms of bringing something different to what is a very difficult situation.

Deputy Cowen asked about the fodder aid scheme. The details are on the Department’s website. People who have lost fodder to flooding will get its full market value from the Department. We want to receive applications by 22 January. We set a tight timeline because we want to get money to farmers quickly to compensate for losses. We are also finalising another scheme, whereby farmers who have experienced severe losses or damage to buildings and stock in those buildings will also be able to get financial compensation. That scheme will be finalised in the next number of days. I met a farmer who lost 47 sheep to flooding. We will compensate him in full for the livestock lost. Other firms have specific concerns and problems, and we are finalising a scheme that can help them.

Whether one is a home owner, farmer, small business owner or is worried about flood management in the future, it should be noted that there has been a major focus by Government over the past ten weeks or so in terms of learning lessons from and responding to this crisis, and redoubling our efforts to try to make sure that we put supports and policies in place that can reduce the risk of damage we have experienced over the past ten weeks from happening again.

I want to clarify a point for my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Kelly. The money local authorities are spending on repairing infrastructure following floods is extra money that he is putting in place. It is not coming from existing budgets. Likewise, in terms of the repairs the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine will have to carry out for piers and harbours that may have been damaged, we are currently going through an assessment process and will revert to Government to look for an extra fund, if necessary, to carry out such work, just as we had to do a number of years ago.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The first lesson we must learn is that nature is very unpredict-
Dáil Éireann

able and it is very hard to foresee fully where the next problem will arise. In 2014 we had the unfortunate coincidence of a high tide and the top of a storm at exactly the same time. If it had been six hours earlier or later it would not have caused half the damage it did. We should also recognise that unusual weather events may be becoming more frequent. I do not know. They are not unique. I do not know how many people are aware of the night of the big wind. The poem says: “Ar Oidhche Cinn an Dá lá Dhéag beidh cuimhne grinn go héagán.” It was 5 January 1836. Whether it was caused by global warming or not I do not know, but any account of the night of the big wind tells us it was an exceptionally violent storm. Therefore, I am not innocent enough to believe we can protect against everything. However, I do believe there are steps we could take to minimise the potential damage.

For those who have been personally affected, and who continue to be personally affected, with regard to access to houses or having to move out of houses, as some people’s houses were flooded but the issue for other people is they cannot access theirs, the first thing we need to do is proceed as fast as possible to deal with the clean up as the flood subsides. This is also with regard to people whose businesses have been damaged.

We must examine whether any of this was avoidable. This issue arises particularly with regard to where the level of rivers is controlled. Three rivers spring to mind, and these are the Lee, the Shannon and the Corrib. We have to investigate whether lakes were higher after a very dry October than they needed to be. Had there been too much worry about it continuing to be dry in November and were they left too high? An electricity argument cannot be made with regard to the Corrib. It is controlled by a weir in Galway. I have to say there is a lot of rain in the west but in all my years I have never seen the Corrib as high as it has been for the past eight weeks. It is now beginning to go down rapidly because the gates are open, but there is a need for the OPW, which controls the gates, to answer whether, in hindsight, it kept the lake too high at the end of October in a contingency against continuing dry weather. Whatever damage continuing dry weather might have done in the middle of winter, and it was unlikely, a deluge was going to do much more damage. We must see what could have been done to avoid this.

If we are to be systematic, the next issue we should deal with is to examine all of the roads which have been flooded. Some were flooded to the level of a foot or two and some to levels of between five and eight feet. We should first consider the very easy cases which constantly flood to a very low level. These roads are not damaged, and when the water goes away they are as they were before. We should provide money to local authorities to resolve these issues. In some cases it is as simple as raising the road a few feet. In other cases much more substantial works need to be carried out. It is fair to say the local authorities in the counties affected now have a great marker of all the roads liable to flooding and much of this could be solved once and for all.

The next issue we need to look at is drainage. As the Minister and I know, in the old days every winter farmers went out and cleaned every drain on their farms. This is a fact. Once the winter work started it was mainly cutting hedges and cleaning drains. This no longer happens and therefore the land holds more water. When the rain comes the land is already wetter. We need to look at whether grants should be restored. I do not care about the arguments against it, because it did not do any harm to fish or wildlife when all of the drains were cleaned. There was much more abundance than there is now. With all the fantastic modern small equipment available, we need to consider whether we should facilitate farmers in cleaning their drains. Another question we must ask is whether it is environmentally balanced to state farmers need planning permission to drain their own land. This is effectively the situation in many parts of
the country. It is not planning permission for which people go to the local authority, but they know they must get permission to dig drains in their own land. I am not talking about building big rivers, I am talking about draining land.

Many rivers are no longer cleaned, and branches of trees and every kind of thing gathers in them. In the old days these were cleaned. Farmers should have responsibility for drains and small streams, local authorities should be financed to keep smaller rivers from obstruction and the bigger rivers should be maintained by the OPW and should be kept free from obstruction. We know they silt up and that all sorts of things get into them, and then we wonder why, when a big storm comes, we have big problems.

A major problem in limestone areas is swallow holes. We need to clean every swallow hole in the country. I do not know whether the Minister saw on Facebook the picture of my local football pitch in Clonbur. For 24 hours it was literally under water. The pitch and car park were destroyed. The water was gone 24 hours later, but it left destruction in its wake. What happened was the swallow hole could not take the water. There is a belief the swallow hole is not as clear as it used to be, and what would be found in it if it was cleared would be interesting. The National Parks and Wildlife Service should be forced to deal practically and pragmatically with this, because it does not do the environment any good not to have available a natural escape for the water.

Over the next week or two it is important that the OPW and other agencies sit down with each of the 260 householders who were flooded to decide, as we decided in 2009, on whether remedial works or relocation is required. People should be given an option of one or the other. In many cases the houses which flooded were built long before planning. I do not know whether the Minister will do a survey on when all of the houses which were flooded were built. There was talk about recent bad planning. In my experience many of them predate planning when people were very careful to build on dry land. Traditionally people knew what land did not flood. It has now flooded and they cannot be penalised. It would be interesting to analyse the planning date of every house which was flooded. People would be surprised how few of them are of the modern vintage and how few of them were built in what would have been considered a flood plain. None of the houses I dealt with involved bad planning and the flooding could not have been foreseen. It is important we get the facts on this before people start rushing to judgment. We need a scheme whereby people know clearly whether they will have works carried out so it does not happen again or whether they will be relocated. We did this in 2009.

Remedial works do work. When the OPW eventually gets to do the job it is competent, but it has to go through too many processes to get there. Claregalway was flooded in 2009. This year, no house there flooded because of remedial works, including an additional eye in the bridge, but the second part of the works has not happened yet. All summer I chased the OPW, which had to go through an extra hoop to get at the job. We need to introduce a quicker system of getting these works done as there has been an underspend by the OPW because the processes are so drawn out that we cannot get the work done in time. The lack of flooding in Clonmel, Claregalway and many other places on this occasion shows that the investment we started has paid off and is effective. It proves that much of the destruction we have seen in recent weeks is preventable in the future.

Deputy Martin Ferris: There is no doubt that a great deal of the damage caused by the recent floods could have been prevented had successive Governments not indiscriminately slashed public budgets. I welcome the schemes put in place by the Minister for Agriculture,
Food and the Marine, Deputy Simon Coveney, which will help in some way to compensate farmers for fodder lost and so on. Today marks the 75th consecutive day on which rain has fallen and thousands of stories have emerged of the consequences of the flooding that has resulted. Throughout my constituency and in many parts of the country, people are talking not only about what has happened to them but about how they were left to fend for themselves. In many cases, these were people living in dread of flooding after previous experiences. Many of them have noted that floods were a much rarer occurrence in the past, not only because of climate change but also because there were more far more outdoor staff employed by local authorities in earlier decades. Some local authorities have informed us that the numbers of outdoor staff employed by them have been cut by up to 30%. The most basic maintenance carried out by these workers, it now turns out, was very effective flood prevention work. On the other hand, the lack of basic maintenance, like the clearing of culverts and ensuring free flow of water in drains, has had a significant effect. Those of us who are old enough will remember the work local authority staff used to do on country roads. They knew where every culvert was and provided a fantastic service.

There is no doubt that front-line staff in local authorities and emergency services did their utmost to save homes and commercial properties over recent weeks and I commend them on that effort. However, short-sighted austerity measures have had their effect, just as people all over rural Ireland predicted. There is an overwhelming sense in all the flooded areas that the people living there do not matter. When communities predicted flooding due to a combination of various factors, including bad planning decisions, lack of local authority staff and no measures to tackle climate change, no one was listening or taking on board solutions proposed by people in the affected areas. It is late in the day but better late than never for the Government to declare a national emergency and seek assistance from the EU’s solidarity fund. National and local plans must be put in place to deal with the aftermath of the flooding and implement prevention measures for future episodes of flooding.

Instead of an effective national plan, however, it seems the only plan the Government had to deal with the crisis that happened over Christmas and the new year was a press plan. The Taoiseach was invisible but there were no shortage of photo calls. At least the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister of State, Deputy Simon Harris, to give them their due, were visible in affected communities and seeking to reassure people their concerns would be addressed. The same cannot be said for the Taoiseach. Every time I turned on Sky News in recent weeks, there were images of the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, in wellington boots visiting all the flooded parts of the north of England. The Taoiseach, on the other hand, only showed up towards the end of the immediate crisis; he was invisible for most of it. The debacle in Thomas-town, meanwhile, saw the Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy Ann Phelan, getting into a boat in 6 in. of water for a photo call only to end up on their backsides in the flood. Talk about escaping a sinking ship. What message did that incident send to people? The Tánaiste and Minister of State had smiles on their faces because they got wet while, at the same time, people throughout the country were dealing with homes overwhelmed by flood waters and all their electric appliances such as ovens and fridges being destroyed. At least the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, were actually doing something in the areas they visited. Their efforts were appreciated.

Earlier today, Sinn Féin introduced a Bill to establish a single body to take responsibility for the management of the River Shannon, the assessment of flood risk and the maintenance of flood defences along the river. I have been in this House since 2002. Every year since then, the
Shannon has burst its banks and flooded tens of thousands of acres. It has been going on for decades but nothing has been done to alleviate the situation. There has been no plan of action and no intention to establish a single agency and, as a consequence, the same thing continues to happen year in and year out. The Government now proposes to set up a task force to manage flood defences on the River Shannon but has put nothing into law in that regard. The single-agency approach is necessary to carry out the level of work required in the Shannon region, both now and in the future, to ensure proper resources for the job. It must be done under the auspices of the Office of Public Works. The agency would be responsible for the assessment and management of flood risk and flood defences along the River Shannon, co-ordinating the work of key stakeholders in the region and preparing a strategic plan for the management of the river.

Many of the people I spoke to in recent weeks told me that as far as they could see, birds, wildlife and plant life were more of priority for the authorities than they were. One cannot blame them. I had occasion to be in Kilmoyley in recent days, a lovely area with very good farmland. I spoke to a farmer there, Gerard O’Carroll, who has had 20 acres of land under water in each of the past three years and four times in seven years. On each occasion, the land remains under water for at least a month and sometimes up to six or eight weeks, after which he has to rotovate and reseed it in order to feed his cattle. Next door to him is Pádraig Reagan who, on three occasions in seven years, has had his land destroyed by the same flooding. In Tralee, on the occasion of every single flooding event, whether in summer or winter, Danny Dunne’s land has been affected. His daughter, who lives next door, had to move out and rent a house elsewhere. Nothing has been done for these people. Just after Christmas, I visited people in Tralee who were suffering the consequences of the floods. The flood water in the home of Margaret Hegarty, a woman living on her own, went up four steps of the stairs. The five houses next to hers were likewise destroyed.

This is the reality of what is happening and it is partly the consequence of the Government repeating the mantra that EU directives prevent it from taking adequate action to protect people in their homes and stop their farm land from being destroyed. It is important to put on the record some of the facts about the relevant EU directives and how they relate to flood prevention, or the lack of it. Neither the birds directive nor the habitats directive prohibits flood prevention measures designed to protect life and property. That is the truth of the matter. In fact, those directives provide that in situations of overriding public interest, activities that might damage a Natura 2000 site but which are necessary for human welfare are permitted. The directives do, however, require an assessment of the options available before a conclusion is reached that such damage is unavoidable, as well as a consideration of any compensatory measures that will be taken. The directives also permit derogation from species protection measures in the interests of public safety and for other reasons including socioeconomic ones - again, provided no satisfactory alternative is available. To be clear, EU environmental legislation does not prevent action being taken by governments to address the problems of flooding. What it does is provide a framework to ensure the environmental sustainability of any such measures. That reality is set out clearly in the answers given to questions submitted last week by Ms Liadh Ní Riada, MEP.

I spoke recently to an elderly man in his 70s who pointed out to me the river that runs under the bridge on the Castlemaine Road. He told me a person would have to get down on hands and knees to get under the bridge these days. However, he can recall drawing gravel from the river with his father and that as they went under the bridge, they were standing up in the pony and cart. Small rivers and streams like these are causing flooding because the water cannot pass under bridges and is instead flowing out to the land around them. All of that can be dealt with
by local authorities or any agency that is set up, and it must be done. We need a political com-
mitment from this Government or the next that the funding will be there and will be managed
by an agency with sole responsibility in this area. That will ensure transparency and account-
ability. Otherwise, things will go on as they have done for the people living on the banks of
the River Shannon and other rivers, who have suffered year in and year out. Nothing has been
done to help them.

I hope this Government and whatever Government replaces it will have learned this lesson:
people cannot be taken for granted. We cannot allow a situation where hundreds of people are
the victims of political failure to deal with the situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Fitzmaurice is sharing time with Deputy Ruth Coppinger.
They have five minutes each.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I commend some of the councils, especially in my area of
the country, for the work they have done. They are down on staff, but in fairness to some of
the senior engineers on the councils, they worked night and day. I have to commend them on
that. They did not have the resources, but they did whatever they could do to help the people.

The Army carried out 2,686 duties, but why am I led to believe that there have to be council
people with them on the day, manning a pump? Manning a pump is a pretty simple job. Two
Army staff could do it, but from what I understand, we had to pay council staff to do the same
job.

Deputy Simon Coveney: One took over from the other.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is not great that they had to be together — In the line of
farmers, in Athlone, south Galway and various areas around the country, fodder has been badly
affected. A young guy in the Visitors Gallery, Francis Nally, had to dry off every one of his
cows. How does the Minister intend to look after situations like that, where farmers have been
badly affected?

One thing we need to look at in GLAS and other environmental schemes is whether we
should make cleaning a watercourse, rather than blocking it, as we have done over the last
number of years, part of the scheme. In the line of movement of cattle, we have to make sure
we facilitate farmers and suspend all inspections completely for the next three weeks or a month
to get these farmers back on the road again. I want to compliment two other people in the Gal-
lery, John Hanley and Tom Turley, because they have travelled every part of the west to see the
situation and help farmers as best they can.

I know raising roads has not worked in some cases, but there are roads that we will have to
put a lot of money into. I hope councils will not be left short-changed. Emergency measures,
such as raising roads and putting in a turning space, had to be taken. The councils did this, in
fairness to them. Please do not leave them short-changed, because their budgets are tight. If
possible, the Government should look at helping them on the numbers they have because, my
God, they are tight.

The NRA is building roads in different parts of the country. We welcome that and no one is
against it, but the size of pipe they are putting in is not right. They need to put in proper culverts
to let water go. I ask the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, to make sure that is looked at.
The other thing we need to tackle as a nation is that there are great communities out there in every village that wanted to help. They wanted to help the council guys, to let water go, or to do something that would help their area or their neighbours, but the councils could not give them the go-ahead to work with them. As politicians, we need to sort this out, one way or another.

I was in Brussels today. I have heard so much in the last few years about how we cannot do this, that and the other. It was very clear today that if there is a turlough here that is designated and there is a turlough over there, if the water has to be dropped by 16 inches to save a house back there, the infrastructure of the turlough is not being damaged. All that is happening is that the water is being balanced. They made it clear today that they have no problem with that. The other thing we need to look at is that a document has gone out to every planning authority in the country on the 2011 regulations. It made very clear that we should not look at imperative reasons of overriding public interest, IROPI. Today in Brussels it was made clear to us that only one IROPI project has ever been refused in 20 years. Someone has to look at this guidance document, which has gone to every council in Ireland from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and which is misleading. It needs to be looked at and it needs a bit of joined-up thinking in it. The other thing that was made clear today is that in an emergency, if a house or people are at risk, whatever we do, we must make sure we save them. That was made very clear to us today. The other thing was that in the likes of the rivers where there are designated areas, this IROPI project can be used. There is no problem using it. They are willing to look at that. They said that today. Ireland has only ever put in one IROPI request and that was in the tunnel coming in from the North.

Regarding the management plans in these designated areas, they have made very clear that if the Minister states in a management plan that we need to clean the river every three years or to do X, Y or Z, that there is no problem with it, once it is in the management plan. The one important thing that we, as politicians, need to face up to - we might get grief about it here and there - is that there are old drains blocked in all parts of the country. The old Ordnance Survey maps showed us how to move water one time or where the drains were. We then decided we would close drains here and there. Legislation needs to be brought in so that if a necessary drain is closed, there is legislation to cover the councils to open that up. Everyone in the House needs to join in that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy, I have to call your colleague, Deputy Ruth Coppinger.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I have more to say.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I send my solidarity to all the people affected by the flooding in the last two months, both farmers and townspeople. I visited Athlone at the request of the Anti-Austerity Alliance branch in the area and of Dom Parker, a representative there, and I visited the homes of some of the people affected.

One woman I met, Veronica, was out of her home in 2009 as well. She was fighting to remain in her home in 2016 and she has been campaigning for a number of years for something to be done about the flooding, because this is an annual worry. Every October people are stressed about whether it will happen again. She had a smell of sewage in her back garden and her furniture was piled up in her kitchen.
Dáil Éireann

I also met Philomena, her brother and her 90 year old mother. The only direct State help given to that family was a bottle of disinfectant, to help with sanitation. They have to pay for their own pumps and to replace their heating. The only water infrastructure, they pointed out to me, that has been put in for them since 2009 is a water meter from Irish Water. Can the Minister imagine the irony? That water meter has burst and they said the water charges would be extracted from their dead hands. Those were their words, which they wanted passed on.

I found that people were so grateful that anybody who was elected to anything was coming to see what they were going through. I commend the community for giving the solidarity that they did. What they do not want is politicians looking for photo ops, sitting in boats in a foot of water when there is no need for them to be in boats, then falling out of them. What they want is a serious response from the Government.

I have a few quick questions for the Minister. Why did the Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, go to Paris for the environmental summit, only weeks before these events, and tell the world that climate change was not a priority for this Government? It is clear to practically everybody in society that these events are a result of climate change. We have had unseasonably warm weather up until recently and a huge amount of rainfall. We had a debate in this Parliament a few months ago on a Bill with no targets in it. As far as I can see, the parties that are in the pockets of big business will never take action to deal with climate change.

Why has nothing been done since the last floods in 2009? The cost for Athlone, for example, is only an estimated €5 million. It is a paltry sum of money relative to the damage those people have suffered. The budgets of local authorities have been slashed in recent times. How do people then expect that local authorities and public bodies can deal with huge events like this? I have a more pertinent question: why were councillors from Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, a number of Independents and, on very rare occasions, councillors from the Labour Party, voting to build on flood plains in the last few years? Those of us who have been on councils have seen this during development plan meetings. Will the Minister issue a directive to councillors in his party in the upcoming development plans that they must not break with professional advice in respect of flood plains? It is simple to prevent this happening again.

What will the Government do now for the victims with regard to insurance? Insurance companies, such as Aviva which made €1 billion in profits in Europe this year, are in it for profit. They will not insure these people. We need to look at some kind of State insurance scheme for people in flood affected areas.

Will the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, now agree that there must be progressive taxation on wealth and corporations to fund the kind of flood prevention schemes needed throughout the country? It is clear to everybody there must be action on the broader issue of climate change and there needs to be immediate action to help the victims.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, who is sharing with the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Many colleagues have described the general effects of the very severe weather and I will not go through them in any greater detail. I want to recognise the considerable difficulty and trauma that communities all over the country have gone through due to the terrible weather before and after Christmas and empathise with them, as other Deputies have done. In my comments I will focus
on the effect of flooding on the road network and the consequences for both the road network and the broader transport network and in that context I wish to acknowledge some of the difficulties that arose across the period.

From a rail point of view and within public transport, the western rail corridor, between Limerick, Ennis and Galway, was disrupted due to flooding and currently remains closed. The Dublin-to-Sligo service, between Carrick-on-Shannon and Longford, was suspended as a result of both Storm Desmond and Storm Frank. The Killarney-to-Tralee line was closed for a short period. The Dublin-to-Rosslare Europort service, between Gorey and Rosslare, was suspended due to flooding, as was the Dublin-to-Belfast Enterprise service. In each case, Irish Rail put in place bus transfers to accommodate passengers. In addition, erosion has occurred close to the Dublin-to-Wexford railway line, just north of Wicklow town. The required emergency protection works by Irish Rail, and rock armour, was placed to protect the railway over the following days and the residual damage and cost of all of this is being assessed. In the case of Bus Éireann, its services are dependent on the roads that we are discussing and in a number of cases, disruptions occurred due to flooding.

However, the most extensive transport impact to date of this weather has been to the local, regional and national road network. Across this period the Road Safety Authority was active in supporting and sharing safety messages for all road users and in a number of cases, we saw damage to roads. For example, in the case of Storm Desmond, flooding occurred mainly in the western coastal counties, particularly the Moy, Clare and Shannon catchments, and following Storm Frank, the main areas affected were along the south coast and in the catchment of the different rivers there.

During the height of the flooding, there were numerous sections of national roads affected. Currently, a number of these remain impassable, including a section of the N65, between Portumna and Borrisokane, and the N18, the Limerick-to-Galway road, at Laban. In regard to non-national roads, we face a situation where many regional and local roads across the country were flooded and closed. For example, Cavan County Council alone reported last week that approximately 50 roads were impassable, many under 1 m of water, and as recently as Monday last, 20 roads were reported as being closed in east Cork, mainly due to the disintegration of those roads. I am aware of other reports of significant damage to roads in many counties across the country.

With regard to tourism infrastructure, a number of local authorities have reported damage to sections of the Wild Atlantic Way and in regard to greenways, my officials are currently ascertaining whether any significant damage has been done to those State assets. In many cases it is still difficult to form a final assessment of the damage that has been done to local and regional roads because of the number of such roads that are still under water but my officials, in conjunction with the local authorities affected and Transport Infrastructure Ireland, are working hard to form an estimate of what that damage will be.

I appreciate that many communities have shown great resilience in dealing with their roads being impassable due to the presence of water but they have a reasonable expectation that when that water recedes local authorities will be in a position to be able to begin work restoring those roads, making them passable and allowing local authorities make use of them. We are doing that work at present with local authorities. When that cost becomes clearer to us, as I hope it soon will, the Department and I will work within Government to put in place a plan to respond to that.
Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I am pleased to have an opportunity to highlight the issues and problems that we have faced in my home county of Wexford, particularly Enniscorthy, where home, farms and businesses were devastated due to the floods following the major storms. I acknowledge the efforts of those from Wexford County Council, the Civil Defence, An Garda Síochána, the Defence Forces, Slaney Search and Rescue and the many other voluntary groups and organisations which were involved in the fight against the flooding in my home town of Enniscorthy. For those who have seen their farms, businesses and even homes threatened by flooding, the appearance of members of these groups to help fight the flood gave them hope at a time when it was desperately needed. I refer specifically to both quays in Enniscorthy and the Island Road, which was devastated by flooding. The homes of families on the Island Road had to be evacuated at short notice because of the rising waters and the tide coming in, and it was devastating to see these families having to move out of their homes.

Over the past number of weeks I have witnessed at first hand the aftermath of the flooding in Enniscorthy. We need to step up to the challenge we now face. The protection of people’s homes must be prioritised. Tonight, I call on the OPW and the Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy Harris, to expedite the process of providing flood defences in my home town of Enniscorthy. The option of dredging, where suitable, should be part of the flood relief programme. Often we are told that because of environmental issues we can no longer dredge but I do not accept that. I believe that people’s homes and businesses should be flood-protected and dredging must play an important role in this.

I welcome the steps taken yesterday by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and other Ministers to meet the major insurance companies to try to resolve the issue of homes and businesses being denied insurance cover. It is unbelievable when one hears some of the insurance companies state that even when flood defences are put in place businesses and homes still cannot get insurance cover. I have been contacted by a significant number of businesses and home owners in the Enniscorthy town area following the floods who now face the challenge of recovering from the damage inflicted and who have found for the past number of years that they cannot get insurance. It is impossible for home owners and business people to deal with this. For example, one business in Enniscorthy has been faced with tens of thousands of euro worth of damage. I had the opportunity of discussing this issue with the Taoiseach prior to his meeting with the insurance companies yesterday. Where I received letters from business people in Enniscorthy, these enabled the Taoiseach to raise the issues of the lack of flood insurance in Enniscorthy. I can see no justification for insurance companies refusing to cover homes and businesses where flood defences have been completed. I expect homes and businesses in Enniscorthy to be provided with insurance after the Enniscorthy flood relief programme has been fully carried out. While we may not be able to stop this island being hit by major storms, we must take steps to ensure that flood defences are in place to minimise the damage they cause and address the current problems that result in many people not being covered by insurance. The Government is taking action in this area and I hope Insurance Ireland and the insurance companies come back to the Department of the Taoiseach and the OPW with their proposals.

The Minister, Deputy Donohoe, has addressed another major issue, namely, the many minor roads which have suffered millions of euro of damage. I am delighted the Minister was in the Chamber to hear me address this point. It is a major issue in Enniscorthy and across County Wexford. The Minister is making the right decision in asking the local authorities to examine the amount of damage that has been done in monetary terms and report to the Department of
Transport, Tourism and Sport. I hope the Minister will put a package in place to solve the issues. A very significant number of back roads in my constituency were damaged.

It is unfortunate that we have to spend the first day of our term discussing flooding. That is nature. I wanted to highlight the issues my people in County Wexford have faced during recent weeks.

**Deputy John Browne:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the flooding problems throughout the country, but particularly in Enniscorthy, on the banks of the River Slaney a few weeks ago. There have been major flooding problems in Enniscorthy through the years. There was a major flood in 1965 and lesser floods in recent times. The flood two weeks ago was of major significance to the people living on the banks of the River Slaney. Householders on the Island Road, many of them aged, had to be evacuated while watching their houses being destroyed once again.

Business people on Templeshannon Quay, the Island Road and the Promenade suffered severe losses and damage to their properties in the recent flood. This is not just an overnight problem. They have spent the past two weeks trying to clear up and clean out their premises and get their businesses back up and running. Householders have lost furniture, carpets, tiles and white goods, and walls have collapsed. Some of the businesses are hotels, restaurants and shops and they have lost major amounts of equipment. The loss of business during the past three weeks has been a major problem for these small, family-run businesses and it is important that the compensation to which the Minister referred is issued as quickly as possible to the householders and business people.

While the Red Cross seems to be a very flexible body for dealing with business people, the heavy hand of the Department of Social Protection is interfering with the community welfare officers on the ground, who were operating with great flexibility in Enniscorthy and Wexford up to yesterday. However, they have received many strict regulations from the Department of Social Protection, forbidding them from compensating for certain issues and specifying that flood victims get the cheapest possible replacements. It is very important that the community welfare officers, who know the situation, have visited the houses and have an acute knowledge of the River Slaney and the flooding and problems faced by the people, are given as much flexibility as possible to deal with the problems on the ground. The heavy hand of the Department of Social Protection in any form is very difficult to deal with.

I recognise the great work done by Padraig O’Gorman and the staff of the Enniscorthy Municipal District Office, supported by the outdoor staff and people on SOLAS and community employment schemes who came in and worked beyond the call of duty to help people in their hour of need. We had the fire services, the Garda and sandbags. While sandbags are very helpful and supportive, I wonder, in this fast-changing, modern, high-technology age, whether there is some other way of dealing with the problem apart from sandbags. Many of the areas where sandbags were put in place were still flooded. In some cases, the floods went over the sandbags.

The Minister will have to make much money available to local authorities to deal with country roads. While out canvassing over recent weeks, I found many country roads in a desperate condition. Water is still flowing in off land. Water is flowing where there used to be dykes, and, as a result, the roads are breaking up. Between the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Donohoe, and the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly, I hope adequate money will be made available.
I do not have long left in the House before I retire, as soon as the Taoiseach calls the general election. In 2009, the then Minister, Martin Cullen, announced the defence plan for Enniscorthy with €40 million ring-fenced for it. It is not the Minister’s fault that it has not proceeded. The first set of walls and designs proposed by the OPW caused uproar. Many local people objected and the OPW had to go back to the drawing board. The OPW is preparing a new design for Enniscorthy. I would like an assurance from the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, that the €40 million is still there.

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes.

Deputy John Browne: I would also like an assurance that the scheme will be implemented without any further delay. The latest we hear is that it could be late 2016 or early 2017. Will the Minister of State ensure it will happen? The only solution to the problem in Enniscorthy is to implement the plan that has been discussed for the past six or seven years. It is important that it go ahead without any further delay. I ask the Minister of State to keep his finger on the pulse regarding sorting out the problem in Enniscorthy.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: Like most Deputies, I have spent much time in recent weeks visiting the homes, businesses and farms of flood victims in Carlow and Kilkenny. The rivers Barrow, Nore and Suir flow through much of the constituency and many of the worst affected towns, such as Bennettsbridge, Inistioge, Thomastown, Graiguenamanagh, Carrick-On-Suir, St. Mullin’s, Carrigeen, Piltown and Mooncoin, are situated close to these waterways. Therefore, the single most important action that must come out of this devastation is the implementation of adequate and effective flood measures to protect these communities from further damage in the future.

The most logical starting point is to increase the €45 million annual budget for flood defences. In a constituency such as mine, which features three major waterways, significant investment in flood defences is step one in offering flood victims reassurance for the future. I call on the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, to dramatically ramp up this avenue of funding. Kilkenny city is a prime example of how effective and appropriate funding for flood defences can ensure that efficient management of drainage works can be worked out. The works in Kilkenny were carried out some years ago and have been a complete success. Not one house in Kilkenny was flooded this time. This proves it can be done with a will and a way.

The Government must take note of this success story and do much more to manage drainage on the Barrow, Nore and Suir in Carlow and Kilkenny. Since taking office, the Government has implemented short-sighted, year-on-year cuts to the drainage maintenance budget for rivers. 9 o’clock

The flood drainage budget has been cut by an average of 3% each year, or by 12% since 2010. The effective management of drains and rivers is a realistic measure that can make a lasting difference. I ask the Government to examine the current set-up with a renewed focus. The local authorities are to be commended on their ongoing work in assisting flood victims. Staff worked above and beyond the call of duty in recent weeks, with many of them sacrificing their Christmas to assist those who were forced to cancel Christmas. Unfortunately, the Government is continuing to undermine their efforts. For example, many municipal districts remain under-resourced. When I became a member of Kilkenny County Council in 1992, there were between ten and 15 men under a road overseer, or ganger as we used to call him, in each municipal dis-
13 January 2016

District. Graiguenamanagh, which was one of the most severely flooded towns in my constituency, currently has just three men available on its road crew due to illness and retirements. Those who are not available are not being replaced. This is happening all over the constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny. The Minister, Deputy Kelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Coffey, are wasting hundreds of thousands of euro on a review of the boundary between counties Kilkenny and Waterford, but they are happy to leave local authority crews stretched to breaking point.

I would like to mention another aspect of this matter for which the Minister, Deputy Kelly, is responsible. I am calling for the suspension of water charges for people whose water supplies have been affected by the recent flooding, which caused severe disruption to water infrastructure in County Kilkenny and elsewhere. Excess water is wreaking havoc on the water supply system. As a result, there are regular interruptions in the water supply to homes, businesses and farms. Today alone, and this is the tip of the iceberg, the residents of Ballygriffin, Curraghmartin, Portnahully, Mountneil, Corluddy, Dungooley, Mooncoin village, Dournane and Ballybrassil had their water supply interrupted for up to 12 hours because of burst water mains. This is the fourth time in two weeks that this has happened. People in those areas have spent four of the last 14 days without any water as a result of burst pipes. I am receiving updates from the county council on a daily basis on other towns and villages across the county which have been affected. The water infrastructure is simply not up to scratch. Fianna Fáil believes no water charges should be imposed until the entire infrastructure is brought up to standard. I am reliably informed that many concerned residents of Graiguenamanagh are still buying their water due to the presence of cryptosporidium in their water supplies. The presence of this parasite, which can cause severe illness, was confirmed by Irish Water last November. It is a scandal that people living in the Graiguenamanagh area are being forced to pay water charges even though the water being supplied to them could make them sick if it is not boiled. Irish Water has cost the State over €750 million to date. People expect this money to be spent on upgrading our water infrastructure and improving our vital water services.

The flood waters are subsiding, but this problem is not going anywhere. I assure the House that we will be dealing with the same problems in the future unless drastic changes are made. I ask the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to pay attention to country roads, which have already been mentioned. I refer particularly to gullies and inlets that have not been opened for years. I recently had the pleasure of meeting a man who spent three days assessing an area of 500 m. He found two complete drainage systems under the clay that had not been opened for 20 years. He could not ever remember them being opened. No one knew they were there, but they would have taken all the water during the wet weather. If those pipes and drains had been open, a house in the locality that was under a 1.5 ft. deluge would not have been affected. We need workers on the ground. There is no use in having people go in and out with JCBs unless there are workers with them cleaning the gullies and dykes.

Deputy John O’Mahony: Like everybody else in the House, I have visited families, businesses and farmers to meet at first hand those who have seen their lands marooned and their houses flooded over recent weeks. We can sympathise with these people and we can take the action that is being taken to assist them, but we have to be affected by looking at the weariness in the eyes of some of them after days of fighting a losing battle to keep the water out. It can no longer be said that the real effects of climate change affect others but not us. At one time, events like those of the last month were experienced once in a lifetime, if they were ever experienced. Now they are becoming regular events. Solutions and supports need to be put in place in the short term - this is being done - as well as in the medium and long terms. Like everyone else,
I commend the neighbours, friends and volunteers who took a meitheal approach to the recent flooding. I also commend the workers from the local authorities, the OPW, the Army and the Civil Defence who have been real heroes in this situation. I welcome the long-term allocations that are to be made. The allocation of €500 million over the next four or five years, which can be doubled over a ten-year timeframe, is more than has been spent in the last 20 years. The whole idea of taking a concerted approach, engaging in joined-up thinking and knocking heads together across the various agencies has to be welcomed. There needs to be action coming from that as well.

For obvious reasons, there has been a huge emphasis on the Shannon basin, on Cork and on the south east. Many people in areas that have not been mentioned in the national media have been greatly affected by flooding. I refer, for example, to many households, farmers and businesses in south Mayo and west Galway. In Claregalway, for example, flood funding has been allocated in recent weeks. In some cases, the legacy of the floods that have been receding in recent days will be there for a long time. The road from Cong through The Neale to Ballinrobe, for instance, was under a few feet of water for four weeks over the Christmas period. Water is still being pumped out in Cong, County Mayo, which is a major tourist attraction, to protect the businesses and residents of the local area, which is obviously the location of the world’s number one hotel, Ashford Castle, as well as many other tourism amenities. Numerous farmers and homesteads in this region have been marooned and isolated as a result of recent floods. Elderly people and young expectant mothers in the area were living in fear of being trapped in their homes if emergencies arose.

I welcome the flood relief money that has been allocated in recent months to alleviate flooding in places like Claregalway. Just as there needs to be joined-up thinking on the Shannon Basin, it is needed in the area to which I refer as well. For instance, a community of 21 houses in the Montiagh area of Claregalway became an island, in effect, for four weeks because the only road into it was under 2 ft or 3 ft of water. Local people and various agencies, including the Army and the local authority, were involved in bringing the residents of this area to school etc. on tractors and so on. Similar efforts were made in areas like Lisheenavalla, Caherlea and Coolarne as well. We need to consider our priorities in this context. I understand the work that is to be carried out in the Montiagh area under the Claregalway flood relief scheme will take two years because it will be the last area to be done. In other words, if the priorities and work schedules within this scheme are not re-examined, this locality will be totally flooded each time there is any excess water. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, to consider this issue to ensure people are protected and do not feel isolated.

I conclude by calling for a reactivation of relocation funding. The Taoiseach and I visited the Connolly household in Hollymount last week. At certain times in the last month, there was 2 ft. of flooding in the vicinity of the house. The family kept out the water from the river and the surrounding areas, but it came up through the floor. Such families need to be relocated. I do not think there are too many houses in the whole country in respect of which it can be said that this is needed. The Connolly house has been there for 90 years over a number of generations. This is not a case of planning on flood plains. Water was running from the silage pit and in the front door. That needs to be looked at. I am calling for relocation grants to be reinstated in the coming weeks and months.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan):** In the few minutes available, I will try to outline as much as possible the effects that the recent flooding had in my county and to sympathise with many people who have been affected by flooding.
all over the country, especially in counties Galway, Mayo, Roscommon, Limerick and Clare. We have certainly seen an unprecedented level of rain. Last month was the wettest December in history, or at least since we started recording such matters. It would seem that this is going to become the order of the day in the future because of climate change. We have to start planning immediately and to respond to what has happened. I welcome the initiatives that have been taken by the Government. The plan to spend €430 million over the next five years is very welcome and it is very important that it is spent in the right places. The CFRAM study will be published later this year and will give priority to 300 areas, which is also very important. I am glad that the Red Cross compensation will be available to farmers and sporting organisations and that family farms and homes will be eligible under the humanitarian aid scheme. The new flood forecasting unit is to be established, and that is welcome.

In the establishment of the River Shannon co-ordination group, for which people have called for a number of years, the Minister should not ignore the lower Shannon, in particular the Cashen area of Kerry, including Ballyduff, Ballynooneen and Drumerin, which should be included as there is extensive flooding there. We were fortunate on this occasion in Kerry in that we were not affected as much as by previous storms, but 600 houses in that area will eventually be hit with serious flooding unless remedial action is taken. The Cashen drainage scheme was completed back in the early 1960s, taking ten years. It has been very effective but now, because of lack of maintenance, money will have to be spent. It is to be hoped this will be part of the brief of the River Shannon co-ordination group.

As Deputy O’Mahony said, other parts of Ireland have not been mentioned to date. In Kerry, for example, Kenmare town was flooded, as were a number of locations in Tralee, in particular the Tralee-Killorglin road, as well as the Clieveragh area of Listowel. Glenflesk has received very little mention in the media, but 14 families have been affected in the Foiladuane area. This has happened for a number of reasons. The local river had not been maintained for a number of years, and when trees were cut out and dredging took place, we had flooding. A number of Deputies have mentioned lack of maintenance, but maintenance served to alleviate flooding. There was a major flood in 2008 and there have been three floods since September affecting 13 houses. The N22 was raised by approximately 15 ft. at the new bridge at Garries, and that has served as a barrier in the form of a dam keeping the water on the Foiladuane side of the road. The people were isolated in their homes and there will have to be a special plan for the Foiladuane area in Glenflesk as it was not included in the CFRAM study and will not be affected by it. I do not know why it was not included but I will ask the Minister to take another look at this to ensure the area of Glenflesk is in the study.

I am sure every Deputy has his or her areas to refer to but this is an unprecedented challenge, with global warming a reality for our country. It is something we will have to face collectively. Irrespective of who will be in Government for the next 20 years, this issue will be discussed in the Dáil so we have to face it now with a cohesive plan. It is something on which all Members of the House can offer their views and we all share the same knowledge and solutions to resolve the problem.

Within the habitats directive there were designated areas, special protection areas, SPAs, or special areas of conservation, SACs, and these were supposed to be accompanied by a management plan but we did not do that in this country. If a management plan were available, people would be able to carry out interventions for humanitarian reasons and that is something we will have to look at very seriously.
An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies Colreavy and Tóibín are sharing time.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: Prevention, maintenance or protection? I was not a Deputy in 2009 but a councillor with Leitrim County Council and I hope I will not be a Deputy when the next storm comes because if I am, it means there is another storm coming before this Dáil concludes. As a councillor with Leitrim County Council, I remember the devastation done after the 2009 storms to businesses, home owners and farms and I remember the desolation. I went again to people in my constituency and the broader constituency around Sligo and Leitrim, south Donegal and west Cavan and I saw the same picture again. I was talking to a mother whose kids, about ten days before Christmas, were asking when they could put up the tree and the decorations. She was wondering whether the family could stay in the family home as the waters inched closer to her back door. Businesses which were fighting against the odds to try to make the little bit of extra income over Christmas, on which their year depended, were terrified. One thing was learned, however. I have to say the local authorities were good. This year there was less of the red tape and the bureaucracy. The sandbags were ready, decisions were made quickly and the local authority worked with local communities and other agencies, but it was all damage limitation. That is why I began with my question, “Prevention, maintenance or protection?”

It is difficult to understand why floods come as a surprise to people. The storm in 2009 was supposed to be a once in 100 years or once in 50 years event, but it was not and it will not be in the future. We have to invest to ensure we prevent floods occurring in the places where they are known to occur. A big part of the problem is that the investment has not been made in recent years. We discuss permanent barriers or temporary barriers and Deputies will have an opportunity tomorrow to vote on a Bill to create a single agency with responsibility. We cannot afford any longer to have the scenario where everybody is responsible but nobody is responsible. We can kick-start proper planning by supporting that Bill tomorrow. I pay compliments to the local authorities, the Defence Forces, the fire services and the local communities who worked so hard. One thing the home owners and businesses to whom I spoke remembered was that, after the last time, we were promised this would not happen again but it has happened again. I am sure the same debate was held in this Chamber in 2009 or early in 2010. People could have cut and pasted their speeches for that discussion. My brief is communications, energy and natural resources and this crisis could become a catastrophe. Imagine five or ten years hence if fracking is permitted anywhere on this island. Imagine the poisons and chemicals that would be poured and washed into the Shannon. People talk about the Shannon as a source of drinking water for Dublin, but imagine the catastrophe five or ten years hence. What we are dealing with at present is a crisis. Let us deal with that and do the preventative work, but let us ensure no further consideration is given to the potential for the catastrophe of poisoning our environment, economy and society as a result of fracking at any time in the future.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In the five years I have been in the Dáil, it has always struck me as interesting that the Dáil staggers from crisis to crisis. Members in the Chamber get het up and focused on a major crisis, and then they move on to the next crisis in a few weeks. As a result, the initial crisis never receives the political will, effort or energy it needs to be fixed.

I reference this to a number of matters, one of which is global warming. The Minister spoke about global warming, but what effort has the State made to reduce global warming over the past five years? With regard to electric cars, the objective was that they would account for 10% of the car market. They are currently 0.5% of the market. There has been a trickling roll-out of the retrospective insulation of houses. The State has failed on every aspect of global warming.
There is not a decent cycling lane in the country. The move from coal-generated electricity to biofuels and so forth is not happening. It is interesting that the Taoiseach, when he was going to Paris and just before the storms hit, tried to make an argument for Ireland not to live up to its responsibility with regard to cutting greenhouse gases. He said we have to protect the farming industry. The farming industry is not protected when it is under water and people are finding it difficult to keep fodder and livestock safe.

Another interesting issue is that the Government talks tough and refers to figures when it comes to flooding. However, look at the investment. Investment is one of the biggest failings of this Government. It is not something that gains headlines on a regular basis but it has a serious effect on people. In 2008, there was capital investment of €9 billion in the State. Now it is approximately €3 billion. In the spring document produced before the budgetary process, the Government indicated that its capital investment was going to reduce from 1.8% of GDP to 1.5% before 2020. In other words, even though the economy is currently finding some legs, the Government has decided to reduce government infrastructure investment as a proportion of GDP over the next five years. What is considered proper investment in a state? The European average is approximately 4%. That is what is deemed necessary to maintain the capital stock of a state, but the Government expects to invest 1.5% in 2015. The Government does not directly cause the rain, even though its policies to ameliorate global warming are really poor and do not help, but it does not invest the necessary funds in the protection of communities when that is necessary with regard to flooding. That is a major flaw in the Government.

In fact, the Government does not hope to do it in the term of the next Government either. We do not see the Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, going out on the plinth to say that the Government will introduce €4 billion of investment over the next four years in X, Y and Z. However, he does say that he will make cuts in universal social charge worth €4 billion over the same timeframe. That is his political priority. The Government is saying simply that people cannot have European infrastructure or European public services because it is giving people American taxes.

Current investment is also a big issue. Many local authorities have been suffering as a result. Meath has experienced flooding. It has not been as bad as the flooding in the Shannon basin or in County Cork, but individual homes have been swamped by floods due to rivers and streams breaking their banks and the fact that drains are not being cleared properly. I am aware of a woman who awoke at 1 a.m. to hear her neighbour beeping the horn of their car. She stepped out of her bed into one and a half feet of water. The reason was that the drain running past her house has been blocked for a long period of time, due to the Government’s cut of 30% in the outdoor staff of local authorities.

The political will does not exist. A progress report from the Office of Public Works reveals that 20 major flood defence schemes are running behind schedule. Some of them are two years behind schedule. The reason is delays with regard to the implementation and planning of the schemes or the employment of the necessary consultants to do it. It is important that we do not add to the floods with crocodile tears and that the Government invests real money. It should also tax on the basis that it will invest real money.

**Deputy Fergus O’Dowd:** When flood plains are built on, it is not a question of climate change, an act of God or something unseen and unexpected. It is a deliberate decision by politicians to rezone, as a reserved function of a council, an area that is a flood plain. That is precisely what has happened throughout this country. It happened in Bettystown, County Meath,
which is now part of my constituency. In 2005, the council voted to rezone 22 acres of land, which were clearly a flood plain. One councillor at the meeting was quoted in *The Irish Times* as saying, when he was told by the council officials that the land was subject to flooding:

> That is the poorest, pathetic excuse I have ever heard for land not being rezoned... The man is going to build the houses himself. He is not one of the big boys. It might be better, easier if he was.”

That is the reality when dealing with houses on flood plains.

If one searches Cois na Mara on Google tonight, one will discover that a 300-house estate is being constructed in Bettystown. It is believed to be a very fine example of the best possible build, with all the pluses one can think of for that beautiful area. The one thing not stated is that these houses are being built on a flood plain. The point is that there must be accountability for building on flood plains. If a company has planning permission, it should be legally required to state in its documentation that the building is on a flood plain. That is the only way the 350 or so people who may buy those homes will be warned or made aware of the dangers that might exist for them. Who benefits from all of this? It is not the person who is buying the house, because they do not know it is on a flood plain. It is not the community who live in housing near that area, because they will be affected by the overflow of water as the new run-off comes into their estates. An estate called Northlands in the same area is subject to frequent flooding. The Office of Public Works is spending a fortune trying to alleviate flooding distress in east Meath, yet the building continues. It is not stopping and will not stop any time soon.

It is a question of greed and avarice on the part of a very small number of people who are exploiting planning decisions, some of which were made at secret meetings. A report published by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government before Christmas regarding a planning inquiry in Meath East, which is also part of my constituency, states that the records show that when a senior official of Meath County Council met with developers, he did so unaccompanied by another staff member. It states that the absence of minute keeping by the planning authority in respect of meetings with landowners and their representatives is a significant procedural weakness. How can planners hold meetings with developers in hotels outside of office hours with no minutes and nobody else present? What the hell is going on here and why do we allow this to continue in the State? My message is that we need real change in our legislation. I acknowledge that the Government is making proposals, although they are late in the day. The detail of the legislation is there. Fundamentally, we must protect our people from planning abuses, sharp practice and the greed and avarice of those who would exploit in every possible way the purchase of property and the rezoning of land for their own benefit. If nothing else comes from all of this, everybody must be alerted nationally that where flood plains are rezoned by councillors, somebody has to pay for it. In the first place, it should be the councillors who make the decision. They should be held accountable where they go against the advice of the planning authorities and rezone. They should be held individually and personally accountable for any suffering experienced by the people who buy homes in those areas as a result. We must clean up planning. We have had tribunal after tribunal. If CAB could go into the accounts of the companies we are talking about to investigate what payments, if any, were made over or under the table, there would be far fewer of these decisions.

**Deputy Ciarán Cannon:** In the last 24 hours or so, we have heard phrases such as “aftermath” and “clean-up” being used liberally in the media to describe the flooding challenges pertaining at the moment. We are not even close to discussing the aftermath or clean-up in south
Galway. We are still in an emergency as we speak. There are still approximately 30 families out of their homes, farmyards remain under water and farmers’ stocks have been flung to all corners of south Galway and across the farms of their helpful and supportive neighbours. Approximately 15 to 16 million cu. m. of water over and above the 2009 flood levels in south Galway have yet to make their way to the sea. One family living close to Gort and within one mile of their local primary school must currently undertake a 66-mile journey to get to that school every day due to the blockage of 36 roads in south Galway which is making them impassable. One might expect these issues to ebb away slowly over the next week or so, but that is not the case. The history and topography of the area dictates that these challenges will continue to be faced by the community until at least mid-March.

Having recorded that we are far from over the emergency in south Galway, I thank all of those who have been so helpful and who have given their time, expertise and wisdom to communities across south Galway over the last month or so since the flooding challenge began. I thank Galway County Council, the OPW, the Civil Defence, the Army, the Air Corps, the staff of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the HSE, community welfare officers and the IFA, for many of whom Christmas was, in effect, cancelled. They worked on and through Christmas to support those who were adversely affected. Many of the families whose homes are flooded knew what lay ahead, having been flooded in 2009 and 1995. They had seen and felt the devastation, anguish and strife and knew it was coming again. They could do little or nothing to prevent it. I thank the Taoiseach, who spent eight hours with us in south Galway last Saturday, travelling from Craughwell across the region to meet with the families who have been so adversely affected and to hear, perhaps more importantly, of the solutions that are now available to us. It is to those solutions that I want to make particular reference now.

I will read to the House a quote from a discussion held here 55 years ago. Deputy Michael Carty, who was representing south Galway at the time, asked the Minister for Finance “when a scheme for the drainage of the Dunkellin catchment area, County Galway, is likely to receive consideration under the Arterial Drainage Act 1945”.

The response from the Minister, James Ryan, was:

I cannot say at present when the Dunkellin catchment can be reached in the drainage programme. Its turn is coming but it will be a few years yet.

Thankfully, its turn has come 55 years later in 2015. There is now an allocation of €6 million for the Dunkellin flood relief project and we are awaiting a decision from An Bord Pleanála, which is due to issue at the end of February. Once that is out of the way, we are ready to go. The OPW has committed to carrying out the project using direct labour, so that there will not be any long and bureaucratic tendering process to go through. The OPW is ready to move onto the site once the permission is granted. That will serve to address a large number of the issues occurring across south Galway. Not only will it relieve the situation in Craughwell, Ardrahan and Labane, but it will help a far wider region. A number of smaller tributaries and streams flow into the Dunkellin river and all the way out to the sea at Kilcolgan.

There is another challenge that we face. The Taoiseach was particularly interested to hear of the solution to this when he visited us last Saturday. There is a massive tract of water from Coole to Kil tartan and Cahermore which goes out to the sea at Kinvara. The solution presenting itself to us right now is to link up these three massive bodies of water with small drainage channels to allow water as it accumulates in these areas to drain slowly to the sea and, if necessary, to control its flow. We are not suggesting and never for a moment have suggested compromising
in any way the integrity of the habitats in these areas. Rather, we seek to put in place measures that would serve to remove excess water when it occurs at times of very heavy rainfall. We have solved the problem in Gort, which did not flood this time due to the engineering works carried out in the immediate aftermath of 2009. However, in essence, we moved the challenge and the massive volume of water on to areas west of Gort and towards the sea. A solution presents itself and we must act swiftly and decisively to ensure it is implemented. We must look urgently at how to deliver flood relief defences in the long term. While the OPW is adequately resourced, it needs to look at the mechanisms whereby they are delivered.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I compliment all those involved in the response to the recent spate of flooding, including county council staff, the Civil Defence, gardaí, the Red Cross, Carrick-on-Suir River Rescue, the Army, volunteers, residents affected by the flooding and their neighbours, and the fire service. There was significant flooding in Tipperary right along the Suir catchment from Carrick-on-Suir back to Kilsheelan, to Clonmel, Marlfield, Knocklofty, Newcastile, Ardfinnan and Goatenbridge, and also in north Tipperary in the part of the Shannon catchment there. Flood defences in Clonmel worked well, although there were a number of small exceptions to that. These were traumatic for the families involved whose houses were flooded. As an example, Mrs. O’Brien in Kilganey just outside Clonmel is flooded for the ninth time. On Bridge Street a small number of houses were affected, as was the area of Kilmacomma just outside the town, which was almost completely cut off from the town for a number of days. What is needed now is a full assessment of the situation county-wide and countrywide to ensure that we are ready for any further flooding, which is inevitable. We must consult with those who have been affected by the flooding. They are the people who know what happens. They know how flooding should be dealt with. Their advice and guidance should be sought specifically in the reviews. We have to examine what happened, how it happened, how the various services responded, what was done well and what could have been done better. There is no doubt that this needs to be done urgently.

I must mention the condition of the roads, particularly county roads across Tipperary. I drove the high road at Kilmacomma on the Saturday night of the flood. Doing that was dangerous because the road was effectively a stream in full flow and had been undermined. Many roads across the country are in a similar condition. We need to get back the €430 million that the Government gave to Irish Water out of the road tax fund if we are to ensure that these roads are brought up to standard, rebuilt and maintained properly. This must be done urgently.

The availability of staff to local authorities is a further issue. Moratoriums and cutbacks in staff numbers in recent years have brought about a situation in which we do not have enough people to maintain inlets, dykes, gullies, drains and the road network properly and thereby prevent avoidable flooding. I appeal to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to include the N24 in the roads capital programme, which was published a number of months ago. The N24 is a key economic and social road for County Tipperary and links the mid-west to the southeast. It was impassable at four locations during the flooding. It is a national primary road.

**Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan:** I wished to speak tonight because, although I represent Dublin Central, which was not flooded this time, parts of it have been flooded previously, including the area of East Wall where I live. While we did not experience the nightmare experienced by communities in other parts of the country, we know about flooding, for example, the suddenness with which it happens and which means that people do not have the opportunity to move cars and furniture. We know about the power of water, in particular its destructive power, the dirt and the smell that lingers for a long time afterwards. We also know about the community
and the way in which communities rally and support those in need. Those flooded in recent weeks have experienced all of this. The one word that summarises it all is “nightmare”. Seeing the affected areas on television was horrific.

Dublin Central was not flooded this time. A fair number of preventative measures have been put in place, but I find appalling the suggestion that this was done because the Taoiseach at the time of the last flooding represented the constituency. It is appalling because such measures must be based on people’s needs, not who represents their constituencies.

I wish to discuss the major issue of insurance. It appears that this week’s meetings were positive. The words “frank” and “constructive” were used. The problem relates to demountable flood defences as opposed to permanent defences. Removable defences can cost more than permanent ones and are treated differently by insurers, yet they do pretty much the same work. Where is the rationale for treating them differently?

In May 2014, I tabled a number of questions to the Minister for Finance regarding the way in which insurers were treating customers. A household that made one claim for flooding would never be covered again. Even though extensive preventative works were conducted in Dublin Central, insurance companies have not been taking these into account. Homes on streets that were never flooded are being refused cover because they are in the same area as streets that were flooded. The home owner must accept this. Whatever about having difficulties if one has been flooded, people who have never been flooded are surely entitled to cover. If I had a motoring accident or made a claim on my motor insurance, my premium would increase, but I would still be covered. According to the Minister’s reply in 2014, “the OPW and Insurance Ireland have agreed on a sustainable system of information sharing in relation to completed flood alleviation schemes”. The plan was for this to be reflected in assessing the provision of flood insurance to householders in areas where works in areas had been completed, but that has not happened.

I tabled a further question in October 2014 because householders who were unable to get flood insurance had contacted me. I was told that Insurance Ireland had been asked when it would be in a position to provide the hard information that would show an increase in the availability of and a reduction in the cost of insurance in the 12 areas mentioned. The end result was that the OPW and Insurance Ireland had agreed to resume regular meetings of the flood working group. It is now more than a year later and we are back to holding talks with the insurance industry. No progress seems to have been made on the matters discussed in the replies that I received more than a year ago. There is a crisis now but the danger is that this issue will be put on the long finger again.

The humanitarian assistance was welcome. The Ministers mentioned how the schemes would be flexible in addressing people’s needs. Bad planning decisions and extensive building and deforestation have led to problems. The Woodland League has made sensible suggestions, for example, to work with local communities and, in particular, use local knowledge of the areas in question. The league reminded us of a UK project conducted through Bangor University that found that water was absorbed 67 times faster by native woodland than by grass. Reafforestation could reduce flooding significantly. While we cannot control nature, many strategies could be effective. In particular, there should be no further insane and bad planning decisions.

I acknowledge the work that has been done by communities, the Army, Civil Defence and other organisations.
Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I call Deputies Hannigan, Costello and Spring, who are sharing ten minutes.

Deputy Dominic Hannigan: I would appreciate it if the Acting Chairman would tell me when my three minutes are up.

We have heard about the problems created by Storm Frank and other recent storms across the four corners of this island and the impact on places like Galway and Athlone. As Deputies have mentioned, however, the storms also impacted on the east coast. Many villages in my county of Meath, for example, Moynalty, Wilkinstown and Carlanstown, suffered flooding. We also had problems with some of our rivers. The Boyne was flooded in parts. The road to Brú na Bóinne, the Newgrange interpretative centre, had to be closed because of flooding. The River Nanny in Duleek flooded, causing problems in places like Boolies and making roads impassable. As such, the flooding was a national event and not localised to certain areas.

Like other Deputies, I commend the emergency services on their wonderful work during the period in question. Our local authority in Meath did tremendous work throughout the county. Civil Defence was out in force, as were the Defence Forces. We owe them a vote of thanks for trying to keep the country on the move during the worst parts of the storms. It was a fantastic response from our public services. The Government has also responded and tried to ensure that improvements will be made. A clean-up fund was increased, family farm homes were made eligible under the humanitarian aid scheme and it was announced that a new flood forecasting unit would be established. All of these were worthwhile measures and will go some way towards improving the situation.

However, we must ask why this happened. A potential reason is climate change, but Deputy O’Dowd mentioned another. From my own experience of the part of east Meath that he now represents, I know that some of this has been due to bad planning, for example, zoning on flood plains. We need to learn lessons from this. I would like to see improvements regarding certain matters. The climate change convention recently signed in Paris will be of major benefit in the fight to tackle climate change and the proposed improvements to flood defences that were announced in last year’s capital improvement plan will see hundreds of millions of euro going to those areas that most need them, but there must be an end to bad planning across the country. We need to ensure there can be no more zoning on flood plains. As stated by other Members, insurance companies need to step up to the mark. Many residents in areas that have seen improvements to flood defences were not flooded on this occasion but they still find it difficult to obtain insurance. The industry needs to move ahead on this and ensure insurance is made available to residents in areas that have had flood improvement and protection schemes put in place.

Deputy Joe Costello: Over the Christmas period and at the start of the new year, we all looked aghast at the incidence of flooding throughout the country, particularly in the Shannon basin area. I compliment the people in the rural areas on their resilience and I acknowledge the hard work of the local authorities and various agencies in providing services, as seen on the television.

One of the most significant features of the widespread flooding that occurred over the Christmas period, to which enough attention may not have been paid, is that, despite the fact these were the heaviest rains nationwide in decades, there was no flooding in Dublin. We must take cognisance of this. The inner city of Dublin, including my constituency, Dublin Central, which was prone to flooding, was not flooded. One will have seen photographs over the years
of taoisigh standing in the water, of the River Tolka bursting its banks and of flooding along the River Liffey and Royal Canal. East Wall, North Strand, Clonliffe Road, Ballybough and Cabra were especially vulnerable. Homes in these areas were regularly flooded. Despite this, there was no flooding this time around. Substantial funding was invested by the Government and substantial remedial works were carried out on the River Tolka, Royal Canal and River Liffey. Swales were constructed in Cabra and water drainage was checked systematically by the local authority. The issues in Dublin city have been comprehensively addressed in that the heaviest rains in decades caused no flooding at all. Despite this, the insurance companies have continued to behave as though the area were prone to flooding all the time. They have failed to take cognisance of the flood defences that have been put in place. Certain areas which used to be flooded remain no-go areas as far as the companies are concerned. They simply will not include flood cover at all in the premiums. They will not even offer people quotations or, if they do, they offer exorbitant ones. People buying a home in virtually any part of Dublin 3 or parts of Dublin 7 in my constituency are treated like pariahs by the insurance companies when they ask for flood cover on their premium. This is intolerable and should not be allowed to continue.

The insurance industry is operating in a very high-handed fashion at present. Where the local authority and Office of Public Works can demonstrate the extent and effectiveness of the flood defence works that have been put in place, the insurance companies should be obliged, by legislation if necessary, to include flood cover on all premiums. In all the discussions we are having today and have been having recently, we should note that where flood defences have been put in place, with proof of engineering, the insurance company should not be allowed to get away without offering a quotation.

**Deputy Arthur Spring:** I hope the people working on CFRAM studies and in the OPW pay some heed to these statements. Some salient information is being gathered throughout the country and put on the record of the House, and I hope it is actionable. I welcome the fact that we are moving away from a period of austerity into a period of prosperity. Over the past five years and even the past 20 years, very little has been done to alleviate the problems caused by floods. Although a number of projects have taken place, I am glad to note we are to spend from €430 million to €500 million to protect places.

I come from the town of Tralee which used to flood profoundly in the early 1980s and before that. Thanks to a culvert that was put in place the last time the Labour Party was in government, in the 1980s, the town does not flood anymore. To the delight of people, it is not flooding. They look at places like Shannon and thank God for the culvert and extensive capital programme that was carried out. We need to do more, however. A ring road was built in Tralee town. A study was carried out before its construction and it was stated that the net effect would be that no lands would be flooded. However, I can tell the House that farmland has flooded up around Kennedy Equine Centre. There has also been flooding on the Castlemaine road. Down where Danny Dunne lives, as mentioned, Caherwisheen, Clahane and Ballyard, which never flooded before, have all flooded. This may sound trivial in the national context but this is the level of detail we need CFRAM studies to obtain to gain an understanding. We should bear in mind the flooding in places such as Kilmoyley, where a resident has been pumping out water since 2009 when I became a councillor. We should bear in mind that there are rivers close by and that the natural flow of water could solve the problem. Pipes need to be put in place and neighbours need to co-operate. We need to consider an overall solution but we need compensation packages to address what has happened in recent times.

I am really resentful of the fact that I have been given only three minutes in which to speak
about this considering it is such a major issue. In areas such as Killarney, I met representatives of businesses under threat. One business got absolutely tattooed, unfortunately. Places such as Fossa, Kilmoyley and Kenmare, which I visited on Saturday, have businesses that were never flooded before. This is also the case in areas around Listowel.

To solve this, money is needed, but tacit knowledge, or knowledge coming from the ground up, is also required. There are houses now built on flood plains where I used to play as a kid. Six families were removed from an area called Bruach na hAbhainn. One would not need too many words of Irish to work out that this means “bank of the river”. If any place is prone to flooding, that is it.

Consider the net effect of a new road. I am not sure what it means for other areas. It was incredible to see land under four ft of water and houses surrounded by two ft or three ft of water. The famous Munster Bar, which for many is synonymous with the Rose of Tralee International Festival and which was never flooded in the past, was flooded. Its owner, Mr. John O’Sullivan, and others there were flooded for the first time ever. I welcome the fact we are making funding available to alleviate the problems of businesses through the Red Cross and the community welfare officer through the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton, who has had her own trouble with floods in recent weeks. She is tougher than that so she will get out of it and sail into better waters.

We need to know the exact details of the problems. Problems in places such as Ballylongford and the Cashen area can be fixed but we need the relevant information and action. We have five years to achieve this. I would like to be part of a Government that does not say we have a failed state, as some were alleging tonight, or that we do nothing about the problem but which instead solves problems. That is the job we are supposed to be doing here.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I will not go back over some of the points I made before Christmas but I hope they are taken on board in respect of the ongoing review by the Government. However, I compliment the staff of the councils, the emergency services, An Garda Síochána, the Army, the Civil Defence, the Red Cross, the Office of Public Works, the farming community and local communities, all of whom have done tremendous work over many weeks battling the flood waters throughout my constituency and the rest of the country. Many families are now exhausted. While the Defence Forces have come to their aid in manning pumps in many parts of the country, there are still families who have been struggling for four or five weeks to man pumps. That should not be the case at this stage.

There is a rapid response corps within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It was established when difficulties arose in east Asia a number of years ago because of the tsunami. In circumstances such as those of recent weeks, the rapid reaction corps should be activated by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to co-ordinate the supports and services needed throughout the country to deal with the crisis. It has been put to me that the US State Department calls a state of emergency when crises such as this happen. Why is it we have to wait a long while before the Army is engaged to support the civil authorities here? A mechanism needs to be put in place to ensure this resource is unlocked and made available. The main criticism I have received over recent weeks concerns the delay in gaining access to sandbags and supports. The process needs to be reviewed in order that this does not happen in future.

I was looking back over some of my notes on flooding along the Shannon.
10 o’clock

In 2011, the Office of Public Works produced the River Shannon level operation review report, which examined water levels on the river and highlighted particular problems the CFRAM study needed to consider. It recommended hydrology and hydraulic modelling of improvements in the channel capacity in the River Shannon to determine whether siltation had reduced the flow capacity, particularly in the bottleneck between Banagher and Meelick.

As the Minister of State will be aware, the CFRAM study was supposed to have been completed by 22 December 2015 but a further 12 months will be required before it is completed. While solutions for 30 towns in the Shannon catchment are to be placed on public display as part of the study, these will result in a large amount of water being dumped in south County Roscommon, east County Galway, south County Westmeath and west County Offaly in the area known as the Shannon Callows. To my amazement, I learned that the question of how to remove water from the Shannon Callows had not yet been addressed. Last Monday, I met the relevant consultants in Ballinasloe who told me they are only now considering the problems between Banagher and Meelick. This means they have spent the past four years examining how to dump water into the Shannon Callows and only now that the deadline for completion of the study has passed are they examining how to get water from them over the weir wall in Meelick and into Lough Derg. Three years ago, Mr. Michael Silke presented to the Office of Public Works information on six bottlenecks in the River Shannon between Banagher and Portumna. Surely action should have been taken before now on the modelling required.

A number of speakers referred to the potential to flood cutaway bogs. I welcome this development, having raised the issue ten years ago at the then Committee on the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. If action had been taken at that stage, it would have resulted in the mitigation of the scale of current flooding. Nevertheless, this is a positive and welcome development.

We must actively engage with Bord na Móna on the issue of using the bogs. The company must also be included in the overall management of flood levels on the River Shannon, not only in respect of the cutaway bogs north of Lough Ree and south of Shannonbridge, which would accommodate waters from the river Suck and Brosna, but also the River Suck itself, particularly around Ballyforan where some of the pressure could be relieved. The scale of flooding on the rivers Shannon and Suck could be reduced by opening up the bogs, some of which could be flooded to a depth of 4.5 m. However, Bord na Móna could also be usefully engaged in dealing with the siltation problem between Banagher and Meelick. One of the challenges we face in removing the peat and silt that has accumulated over the past 50 years is to transport it from the river banks through the Shannon Callows. Bord na Móna has rail track and staff who possess the necessary skillsets and expertise and must, therefore, be an integral part of the solution to the problem.

The Minister of State, Deputy Harris, visited Ballinasloe before Christmas and I thanked him at the time for doing so. He visited Derrymullen and observed the success of the flood wall in the area, which was constructed as a result of investment of €1.5 million provided by the Office of Public Works and Galway County Council in 2011. It is frustrating that the owners of 60 of the 100 houses that have been protected by the new flood defence system are still unable to obtain flood insurance. There is something fundamentally wrong when we spend money on a flood defence mechanism that proves to be effective and 60% of householders in the relevant area are still unable to obtain flood insurance.
Prior to the most recent flooding, I raised with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the need to alter the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, to accommodate flood mitigation measures on farms. This step is urgently required. Stock could be kept away from flood waters by raising floor levels in some dry sheds. Additional slurry storage capacity and facilities must also be provided on farms located on the Shannon Callows because farmers in the area will be unable to spread slurry on their lands for some time. As I suggested previously, a grant aid scheme needs to be introduced to benefit individuals whose homes are not covered by the measures provided for under the CFRAM programme. The provision of flood defences and barriers for individual homes can provide an effective solution and funding must be made available for this purpose, as was done successfully under previous schemes. The VAT rebate introduced by the Department of Finance should also be extended to cover flood defence works.

While visiting constituents in recent weeks, I encountered anomalies in the humanitarian fund that has been made available for the owners of homes affected by flooding. Thankfully, many homeowners have successfully battled the elements and kept water out of their homes because they had access to sandbags and pumps. However, as a result of their efforts, they have accumulated significant costs, including for electricity and in hiring generators and pumps. Provision must be made to have such costs covered by the humanitarian fund.

As I indicated previously to the Minister of State, an anomaly also arises with regard to some businesses which are not rated for reason or another. For example, a classroom is exempt under the rates scheme, which means the business support scheme cannot be used to fund repairs. These anomalies must be removed.

A significant number of homes and communities in County Roscommon and east County Galway are marooned. Some homes are still behind 3 ft of water. If someone were to have a heart attack or stroke and required access to emergency services, it would be virtually impossible to remove him or her from some of these areas because the Coast Guard helicopter does not have sufficient landing space. The Defence Forces must introduce protocols for approximately 80 homes in my constituency to reassure people that they will be able to access medical treatment in the event of an emergency.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: The River Shannon has been flooding in winter for centuries. However, the onset of summer flooding, coupled with an increase in the incidence of torrential rain in recent years, has alerted us to the fact that something else is happening, namely, climate change. Climate scientists tell us that extreme weather events will become more frequent. Rather than being a one-in-100-year event, as we were led to believe when we experienced the most recent major flood event in 2009, more intense rainfall and high river flows can be expected to become the norm.

In 2012, a summer flood also caused havoc along the Shannon catchment, including the Shannon Callows in west County Offaly, parts of north County Tipperary and other midlands counties. This prompted the Joint Committee on Environment, Culture and Gaeltacht to hold hearings and produce a report. Committee members agreed that no further investigations or surveys were needed and proposed instead to make practical recommendations to take action to deal with flooding before and after it occurred. The resulting report was titled, Eight Proposals Urgently Required to Tackle Flooding on the River Shannon, its Tributaries and the Water Feeding into it.
The first and most important recommendation was to appoint one agency to oversee management of the River Shannon. The joint committee recommended that this agency be the Office of Public Works. It envisaged that all other agencies would be obliged to follow directions given by the OPW if their response was not sufficient to have a positive impact as soon as storms were forecast. It is also worth noting the seven other recommendations made in the report, which were to maintain the River Shannon, its tributaries and the water feeding into it; engage in local consultation and co-ordination; maintain appropriate water levels; prevent and alleviate the build-up of silt; establish flood warning systems and emergency management; utilise boglands to attenuate water from the River Shannon, where necessary; and protect our natural heritage.

I welcome the Government’s decision to establish a River Shannon task force. I understand the Office of Public Works will report back on the terms of reference for the task force in the next week or thereabouts. I appeal to the Minister of State to ensure that the OPW takes into account the report of the joint committee before making a final decision on the terms of reference. Another consideration must include a survey of the existing zoning for development, either residential or commercial, in flood plains. Evidence of poor decisions has been obvious to all in recent weeks. De-zoning and re-zoning land as unsuitable for any development in certain flood risk areas must be a priority. Additionally, specific measures to incorporate climate change impacts into flood management plans will be required.

I am keen to see the establishment of local community flood relief committees. This should be seriously considered. They could work with local authorities and other agencies to produce a public flood response plan. This could include weather forecasting and mechanisms such that increasing river levels would trigger a local response, for example, placing sand bags on pallets in strategic areas, initiating a text alert system and ensuring access to pumping systems, as required. I believe this is a real possibility since communities have already shown their willingness by being proactive and assisting in efforts to protect residences and businesses in recent weeks. The new and welcome flood forecasting and warning service involving Met Éireann and the OPW will be critical to the success of these committees in future.

I look forward to hearing the outcome of the Government plans to meet the EU Commissioner to ensure emergency works on rivers comply with directives. Year after year, problems arise when maintenance is required but some EU directive or other is quoted as grounds for preventing the essential work. This happens regularly at the cut near Meelick in Banagher. It is silted to such an extent that vegetation growth is reducing the width of the river, which naturally bursts its banks as a result. The tributaries and other watercourses are equally important and require regular maintenance. For the first time in my life, the River Brosna flooded because the Shannon was so swollen. This left some home owners isolated and others had to evacuate their homes.

I pay tribute to all agencies and committees involved in coping with the extensive flooding of the Shannon, especially around the areas of Shannon Harbour, Shannonbridge, Banagher, Lusmagh, Ferbane, Pollagh, the Derries, Rashina, Lorrha and Carrigahorig, to mention but a few.

Deputy Noel Harrington: I welcome the opportunity to speak this evening on the flooding that has hit this country extremely hard in recent months. I compliment the response of the State agencies, the Department, the Defence Forces, the local authorities, the Civil Defence and the countless volunteers throughout the country in towns and in the countryside who have
Dáil Éireann

worked to tackle what has been a national emergency. I look forward to the flood relief schemes confirmation process for towns such as Bandon and Skibbereen. Later on we will see the same for Clonakilty. In looking at the confirmation process for these schemes, it is worth recognising that many of the areas and houses which flooded this time are not part of urban flood relief schemes. In many cases, the schemes are concerned with multiannual routine maintenance of our rivers and waterways. Local authorities, the OPW and agencies such as Inland Fisheries Ireland engage in a statutory process to allow routine multiannual maintenance of our rivers. That is critical.

A small flood occurred in the Owvane River near Bantry in west Cork. It flooded five properties. It may seem small in the scheme of things but it was extremely significant for those affected badly.

During the course of some media discussions and local authority debates, it has transpired that under emergency legislation from 1949, local authorities can invoke an emergency request through Inland Fisheries Ireland and the OPW to carry out maintenance on some of these rivers. There is a lack of co-ordinated communication between some of these agencies. More needs to be done to co-ordinate the work. For example, if an emergency request is invoked under the 1949 Act, often it is done at a time of flood. Then, when the flood subsides, the emergency is over and often the request is denied. That is not in the spirit of the legislation. The matter needs to be examined, updated and reviewed.

I am keen to highlight the great work that the OPW has done on the CFRAM studies. Many local authority development plans have adopted the CFRAM or flood risk assessment maps in draft form in their development plans. Now, they will have to adopt CFRAM maps in formulating their development plans. I offer a word of warning. This is a political issue. The CFRAM or flood risk assessment maps will be sterilising land. Often, they will be sterilising zoned or development land. In this Chamber in future we will see consequential issues. They will be replicated in local authority chambers throughout the country. We will see efforts to try to undermine the CFRAM maps. I predict that in the coming five or ten years as development plans are being formulated, Members will be supporting the dilution of these CFRAM maps. I am keen to warn against that. We have seen the risk and we have seen the trouble it has caused.

Deputy Frank Feighan: This has been a very difficult time for everyone. I saw the devastation around my constituency in Roscommon and Leitrim and I wish to highlight the work done by the local authorities, the Office of Public Works, the Civil Defence, the Coast Guard, the Irish Red Cross, the Defence Forces and the many volunteers who have worked extremely hard. This is a serious situation which needs to be addressed.

There is much the political system can do. We are dealing with the worst weather we have seen and we are dealing with climate change. I believe that far more work needs to be done with local authorities talking to one another. There has been considerable interaction, but sometimes in areas where there is a county border, the people on that border can be left behind.

I attended a meeting behind closed doors involving members of a community in north Roscommon. No cameras were brought in. This community took the view that more should have been done. They articulated their views to me through the members of the local authorities in Roscommon and Leitrim. I believe that much work will be done. The people there are concerned that their fears about the CFRAM studies may not be taken on board. Deputy Noel Harrington summed it up perfectly. This is why we need more local involvement in the
CFRAM studies. Oftentimes people do not engage because they find it overly technical. I appeal to local communities and people in local areas to get involved. I expect the Minister of State to come down to north Roscommon and south Leitrim to see the devastation for himself. He should also assure these people that the Government is keen to listen and will listen to them and that their concerns will be put into the CFRAM process.

Considerable damage has been done to roads and bridges. The Government must ensure that the local authorities bring up the bill to Government. The Government has money in the coffers now. We have to ensure that the local authorities in those communities get the finance they need.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Deputies Robert Troy and Timmy Dooly have ten minutes between them.

Deputy Robert Troy: I wish to take this opportunity to thank and acknowledge the incredible work of the volunteers, the Civil Defence, the council staff and the Army during this particularly difficult time. They have been involved in the erection of sandbags, manning pumps and transporting neighbours who were cut off. There really was an incredible sense of solidarity and I acknowledge the work done.

We are faced with a complex issue and there is no simple solution. This is why, earlier today, I brought forward legislation which would put on a statutory basis a single agency to deal with the maintenance and protection of the River Shannon in future. During the debate, the Taoiseach sought to ridicule my proposals. He said a similar Bill was brought forward in the early 2000s. That is right and I do not deny it, but nothing has happened since then. What we should be doing is debating legislation that would put on a statutory basis a way for us to ensure that this will never happen again.

I have no wish to see this as simply a box-ticking exercise or a way for people to say we allowed five hours of debate in the Dáil for disgruntled Deputies to have their say. Instead, I want to see real and concrete consequences and solutions coming out of this debate. I acknowledge the presence of the Minister of State, who came to Athlone and engaged with the people. He let them know that he was coming, unlike some of his colleagues. I wish to raise a number of issues to which I hope he will directly allude in his reply to the debate. Why did it take six weeks for the Army to intervene in Athlone? Volunteers, who wanted to do the work, worked 24-7 and were exhausted from the work they had to do, should not have been required to carry out such work. Our Army has the capacity, capability and willingness to deal with emergency situations. It was an emergency situation and the Army should have been called in at a much earlier date.

I refer to compensation for small businesses, an issue that was raised directly with the Minister of State, the Taoiseach and other Ministers. Why are legitimate business owners, who are tax compliant, have worked hard to make a business for themselves and are self-employed, being refused compensation under the Red Cross scheme? Owen Egan appeared on RTE news last night and last week. He provides employment, but has lost his income because of the flooding that has taken place. He has suffered serious damage to his property, but has been refused compensation, as have others such as Thomas Cleary and Patricia Doyle-Turley. Such people met members of the Government who promised them that the issue would be resolved. It has not been resolved, and it is not good enough or fair to claim that it has been.

People have battled for seven weeks to keep water out of their homes, given up days of work...
and incurred extra expenses such as ESB bills for powering pumps and buying additional fuel. Burdens have been imposed on such people, including those in Longford or Athlone. Community welfare officers are telling such people they are not entitled to compensation or funding. If people did nothing and allowed water to stream through their houses, they would have been put up in hotels for a couple of weeks and then given €5,000 or €10,000 to repair their homes. Such an approach is not good enough. The people to whom I have referred deserve compensation and I want to hear what the Minister of State has to say about what he will do about that.

What priority is being given to ensuring that councils have appropriate funding for clean up work and the necessary repairs to roads that have been adversely affected over the past number of weeks? When will councils have the necessary funding made available to them? It is not fair that people who are living under these conditions will simply have their property taxes deferred. They should be exempt from property tax until such time as flood defence mechanisms are put in place.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. The Minister of State and I had a conversation about this matter on a Topical Issues debate before Christmas. As he is well aware, these flood events have taken an enormous toll on the lives of many people. Communities have suffered huge disruption. Houses have been flooded, homes have been marooned, farmland has been isolated, farm sheds have been flooded and cattle and milking cows have had to be moved around. The floods have had a major impact on rural and urban life. Roads and other infrastructure have been severely damaged.

In the area I know best - County Clare - there are two or three aspects to the flooding. One is the River Shannon, to which my colleague, Deputy Troy, referred, and the impact it has had right along its boundary with Clare and, more particularly, in places like Clonlara. The limestone region in the north of Clare takes in places like Tubber and New Quay and has been impacted by the turlough system. Places like Newmarket and Sixmilebridge include small tributaries up to the Shannon estuary which flooded homes on an individual basis. I think in particular of people such as Pat Corrigan, whose home was flooded over the course of a very short period of time. I have discussed others in the past. Places like Sixmilebridge, because of the drainage system, have caused concern to people. The floods have caused major disruption.

I again thank the county council, the Civil Defence, the Army, the fire brigade, the large voluntary contribution from various communities, the Garda and the Red Cross. We will not apportion blame. My colleague has identified some of the weaknesses and delays that have taken place. We are now moving on. What will happen next?

The Taoiseach called in the insurance companies. It is an issue that should be dealt with down the road. I would like to see the Taoiseach and Minister of State call in the OPW and immediately establish properly resourced offices in the counties affected by flooding. There should be a flood designation office or a flood officer in each local authority affected, which should be properly resourced and served by engineers and people who can examine compensation claims.

In the first instance, such offices could deal with the major clean-up that is required. While many of the houses in Clonlara may not have been flooded directly, lawn areas and the curtilages of sites were inundated with water. The contents of septic tanks poured and flushed around such areas. Some slatted sheds leaked. All of this requires a major clean-up operation, and there is no plan in place to assist people with that. They require assistance.
I discussed with the Minister of State the possibility of extending the minor works scheme to build immediate defences around homes affected by flooding. An immediate response is required to give people the comfort of knowing they will not be flooded again next November. That will not solve the problem. The medium-term solution is to wait for CFRAM and the greater defence systems that will flow from that. Another immediate response is to wrestle control from the ESB and put in place an independent designated officer to independently manage the flows and levels of the River Shannon.

I am not being critical of the efforts of the Minister of State in this regard but some kind of a co-ordinating body is of no benefit because when the chips are down and there is conflict between any of the 11 or 12 agencies involved, the Minister of State knows what will happen. They will revert to form, to their legislative frameworks and bases, and state they cannot negotiate beyond what their establishing principles allow. If the Lord Himself was brought down, He would not find common ground between diametrically opposed agencies. For that reason, there is a necessity for a legislative approach to create and establish an independent authority, with all of the necessary powers to direct those agencies to put before anything else the lives of those affected by flooding and the communities in which they live.

I also urge an appropriate fund be put in place to carry out a relocation programme. There is little doubt that given the change in weather patterns and increased rainfall, and recognising the slow-moving nature of the Shannon, there will have to be designated flood plains. That will require relocation. At this stage people would like to see flesh on the bones of that proposal.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Deputies Tony McLoughlin, Paul J. Connaughton and Gabrielle McFadden are sharing time, ten minutes.

**Deputy Tony McLoughlin:** We need to set this debate in a manner which will begin to examine how we go about preventing this type of damage from occurring time and time again during future storms. As global climate change continues to develop, and with many climate experts now claiming that Ireland’s winters are likely to become wetter and colder over the coming years, we as legislators need to ensure that better systems are in place nationally to help to minimise the damage effected by flooding. This includes improving our overall national response to the flooding crisis, developing better flood prevention mechanisms, such as flood defences, and taking a serious look at our planning regulations and the approval of once-off housing developments in rural areas which are subject to sporadic flooding.

In the past two months I visited a large number of family homes in counties Sligo and Leitrim affected by the recent flooding episodes. I am advised that of the ten houses in County Sligo which have been evacuated since December, no family has been able to return such is the level of destruction caused. No families should be forced out of their homes over Christmas and if they are, they should be met with the best possible level of care and assistance from the State.

Hundreds of businesses have been affected by the storms, with more than 135 in County Leitrim being inaccessible and many others in County Sligo also having to close, with a major loss of income to the owners. Farmers have also been affected, with a large number being put off their lands. When I visited these damaged homes and businesses, the first thing that became clear to me was the total sense of helplessness and fear. In many cases, water rose up through the ground or else flowed in so fast that the damage could not be contained. While we may not have been able to stop the water on this occasion, we can begin to put in place measures that
A number of measures could be taken now. For example, we could construct new flood defences, dredge more of our rivers, and ensure no more new houses are built on flood plains. We could introduce insurance levies and arrange for the worst affected families to be compensated by the Government for having to move from their homes to higher ground. However, a simple response, which I believe the Government could take, is to look at the social welfare assistance on offer and the means tests involved. It has been very annoying to read about the supposed social welfare assistance payments which were being made available to families affected by the flooding. Of all the homes to which I delivered these forms not one was granted any financial assistance because of the means test. Flood damage is flood damage and if assistance is being offered, it should be offered to everyone who has been affected. This is my opinion as we all pay taxes. No household can take the hit which storm damage leaves, either insured or not. However, I welcome the Government’s swift response of more than €20 million for businesses and households which could meet the means test.

I strongly believe we need greater assistance from our European partners to help us develop and pay for new flood defences. On this basis, I call on the Government to seek more funding than has already been identified for this purpose in the current EU budget. I pay particular tribute to the staff at Sligo and Leitrim local authorities for their efforts and to all the other agencies which have worked extremely hard over recent weeks to try to eliminate the concerns of many people.

Deputy Paul J. Connaughton: I welcome the fact the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, is in the Chamber. In fairness, he has conducted himself admirably in recent months in very difficult circumstances.

As sure as night follows day, the water will recede, we will have an election and the agenda will move on. This is of concern to people on the ground. In 2009, one thing we heard all the time was that what happened was a one in 100 year event but six years later, we have the same problem and we will have it again. Certain areas are more prone to flooding than others, south Galway being one. People will take no satisfaction from this debate because what they want to see is action on the ground. There is great frustration in areas such as Craughwell and Ardrahan with regard to the River Dunkellin. The Minister of State has committed funding and the Department has put together a plan but An Bord Pleanála has put off its decision for the third time. My fear is that flood relief plans will go to An Bord Pleanála and be put off again and again. People want to see action on the ground. There is no point telling them €6 million is ready to go and that there is a plan but that we must have a decision before we can work on it. There is such frustration at present. In south Galway, this happens almost on an annual basis. It must come to a point that whatever small remedial works which need to be carried out must be done quickly.

I am somewhat sceptical of the task force and I hope I am proved wrong. I fear all of the relevant bodies will revert to type and protect their own interests. A situation which arose three weeks ago in Ardrahan involved three State bodies. Every time I rang one of the bodies to do the work, it said it would if the others agreed. We were sent on a merry-go-round for 48 hours while everyone agreed with everyone else that we could do the work but three or four houses were flooded. It is unacceptable.

It is not for us to force anyone out of his or her house, and nor should we, but an option of relocation must be put on the table for those we simply cannot protect. It is the conversation we
need to have. It is not a very pleasurable one but for those who would like to move out of their homes, we should offer a very competitive relocation package. We did it in 2009 and it worked for some. It did not work for everybody. We should go back to that scheme, tinker with it and ensure it works. We should also ensure that whatever works need to be carried out in Galway can be carried out as soon as possible. Let us have one person and one authority making these decisions.

Deputy Gabrielle McFadden: We have been through a terrible time with flooding in Athlone and Clondra. Working on the ground since the floods began in early December, I have seen at first hand the level of devastation and distress that has been suffered by people and businesses. With this in mind, I invited several Ministers, including the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, and, of course, the Taoiseach to come and see for themselves the extent of the flooding and its consequences and I am grateful to all of them for doing so. Having a Minister come to the constituency made it a lot easier for me to articulate the concerns of local people and their needs and what was necessary to help alleviate the hardship. Everyone involved in the flood relief efforts in Athlone has done an amazing job and I am very proud of the wonderful community spirit shown in the town during a time of great need. This does not mean, however, we cannot look at the procedures and the criteria in place to deal with flooding and ask ourselves whether we could have done things in a better way.

When the flooding started in Athlone, everywhere I went I was asked why the Army was not out. We need to examine the appropriate point at which the Army should be called out to help with the relief efforts. The whole area of operational efficiencies also needs to be examined. For example, when I requested that the Army prepare food for volunteers, I immediately got the go-ahead from the Minister and the Department. However, I then had to go back to Westmeath County Council to ask it to request the same from the Army. At a later date, I asked the Minister whether the Army could man the pumps in the towns and rural areas to give people a much needed break. He agreed straight away but again I had to go back to Westmeath County Council and it had to request the Army. What is needed is a single co-ordinator or go to person who is available at all times, whether organising the call out of the Army, volunteers, temporary accommodation, food, fuel or even flood relief donations.

I will speak in a moment about the longer-term measures being planned to address flooding issues on the River Shannon but, as I have stated previously, I firmly believe a number of remedial works could be carried out in the short term to alleviate flooding. In 1979, the water levels on Lough Ree were raised temporarily by 2 ft. for navigation purposes and, as far as I am aware, they were never restored to their original levels. This is something which could be done now and would not cost much money.

Reference has been made to the man-made cut at Meelick in Banagher, which allows water to flow from Lough Ree into Lough Derg. However, parts of this cut are very overgrown and desperately need to be cleared. This work should be carried out as soon as possible. As we all know, there is a serious need for dredging on some parts of the river and the cutaway bogs could be used to facilitate the disposal of what is removed. Bord na Mona constantly pipes water into the River Shannon. While it states the volume of water is minimal, when the ESB releases so many cubic metres of water per second at Parteen Weir, we all jump up and down and it makes headlines in the newspapers. Why cannot Bord na Mona just turn off the pumps, even temporarily, to alleviate what we have just been through? There is a very good YouTube video of Meelick Weir in October 2015, which is worth a look. It illustrated to me how the lack of dredging has had a negative impact on the river. It shows that because of the build up of silt,
there are islands on the river which were never there before. I want to make it very clear that while, like everybody else, I want to protect birds and wildlife, the protection of people’s homes and livelihoods must take priority. We all know the river needs to be maintained.

When the Government came into office in 2011, there were no resources. However, now we almost have the CFRAM report. This report will set out in a clear way the measures required to address flooding and the agencies responsible. There is political will and finance is in place. An official recently stated with regard to the CFRAM study that Athlone could be fully protected for €6 million. If this is the case, I urge the Minister of State to do so as soon as possible.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Gabrielle McFadden:** Some of the permanent flood defences will take time and I urge local authorities to apply to the OPW for the up to €500,000 funding programme put in place.

I know I am under pressure but I need to say this too-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** For the information of the House, there are four more speakers in the Chamber and we have only ten minutes before calling on the Minister of State to bring the debate to a conclusion.

**Deputy Gabrielle McFadden:** I will be really quick.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I ask the Deputy to conclude. Otherwise, we will run short of time for everybody else.

**Deputy Gabrielle McFadden:** I am concerned for people whose houses have been flooded and I have requested from the Minister that they should not have to pay household tax. People whose houses are flooded should be able to revalue their homes at €0 thereby making what they owe to Revenue €0-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Gabrielle McFadden:** -----until permanent defence procedures are put in place and they can be insured.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Gabrielle McFadden:** One last thing; can I tell everybody Athlone is open for business, as are the midlands, despite the negative publicity we have had recently?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I apologise to the Deputy for rushing her, but we are on a tight schedule. The next speaker is Deputy Sandra McLellan, who is sharing time with Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin. The Deputies will have approximately two and a half minutes each, if I am to accommodate the other two Members who wish to speak.

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** I understood Deputy McLellan and I had ten minutes between us.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I have to call on the Minister of State to reply at 10.50 p.m.
Deputy Sandra McLellan: The Acting Chairman is applying strict discipline.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I am giving the Deputies the option of accommodating other Members, but it is up to them.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: I take this opportunity to convey my support for those affected by flooding across the nation over the Christmas period and in the weeks following. I can only imagine the stress and displacement that has been caused, as well as the burden faced by people over the coming weeks and months as they attempt to get their family homes back in order. Many home owners and business owners in my constituency of Cork East have suffered devastating consequences from the latest episode of flooding. Homes have been destroyed in some parts which were never flooded before. In other cases, the properties affected have been flooded on numerous occasions.

Although the extent of the damage may in part be down to climate change, it is also due to a severe lack of foresight on the part of planners and builders. The N25 Cork to Waterford road was severely hit with flooding, causing it to be closed for more than a week. That is simply not good enough. Main roads in the State should not be flooding to such devastating affect, blocking national travel routes and causing major disruption. Minor roads were also drastically affected and will require further funding to be restored to normal service due to the damage caused by the overflow of traffic diverted from the main routes. We must take action to prevent this from happening in the future. Flooding hit areas such as Midleton, Castlemartyr, Water Rock, Mallow and Carrigtwohill in an indiscriminate manner, destroying homes, businesses and farmlands alike.

The impact on some households has been structural, with property damage costing up to €50,000, and more in some cases. That is a very significant amount of money for anyone who cannot get flood insurance. The same applies to business owners, primarily the small and medium-sized enterprises that the Government claims to want to protect. It is not possible to control the weather, but the Government can control whether an effective system is in place to help those most affected. This brings me to the fiasco that is the refusal by insurance companies to insure those who are at risk. I accept that the purpose of insurance companies is to insure against a risk rather than a certainty. However, if there were such a thing as no risk, there would be no need for insurance. Why, then, are insurance providers offering outrageous quotes or no quotes at all to home owners whose properties are not certain to flood?

A motion passed at the municipal district council requiring council officials to revisit plans for two major developments in east Cork, where large sections of the land earmarked for 5,000 houses, schools and retail centres were hit with serious flooding after Storm Frank, is particularly welcome with regard to the areas of Carrigtwohill and Water Rock. However, I would like to see engagement with those living in these communities, as they are the people who have the experience and knowledge, rather than outside parties coming in and deciding they know what is best. As well as the houses that were flooded, many more, although not actually flooded, were directly affected by it. Boil water notices as well as the backing up of sewage systems are some of the issues that have been reported to me.

Although the situation is by no means the simplest to deal with, there are basic measures that can be taken to relieve some of the issues outlined. The need to clear gutters and drains on a more regular basis is something that may seem obvious, but blockages have been an instigator of some of the problems that have arisen. Proposals for dredging the rivers that have
overflowed or cutting back trees and bushes that obstruct the flow of the river should be investigated. That will require a certain level of co-operation and funding.

I conclude by commending the staff of the various local authorities, the Army, the Garda Síochána, the fire brigade, the Civil Defence, ordinary members of local communities, volunteers and other organisations on their hard work in recent weeks. I thank Whitegate oil refinery in east Cork for providing pumps to remove significant amounts of flood water in order to clear the N25 Cork to Waterford main road. Finally, I commend the various hotels in the affected areas on their decisions to allow people to use their rooms in their hour of need.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: There have been thousands of dreadful experiences across the country in the course of the recent flooding. Those of us lucky enough to escape the worst ravages of the deluges that washed across this land during December and into January watched the television reportage of others’ misfortune across whole swathes of the country. We saw homes destroyed, land use lost, animals at risk, and farm machinery, cars and other equipment damaged beyond recovery. Significant areas of rural and urban Ireland have suffered grievously. Our hearts go out to all whose memory of the Christmas season of 2015 will be, not to put a tooth in it, nightmarish. They will never forget this experience and some might never fully recover. Let us, then, as a people, a united people in the face of nature’s adversity, pledge not to forget and not to move on with our lives mindless of the loss and suffering of our fellow citizens. There but for the grace of God stand all of us.

We are often globally referred to as a generous and caring people. We respond generously to international appeals for relief for distressed areas. Calamitous events in far off places deservedly receive our individual and collective support. Our aid agencies are world-renowned, deservedly so. However, we must consider whether we are as willing as a people to respond generously, both individually and collectively through State aid, to the plight of our own, some of them our neighbours, as they battle to restore their homes, their livelihoods and their very lives. Unfortunately, the response so far falls miserably short. In tandem with helping people to restore their lives, there is the major and immediate requirement to address the deficiencies in our flood defences, where they exist, the need to construct them where they are now so clearly needed, and the need to address the capacity of our rivers and canals to cope with the new reality of deluge rainfall that could yet present year after year.

Everyone has a responsibility here and a role to play, including the Government, local authorities, the insurance sector, big business, ordinary citizens and Members of this House. Will the Government take the lead and set the example by creating a channel for flood relief donations from business, citizens and all people who love this land, be they living here at home or scattered across the globe? The experience of these past weeks has been a disaster in the lives of many of our people. They are anxiously awaiting a response from us. I appeal to Government and to all political leaders: surely we can stand together and make a difference now.

Before concluding, I refer to the terrible flooding that beset my own county and constituency. Rarely did we get the attention of our national broadcaster and the national media generally, despite the severe flooding that had an impact across all of County Monaghan and parts of County Cavan. The estimated cost of addressing the serious flooding in the area of Monaghan town’s shopping centre and credit union is €15 million. Business was seriously disrupted. The Monaghan road into Clones was impassable for all but heavy goods vehicles. The Ballybay to Cootehill road was completely closed. Approach roads to Castleblayney and Carrickmacross were severely affected. Some homes in the Inniskeen area were at risk, as were others across
rural county Monaghan and in County Cavan. Some home owners suffered the awful indignity of ground-floor flooding throughout. I appeal to the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, and to the Office of Public Works to ensure the inclusion of the identified so-called hot spots in counties Monaghan and Cavan in the CFRAM programme. No one should doubt the extent of the problem in the counties I represent. The only recorded fatality wholly attributable to the recent flooding took place in County Monaghan, close to where I live, before Christmas. I take this opportunity to record my sympathy, that of my community and, I hope, of this House, to the wife, family and friends of the late Ivan Vaughan, a popular musician and member of arguably Ireland’s top band of years ago, The Plattermen. May he rest in peace.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I thank Deputies McLellan and Ó Cao-láin for their co-operation. As a result, there are two minutes remaining for Deputies Michael McCarthy and Ciara Conway.

**Deputy Michael McCarthy:** In fact, we have one minute and 50 seconds to make a contribution.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I will not be that strict. The Deputies should use up the two minutes or so that remain.

**Deputy Michael McCarthy:** It is no reflection on the Acting Chairman, but what has happened here is a consequence of either how the business was scheduled or very poor chairing of the debate throughout the day. Deputy Conway and I are left with less than 90 seconds to contribute to the discussion on what is arguably the topic of the week. That is wholly inadequate. However, I will make a number of brief points without wishing to eat into my colleague’s time. I acknowledge what has been done by the Government to date to address the impact of the recent flooding. The Minister of State, Deputy Simon Harris, very kindly came down to west Cork on several occasions, the most recent in December. His visits have taken in Bandon, Skibbereen and Clonakilty, but other places were also affected. Innishannon, for example, has not been mentioned often in the context of the overall scale of the disaster and devastation visited on other areas.

The Joint Committee on Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht, which I chair, published a report on flood insurance in December, focusing in particular on the difficulties that both home owners and business owners are facing in seeking insurance cover. I am aware of the meeting that the Taoiseach, the Minister of State and colleagues had in Government Buildings this week. Something needs to be done. When the insurance companies come back, I hope they will see merit in the case presented to them by Government and I hope they will see merit in the report published by my committee in December. There were various discrepancies in terms of the question of how many people are excluded from cover. The Insurance Industry Federation told our committee there are 10,000 homes and businesses that cannot get flood insurance. Enda O’Donovan from Skibbereen, a member of the national flood forum, made the point, based on information supplied by brokers, that the figure is actually closer to 50,000. Whatever the figure, it is imperative that we ensure the insurance companies step up to the plate in terms of providing that cover. I know, as Deputy McLellan said, that we insure risk, not inevitability, and I accept that. I know there are some very serious situations along the banks of the Shannon.

In terms of the talk about a resolution in areas where, for example, flood defence works have taken place and cover is still difficult to get or difficult to afford and, more especially, in areas where flood defence works have not yet started, this talk about an insurance levy is very danger-
It is going to be another charge on hard-pressed households and it is one road we should not go down. Government needs to make that statement before the insurance companies come back because it will ultimately cost more money for people who are trying to survive after the recession and it would get insurance companies off the hook. I thank the Acting Chair for his indulgence.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I call Deputy Conway. I apologise for the limited time, but she should take some anyway. We will have to call a halt soon.

**Deputy Ciara M. Conway:** Given the very limited time I have, there are two salient points I want to make to the Minister of State and to the House in respect of flooding. Over the past few hours we have heard about the distress to people and the ruination of people’s homes at Christmas time, when people were hoping to come together and to celebrate. In Waterford we have seen significant investment by the OPW along the quay and we know it works. However, I found over recent weeks, having met victims of Storm Frank, that where we solved one problem, we often pushed it down the road and created a problem somewhere else. We need a joined-up overall plan when dealing with the issue of flooding because this is not going away. Unfortunately, it will become an increasingly likely occurrence.

The major issue I want to bring to the fore, given the limited time, is the N25, about which Deputy McLellan spoke. This is the major national roadway between Waterford and Cork and it was blocked for over a week. The reason I raise this issue is that in Waterford, if a person has a cardiac event after 5 p.m., Waterford University Hospital cannot treat them in terms of getting access to a cardiac catheterisation lab. They must be transported to the hospital in Cork. The Minister of State can see how imperative the accessibility of our road network is for people, not just in Waterford but in the south east, who use the hospital. There has been a long and ongoing campaign regarding the provision of 24-7 cardiology services in Waterford University Hospital, in which I have been very involved and vocal. The flooding that occurred over Christmas and the prolonged period of flooding on the N25 between Waterford and Cork has serious consequences. This is not just about the day-to-day issues, which are very important for people’s livelihood. It could have fatal consequences if people cannot get access to medical treatment. I understand from speaking to engineers in the local authority that we know the damage done to the road infrastructure by the surface water is sizeable, but equally the roads used for diversions are also coming under huge pressure and will require significant investment. I know the Minister of State is covering all the issues regarding what has happened, but our national roads must be accessible at all times, not just for economic reasons but often for serious, life-threatening reasons for the people of Waterford and the south east when they do not have access to 24-7 cardiology services.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Simon Harris):** I am grateful for this opportunity to address the House on the subject of flooding and flood risk management. I have listened to most of the debate, which has been informative and constructive. I have taken note of a variety of issues that were raised by Deputies on all sides of the House. Some very constructive and useful ideas have been put forward by Members.

The unprecedented rainfall in December has had an impact throughout the country. I have seen at first hand in many towns and their surrounding areas, including Bandon, Skibbereen, Ballinasloe, Athlone, Graiguenamanagh, Thomastown, Crossmolina and in my own constituency, the impact of flooding on people, homes, properties, businesses, farms and communities as a whole. I am, therefore, acutely aware of the distress that people experience when their
homes or businesses are inundated by flood waters or when they are fighting continuously, often for weeks on end, to keep out rising waters. My visits also revealed the resilience of people and communities. In its absence, the impact of the recent floods, from what were in many cases unprecedented river water levels, would have been significantly worse. I express my appreciation to all those I met during these past weeks, those I did not get to meet and those still involved in the front-line response to flooding since early December.

The success of the response is in no small part due to the co-ordinated involvement of local authority staff, gardaí, Defence Forces personnel, Civil Defence volunteers, individuals and my own staff in the Office of Public Works. I recognise also the national co-ordination group for severe weather emergencies which has met almost daily since 3 December. Having attended their meetings and from their daily reports, it is important to acknowledge how the national perspective has allowed better co-ordination and resource mobilisation to manage locally emerging issues and challenges. It has also provided important key public safety messages throughout and provided the information to Government on how best to target appropriate support to both the response and recovery from flooding. It is important at the end of any severe weather event that one stops and reviews what went well and what could go better. That is what that national co-ordination group will undertake and it will report to Government in the coming weeks on that.

What is clear from the recent events and from today’s informed and constructive debate is that, more than anything, people want assurance that the Government can provide support to them in response to a flood event and also assurance that it is planning to mitigate the risk from flooding in the future. The Government has provided and can provide that assurance to people. At the start of this debate, the Taoiseach set out the resources provided through and across all of Government to respond to the recent floods. This co-ordinated response, in line with the Government’s national emergency framework, has been broad ranging and has targeted the immediate needs of people and communities through the delivery of sandbags and pumps to prevent flood waters entering properties, the deployment of 2,686 Defence Forces to assist local authorities, funding for food, clothes, accommodation, replacement of household equipment and structural repairs for those worst affected flooded households, and support to businesses and farmers to minimise the flooding impact.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the response to this flood event in some areas that were historically at risk from flooding came from the levels of protection that have already been provided through the flood defence schemes and other flood defence measures provided through the Office of Public Works. I thank Deputies on all sides for acknowledging that in the places where we have made the investment, those flood defences have made a significant difference. The OPW has already completed flood defence schemes in 36 areas and overall its flood protection measures protected 12,000 properties and €1.2 billion of economic activity from potential flooding in recent weeks. This includes towns such as Clonmel, Mallow and Fermoy where the river levels recorded the highest levels since records began, in some cases as far back as 1939.

In terms of planning for the future, the OPW is finalising a further seven schemes, including in Ennis, on the Dodder and in Bray, starting works in five other locations in 2016, including Claregalway and Bandon, and advancing the planning and design stages for 22 schemes, including the scheme for Crossmolina, which is at an advanced stage of planning. In addition, by mid-year the OPW will publish flood risk management plans for all areas throughout the country that are at significant risk of flooding from rivers and tides. Their publication will allow
for a public consultation on these plans towards finalising the national flood risk plan by the end of 2016. Today’s debate demonstrates the extensive awareness among Deputies of all parties of the Government’s catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme. This programme has designated 300 areas, including 90 coastal areas, as being at potentially significant risk of impact from flooding, pending more detailed assessment and modelling. The detailed surveying and modelling now completed has involved 6,700 km of watercourse and 9,400 sq. km of floodplain. The CFRAM programme is proactively giving a clear and comprehensive picture of flood risk in areas at significant risk of flooding and is setting out how the risk can be prioritised and managed effectively and sustainably.

11 o’clock

Engineering consultants have been appointed by the Office of Public Works to implement the programme through six regional studies. Local authorities and a wide range of other statutory and non-statutory stakeholders are involved, in partnership with the OPW, on steering groups and progress groups across the six study areas. These structures are providing the requisite co-ordination for the development of the flood risk management plans.

One of the CFRAM study areas is the River Shannon catchment. It is the only one of the six that deals with an entire river catchment. The OPW has already discussed flood defence options with 50 of the 66 areas at risk along the Shannon. The Government has announced the establishment of a River Shannon co-ordination group. The terms of reference for this group are being worked upon by my office and will be announced next week. This group, informed by the full technical expertise of OPW, can co-ordinate the work of relevant bodies, from the local level up to Departments and other State agencies. I expect this group to outline its work plans and all of the State agencies to show us their work plans for the next three months, the next six months and the next year along the Shannon. I also expect the group to make recommendations to Government, where appropriate, on any legislative or regulatory change that may be required to help improve co-ordination. Extensive public consultation has been involved at all stages of the CFRAM programme, much of it within communities. Public consultation will remain a key and an important part to finalise the plans to manage the flooding risk.

Major flood relief schemes involve complex engineering and construction operations and have lengthy lead-in times. On average, this is a period of five years. The CFRAM is not just a report; its outcome equates to the first two years of that lead-in period for the 300 areas identified for flood defence schemes under the programme. This means the programme will deliver in the future feasible flood defence solutions over three years rather than five.

There have been some reports that the Government will not protect many properties at risk from flooding. The assumption in this regard is simply wrong for a number of reasons. First, in 2011, the preliminary flood risk assessment completed a cautious and indicative exercise based on initial and not detailed modelling, historical records and consultation. This identified preliminary properties at potential risk from flooding. It was not an exercise to confirm that risk but the objective of this preliminary exercise was to help identify possible location hot spots that would require further detailed assessment, through the CFRAM programme. This exercise also deliberately ignored the flood defence schemes in place at that time and that were providing protection to many of the properties identified at risk that, in reality, were no longer at risk. The detailed modelling now completed will provide the actual number of properties at risk when the CFRAM flood maps are completed. We have just completed a national public consultation on these maps.
Second, the Government’s strategy is clear. It is to ensure feasible investment and measures to protect all properties at significant risk from flooding regardless of their location. The 2011 preliminary flood risk assessment informed this strategy and is being achieved through a number of ways including the following. On the CFRAM programme, while the overall number of properties has no relevance, up to 90% of the properties identified through the preliminary exercise have benefited from the detailed modelling and the flood risk plans will identify and inform the feasible solution for these. We also have the Government’s 2009 minor works and coastal protection scheme, which remains open to local authorities and which provides the mechanism for local authorities to manage the risk from flooding in the remaining properties identified through the preliminary assessment. The Government has invested €29 million for 430 minor works projects since 2009 and many of these have involved permanent flood defence schemes. Regardless of location, feasible protection for some properties will involve individual property protection, which has been raised by a number of Deputies, and as a last resort, a voluntary home relocation scheme. The details for these schemes are being considered through the interdepartmental flood policy co-ordination group which will report to Government at the end of this month.

The interdepartmental committee was reconvened in July of last year and charged by the Government to prepare costed recommendations for the policies and measures that Government can introduce to support the management of flood risk nationally, including the implementation of the CFRAM plans. I have been chairing this committee comprised of sectoral representation and we have engaged in constructive cross-sectoral engagement. My office is co-ordinating the sectoral reports to Government before the end of the month. I was pleased to have led the initiative to introduce a number of important measures in response to the recent events that are reflective of the discussions by the group and will add significant value to its report. I would make the point that whoever is in government in this country in a few months will, through the work of this group, have a range of options available in respect of individual property protection, the roll-out of flood forecasting, the issue of flood insurance policy and the possibility of a voluntary home relocation scheme.

The House will be aware that we have given the go-ahead for a new flood forecasting and warning service. This will be a new operational unit within Met Éireann, with guidance on standards and performance independently overseen by the OPW. My intention is to establish a steering group, including representatives from the OPW, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, Met Éireann and the local authorities to steer, support and oversee the establishment of the new service over the coming years. The service will be nationwide and it is expected that flooding from tidal-coastal sources will form part of the early discussions of this steering group.

On individual property protection, I recently announced the piloting of two community-based pilots to inform the implementation of the flood risk management plans. These are, first, a feasibility study at Thomastown and Graiguenamanagh, where Kilkenny County Council has employed consultants to carry out the study that are due to be appointed in January 2016. The development of all possible feasible flood defence options for these towns is an ongoing part of the CFRAM process. Mayo County Council is also considering, at my invitation, the installation of flood gates for some properties identified by the community in Crossmolina as an interim measure in order to help mitigate any further flood damage pending the completion of the defence scheme for the town.

The interdepartmental flood policy co-ordination group is considering criteria and possible
delivery options for a targeted scheme that would benefit isolated properties, as distinct from the community based approach being piloted. In addition, we are looking, as I have stated, at the home relocation issue and at the issue of community resilience, and also a review of the planning and development guidelines.

I assure the House that the Government’s efforts to manage flood risk are not receding with the flood waters. On the contrary, the Government’s past investment that protected at least 12,000 properties already across the country is being built upon. The OPW has 34 schemes in its pipeline of works and will have plans on how to protect areas at significant risk from flooding across the country by this summer. More funding is in place than ever before. We will spend more on flood relief than we did during the so-called Celtic tiger. We will spend €430 million on flood defences over the next five years - that is more than we spent on it as a country during the past 20 years. Another way of looking at it is that for every €100 spent by Government last year on flood defences, it will spend €155 over the next six years. I am confident that the delivery of the Government’s strategy to manage flood risk that I have outlined will better prepare Ireland fight the threat of nature from flooding in the future and I look forward to continuing to work with Deputies on all sides as we deliver on our ambitious programme of a new national flood defence plan for Ireland.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.05 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 14 January 2016.