



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 16 Meitheamh 2016

Thursday, 16 June 2016

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 12 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Dara Calleary: In January of this year, the former Minister, Deputy Kelly, announced the introduction of a new pay-by-weight billing system for bin customers. He made this announcement amid a lot of fanfare, as was his wont. His forecast was that 87% of customers would save money as a result of the new system but the exact opposite has turned out to be the case. It seems from the feedback being received by all Deputies that 87% of people will be paying much more. There has been a frenzy of coverage, showing examples of families which were paying €200 but will now have to pay €400. Some families which were paying €360 are being charged €611. Deputy Lahart is in correspondence with a family which was paying €420 but will now have to pay €770. There is a growing sense of anger and frustration around the country because those who are in line to be hit with these bills from 1 July are not being offered a means of dealing with this problem. They should be helped to find alternative services by shopping around and seeing what options are available. All of the companies are piling on these increases.

If action is not taken now, we will be facing into a very difficult summer. Families throughout the country will be facing very difficult situations. I am concerned that in such circumstances, waste will be disposed of illegally and difficulties will continue to arise. People with disabilities, older people and people with larger families are being hammered by the new regime and are concerned about the lack of information being given to them. The private companies that are increasing the standing charges are exploiting the Government's lack of preparation in order to profit from this situation. In one instance, the annual standing charge has been increased from €60 to €169. The additional burden that is being imposed on working families across the country is forcing them to add to the profits of these companies.

What is the Government proposing to do? We understand from today's *Irish Examiner* that the Minister, Deputy Coveney, is proposing to take action on behalf of the Government. Will the Tánaiste outline here in the Chamber exactly what the Minister intends to do to stop these charges from proceeding? Will the Government agree to freeze these charges until people can

realise where the savings are, or if the savings actually exist? Will the Tánaiste say whether she and her Government colleagues agree with the increased bin charges? Do they agree with companies profiteering from Government incompetence by adding to standing charges in the way they are doing in this city and this country today? Are they aware of and do they understand the level of anger and worry that exists regarding these charges?

The Tánaiste: This is an issue about which the Government and I are concerned. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Simon Coveney, has asked the major waste collection companies to meet with him next week to discuss this, as well as other issues around the introduction of pay-by-weight. He will put it up to them to explain their justification for what is happening and for such significant price hikes.

This was never the spirit of the legislation. The change in the way this was to be done was about ensuring the principle of reduce and reuse was built into the system. It was never meant to be an excuse for hiking up charges. The Minister, in the first instance, will discuss this with the companies next week.

As Deputy Calleary said, these charges do not come into play until 1 July. However, the companies have begun sending out information which has clearly caused concern and upset to many of their customers and to consumers. We are concerned about this. The Minister will explore what action needs to be taken in the first instance next week when he meets those companies. I would stress that the whole change of pay-by-weight was intended to give households more control over their waste costs and to provide better value to those which prevent waste and recycle more. It is very much in accordance with the polluter pays principle. It was to stimulate the prevention of waste and create a more environmentally sustainable approach to the management of waste.

In terms of the approach to the issue, that is clearly what was behind the spirit of the legislation. It was certainly not intended to be an excuse to top up the basic charges which is what is being reported at present.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Tánaiste said this policy is intended to be good value. It is certainly not good value if one's annual bill goes from €360 to €611 or from €420 to €770. It is certainly not good value if the standing charge is increased. The Tánaiste claimed there is still time to address this matter. However, most households have to pay that charge before their bins will be collected. There is two weeks to deal with this.

The Tánaiste said it was not the spirit of the legislation. It is a consequence, however, of badly drafted legislation which has a lacuna and which has given an opening to companies to profit from this policy. While the policy is a welcome change in attitude, it will crucify households, pensioners, disabled people and families across the country.

Families will be looking to the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government's meeting with the companies for results. If he does not get results, what will he do? Will he suspend the introduction of this measure until these companies see sense or will the Government go along with companies profiteering from families using the pay-by-weight system? We may have a new Government but the manner in which this pay-by-weight system is being introduced is the same incompetence that dragged us through Irish Water.

The Tánaiste: That is an incorrect analysis. The issue is how certain companies are behaving. This is a competitive market. If this is seen as taking advantage, the Minister will intro-

duce regulations if necessary.

In the first instance, however, he is meeting with the companies next week and is dealing with this as an urgent issue. We accept it is an urgent issue. We do not wish to see consumers being exploited in any way in this change of policy to pay-by-weight. As I said, this policy was intended to reduce costs for householders and this was the spirit behind the legislation. We must ensure it works in that way because it would be right for the environment and for consumers if we reduce the cost for them in managing their waste. That was the intention and spirit behind the legislation. It was certainly not to see excessive and extra costs being put on consumers.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Of course, Fianna Fáil is correct to identify it as both a legacy issue and a contemporary issue of Government incompetence. It should, however, be pointed out to Fianna Fáil that it is the facilitator of this incompetence in government. But for its support, this incompetent crew would not be in a position to continue their incompetent governance.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Sinn Féin is doing it in the North where the charge is £1,300 sterling.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Last January the then Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, at the stroke of a ministerial pen, introduced Statutory Instrument No. 24. He said at the time that this would mean that 90% of families and households would pay less to have their bin collected. Roll on a number of months and the truth emerges, with great panic, as the Tánaiste has acknowledged. It now transpires that up to 90% of families and households will, in fact, pay substantially more.

Let us look at some cases. Elaine is a mother of three children, has a chronically ill husband and is in receipt of carer's allowance. The cost of her bin collection service is increasing from €204 to €360 per year, a 76% increase. They cannot afford this. Marie is in her 80s, lives alone and is in receipt of the State pension. Her standing charge is being increased from €50 to €169 per year, an increase of 238%. She has told me money is so tight that she will have no choice but to either go without food or burn her rubbish illegally. Is there not something obscene about this for a senior citizen in 2016? As it happens, Marie is a constituent of the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste said the Minister, Deputy Simon Coveney, would meet the providers and that he would put it up to them. I have to tell her that does not inspire much confidence. What the Minister needs to do is to reverse this bad decision. The regulation was introduced at the stroke of a ministerial pen and could be removed at the stroke of a ministerial pen.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister should today sign a new statutory instrument to remove this regulation which is going to cause so much hardship for families. The Tánaiste should dispense with the tea and sympathy and tell me whether the Minister will today or early next week sign a new statutory instrument to remove this threat of daylight robbery on the part of bin collectors of ordinary decent citizens.

The Tánaiste: It is not the Government which has introduced this charge; therefore, I do not accept the way the Deputy has framed the issue. It appears the companies are taking the opportunity presented by the new legislation to change the standing charges. What I have made very clear is that this is not acceptable to the Government; it is not acceptable to the Minister,

Deputy Simon Coveney, and, if necessary, regulations will be introduced to assure and reassure consumers that charges will not go up in the way the Deputy has described. Not one person has yet been charged and it is the intention of the Government to ensure the legislation is not abused in any way. In its spirit it is the right direction to take and, in fact, will lead to lower charges for households. That is the intention behind the legislation. If it is being abused or exploited by private companies in what is a competitive market, what I am saying clearly to the Deputy is that the Minister will take action before 1 July when the new regime is due to come into place.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste is dancing on the head of a pin when she says it is not the fault of the regulations but of crafty companies which are availing of the legislation in place. She should not waste our time with that nonsense. There are two options. Either the Minister acts to bring forward a new regulation which he is perfectly capable of doing - it is our view in Sinn Féin that he should do so today - or, failing this, we avail of Seanad Standing Orders which give the Seanad the power to annul a statutory instrument within 21 sitting days of its signing by the Minister. As the Seanad has sat in a period of ten days since, Sinn Féin Senators have today submitted a motion to the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad to annul the statutory instrument and regulation. Either the Minister acts or next week Sinn Féin Senators will bring forward the motion to ensure the regulation is annulled. If it comes to this, I hope Fianna Fáil, Government Senators and others will support the motion. Sitting on our hands is not an option. The Minister talking tough is not an option. Either the Government acts or we will do so next week. Under no circumstances, come 1 July, will ordinary people be fleeced in the way the companies intend.

The Tánaiste: The people most affected do not need political theatrics; what they need is action. I have been very clear that the Minister will take action on this issue. Previously a total of 40% of the companies were charging by weight. Legislation is the right approach as it will reduce costs for most households. If it is being exploited, the matter will be dealt with. The Minister will meet the companies and introduce a regulation to deal with this issue.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Therefore, he will annul it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I raise the very serious issue of overcrowding at South Tipperary General Hospital. It is sad that today HIQA has published a report which is very critical. It is not a problem with the staff or management who are overworked and totally overstretched. According to Trolley Watch, emergency department trolley statistics at South Tipperary General Hospital show that it has suffered the most because of the cuts of recent years. Figures from the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation show that in March there had been a 100% increase in the number of trolleys and the level of overcrowding nationally compared to the figures in March 2008, when only 4,700 patients were on trolleys. We need to bear in mind constantly that these statistics represent an old person, a sick child or a person with disabilities who are on trolleys in unsuitable surroundings. They are human beings and we must always treat them as such. The medical staff do their best for them. It is, therefore, truly disturbing to have it confirmed that the total number of patients on trolleys in South Tipperary General Hospital this year has increased to 552, 319 more than this time last year. It just gets worse.

Clearly, the establishment of the emergency department task force has done nothing to alleviate the problem. It is a high-powered task force and promises were made about what it would do, but things have got worse. I am glad that the Minister for Health is present. I ask him to look into this matter to see what the task force established by his predecessor is doing. People are being advised to visit their GPs, but GPs are overwhelmed, particularly since the introduc-

tion of the free scheme for those aged under six years. They cannot cope. They are on the front line and many of them are operating on 40 year old contracts which are not fit for purpose.

Despite the promises made three years ago that stepdown beds would be provided in Cashel, with almost €20 million spent, they are lying idle. Never mind beds, they do not have pillows or blankets to put on them. The facility could be used to alleviate the immediate problem and the standard of refurbishment is exceptional. When will this happen? The former Minister of State, Mr. Tom Hayes, announced that it would and I am sure he did not make it up himself. Three years ago he was told by the HSE that it would happen, but nothing has. This cannot go on.

We can thank the former Minister of State, Ms Kathleen Lynch, for the closure of St. Michael's, a psychiatric institution of long-standing, which provided an excellent service in Clonmel on the same campus as the hospital. People must now travel to Kilkenny, and all the patients now present in the emergency department. The former Minister of State was warned about this and we were told other stepdown facilities and crisis accommodation would be provided, which we clearly do not have. A Vision for Change is not working. I therefore ask the Tánaiste what she will do because the HIQA report is very damning, especially regarding patient safety. I ask the Tánaiste and the Minister beside her what action will be taken immediately.

The Tánaiste: I have read the summary of the HIQA report and I agree with the Deputy that some of the findings regarding South Tipperary General Hospital are extremely disturbing. I noted, however, that when the HIQA inspectors returned six weeks later they had found considerable improvement in some of the issues that had been identified when they first visited on an emergency basis. The Deputy is right, however, that there are serious infrastructure and capacity issues regarding demand at South Tipperary General Hospital. The important point is that we are entering a new era now of further investment in the health service, as evidenced by the extra €500 million that has been allocated to the Department of Health and to the Minister, Deputy Harris. There are improvements overall in the trolley situation but still a lot of work to be done. There is clearly more investment in the area of general practitioners and investment in primary care and it is important that this continues. It will deal to some degree with the infrastructural issues. New initiatives and new funding have gone into the fair deal scheme, which has meant that patients now only have to wait a very short period of two to four weeks for a bed, reduced from 14 weeks just over a year ago.

Improvements are therefore being made, but the Minister has indicated that he intends to address the general issues that the Deputy raises about infrastructure. Clearly, however, there are also management and accountability issues, as evidenced by the HIQA report, that need to be taken up at a local level. I note, for example, that some of the issues that were identified concerned the risks relating to infection prevention and hygiene, with very poor cleansing of equipment around some patient areas and stained, dusty and rusty rubbish bins in some of the surgical wards, and the paediatric ward was not clean. Some of these issues can be dealt with via proper management and accountability from hospital groups. The Deputy makes the point about investment and infrastructure in the hospital. The Minister has said he plans to focus on the issue of capital investment in hospitals that need infrastructural development and he now has the resources to begin to do that. There will be a capital review, as the Deputy knows, in the near future, and the issues he raises can be considered then.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I hope the Minister will address the matter. The money was promised as part of the talks for the programme for Government. I look forward to the roll-out of this. Nobody will condone or accept bad practices and unclean places, especially in a hospi-

tal. HIQA has accused South Tipperary General Hospital of putting patients at risk because of unacceptable practices such as lack of access to oxygen, lack of space - which I see any time I am there, and I am called in there regularly - trolley overcrowding and similar issues. There is no physical space. The staff are at their wits' end and the nurses are under enormous pressure. They are no longer in the reception area because they have been moved into wards, of which there are fewer and fewer. The hospital only has a certain number of beds. It is an old hospital and has done Trojan work. We need infrastructural investment and we need it now, and we need support for the management and staff there. As I said, nobody will condone any poor trolley practices. Sick patients cannot be nursed on long corridors out into the foyer and such places, with no dignity and no privacy. I see this happening every week.

The Tánaiste: I also note, as the Deputy says, the capacity issues, and the Minister accepts that there are legitimate capacity issues in the hospital. It has in fact been experiencing high occupancy rates since January. It is a question of reinvestment and the fact that our hospitals need further capital investment. Thankfully, because of the changes in our economy, we are now in a position to do that, and I am sure that South Tipperary General Hospital will be one of the hospitals that will benefit from the improved economic situation and the reinvestment in our health service.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is a lot of talk about new politics in this Dáil and many of us are wondering what exactly it means. From my point of view it means more collaboration or trying to seek consensus between different parties and different sides of the House. In the Dáil reform committee meetings one of the aspects to which we returned many times was the recommendation contained in the OECD report on how we budget and how we spend our money or allocate the spending of our money. The Tánaiste will be aware that the OECD report said the Parliament needed to be involved at every stage, have access to information in a timely manner and be involved in the decision-making process before the real decisions are taken. Maybe we would not have so many problems, such as the waste charge issue today, if everybody was involved from the earliest stage in examining whether a certain regulation would work. This is not insignificant but it affects everything. The process of how we do budgets and work together in framing them is very important.

I was very heartened when the Taoiseach, in response to a question on the Order of Business a few weeks ago, said there was a vital role for the committees, which we are establishing this week, in the process and that we had to get working this June and July rather than wait until autumn to adopt the OECD practices, which are good practices. The scoping committee on the budget scrutiny process met yesterday. We had a useful meeting in which the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Pascal Donohoe, acknowledged that we had to begin now, not wait for a 2018 process. On the question of whether Government Departments would be able to present their bid proposals for the 2017 budget to the new committees this month and next month, the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, said we should begin the process now in terms of involving the Parliament in considering the options, where we might save money somewhere and spend it elsewhere.

The Minister, Deputy Donohoe, said he would contact his colleagues. I apologise for springing the following question on the Tánaiste before the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, has had a chance to talk to her. Will the Tánaiste and her Department be able, at the end of this month or next month, after the national economic dialogue or the Estimates process we are going through - I see the Tánaiste's Estimate here for this year - to present to the new committee some of the spending or saving proposals she may have to ensure the Parliament is involved properly in the

2017 budget process?

The Tánaiste: The sort of process the Deputy has outlined is very much one in which we want to engage and every effort is being directed towards it. It involves consultation, discussion and sharing as much information on the budgetary process as possible in advance. There will be an opportunity for Opposition leaders and others to be involved in the national dialogue at the end of this month. The budget scoping committee is considering precisely the issues the Deputy has raised. While the budget scoping committee will have to work out the timing issues regarding presentations by Departments, it is our intention, in so far as possible. Most Departments are still identifying priorities for 2017. The intention is to bring the discussion to the committees and have the opportunity to hear everybody's views on how the priorities will be identified and budgeted for in the 2017 Estimates.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank the Tánaiste. I do not want to jump her into something she has not agreed at Cabinet but to consider it on a personal level, in her Department. There is probably political consensus that we need extra gardaí or that we need community policing. While all the Tánaiste's priorities or spending commitments for 2017 might not yet be in place, does she think she would be ready to go to a committee in July and outline some of the priorities she might want to present to her Cabinet colleagues in the budget process? It could help the Tánaiste, and all of us, if we are more honest and open about the various options. Given that we cannot spend on everything, a balancing act is needed. The more open and honest we are about it, the less we will get involved in the kind of dog fights that happened here today about issues such as waste and water in which the Parliament was involved only after the fact. She should get her colleagues on the justice committee that will be set up to help her to consider those spending options. Will she be able to do that in July just for her own Department?

The Tánaiste: Next week we will discuss the 2016 justice Estimates in the House. I was clear with Cabinet and, indeed, with the House about the priorities that I have in respect of the need to support the work An Garda Síochána is doing at present, particularly in tackling gangland crime, but the programme of Government outlines clearly our priorities. There is no intention to do other than what the Deputy has described on the part of Ministers and the Government. I will be in a position in respect of my Department to outline key priorities but, of course, that process will take a number of months. However, with regard to the initial discussions, I am sure Ministers will appear before committees shortly. The budgetary committee is working out the exact processes and how it is intended for those discussions to proceed. We will get guidelines from that committee and I have no doubt everybody will engage in a proactive way around that.

Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Leaders' Questions. Yesterday, I announced the names of the Members appointed to the committee on the future of health care. Since then, I have been informed that two changes have been made to the membership as follows: Deputy Pat Buckley has been appointed instead of Deputy John Brady and Deputy John Brassil instead of Deputy Anne Rabbitte.

Order of Business

The Tánaiste: It is proposed to take No. 14*b*, motion re establishment of select committees; No. 14*c*, motion re Standing Orders 81, 84, 84A, 85, 95, 97A, 114 and 186; No. 14*d*, motion re report of Committee of Selection and Appointment of Chairs; No. 14*e*, presentation and circulation of Revised Estimates 2016; and No. 14*a*, Revised Estimates for Public Services 2016 - Votes 16, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 37, 38 and 41 (resumed).

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the Dáil shall sit later than 5.48 p.m. and shall adjourn on the conclusion of Topical Issues; Nos. 14*b*, 14*c*, 14*d* and 14*e* shall be decided without debate and any division demanded thereon shall be taken forthwith; and the debate in respect of Vote 38 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 3.15 p.m. followed immediately by the weekly division time.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three proposals to put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with the late sitting agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Nos. 14*b*, 14*c*, 14*d* and 14*e* agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Vote 38 agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Today marks the first anniversary of the appalling tragedy in Berkeley, California last year where we lost six of our brightest J1 students while several others were seriously injured. It is appropriate that we again send our sympathies to the families of those who passed away and those who were injured on this most difficult of days. Our thoughts are with them today.

I wish to raise two issues. This day next week, the Brexit referendum will take place. Has the Government prepared a legislative response in the event of the people of the United Kingdom voting to leave the EU? How many legislative instruments will be affected? When will that kick in?

Second, in the context of the health Estimates, which will be discussed later, the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Finian McGrath, who made a brief appearance in the Chamber but who has left again, announced €31 million in additional funding for disability services on the plinth last week. However, this morning the St. John of God order has had to withdraw services for teenagers with intellectual disabilities who are attached to St. Augustine's school in Blackrock because it does not have enough funding. A vocational training programme will be withdrawn in the course of the next two years, while a life skills programme is being withdrawn with immediate effect. The teenagers who have participated in this programme have had huge success over many years. The programme has given huge comfort to families and very important life skills to those who have participated in it. In the context of the additional €31 million in new money that will be provided, will the Tánaiste explain why what has been proposed is happening today?

The Tánaiste: I join the Deputy in again expressing our sympathy to the families who so tragically lost loved ones on this day last year.

To reply to the Deputy's question about St. Augustine's special school, it was the subject of a Topical Issue discussed in the Dáil, I believe, only two days ago. The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, is examining the matter. European funds were in place for the initiatives being undertaken at St. Augustine's special school. The Minister of State is meeting the parents and other relevant individuals to explore what action can be taken to ensure the continu-

ation of the services provided.

On the Brexit debate, our focus at this point is very much on Ministers who have travelled to the United Kingdom, including the North. Opposition leaders have also done so. We are focusing very much on Ireland's interests and how much they would be served by the United Kingdom remaining within the European Union. The Minister, Deputy Simon Coveney, will be in Belfast tomorrow. As the Deputy knows, the Taoiseach has several visits planned today. It is absolutely in Ireland's economic interests that there be a "Yes" vote to remain in the European Union.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I also join in extending condolences to and expressing on-going solidarity with the families of the Berkeley victims and their wider circles.

I want to ask the Tánaiste about the consolidated domestic violence legislation. Yesterday she participated in the launch of the report of Women's Aid which set out the latest round of absolutely horrifying statistics. She and I both know that this is not about statistics; it is about real people and real lives. Therefore, it is a source of great concern that the legislation has been stalled for so long. It is listed in the legislative programme under the heading of "All Other Legislation". It has been noted that the outcome of the pre-legislative scrutiny was reported on in September 2015. Will the Tánaiste tell us when we will deal with the legislation and get it onto the Statute Book?

The Tánaiste will be aware of this issue, not least because she has been talking to people within the community of the north inner city about it. It concerns the illegal trading of prescription drugs. It is welcome that it is the intention to legislate in that regard, but may we have a timetable as to when we will deal with it? I would like to think we will deal with the matter before the House rises for the summer.

As the Tánaiste will be relieved to hear, we say to the Government that, in the event of a Brexit, the issue for us is not simply about trade with the neighbouring island; the more immediate concern is that the country remains partitioned. I appeal to the Government should a Brexit happen that time and consideration be given and collaboration pursued to develop an understanding of the implications for a country that suffers, economically and socially, because of partition.

An Ceann Comhairle: Notwithstanding the validity of the points the Deputy and others have made about Brexit, it is not an appropriate matter to raise on the Order of Business.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have done it now.

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy said, the report by Women's Aid published yesterday detailed horrific instances of domestic violence and abuse, thousands of cases of women who had reported to that organisation the most horrendous abuse experienced by them. It is a very sad and disturbing report, which shows what the Taoiseach noted yesterday is often a hidden Ireland. Thankfully, more and more women are coming forward to get the kinds of supports that they need. In reply to the Deputy's question, I am the Minister who signed the Istanbul Convention last year and who is going to ensure that we ratify it as soon as certain Bills come through and some other work is done. The domestic violence legislation is a consolidated Bill and a huge amount of work has been done on it. That work continues and I will be in a position to publish it early next term.

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The prescribed drugs legislation has been fast-tracked by the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, and has gone to Cabinet. It will be published next Tuesday. In that regard, we would like to thank all of the Opposition spokespeople who have been involved in supporting the development of that legislation. I hope they can ensure its speedy passage through the House before the summer recess. It is very important, not just in terms of the north inner city where it certainly impacts, but throughout Ireland where dealing in prescription drugs needs to be stopped. This legislation will support An Garda Síochána.

I take the points that were made on Brexit. The whole situation in regard to Northern Ireland is key for our hope that the vote is “Yes”, but it is, of course, a matter for the voters in England.

Deputy Joan Burton: I join colleagues in saying that the families of those bereaved by what happened in Berkeley a year ago are in our thoughts and prayers today. Many of those who were injured are on a long road to recovery and I hope they make as full a recovery as possible.

There were reports in the media yesterday that child benefit would no longer automatically be paid to mothers under proposals which are being examined by the Minister for Social Protection. Is it true that the Government proposes to muck around with the payment of child benefit? Since 1974 and the introduction of payment to mothers by one of my predecessors, Frank Cluskey, child benefit has served this country and women and children in particular very well. Is this going to be part of the forthcoming paternity legislation or is it proposed for the social welfare Bill? There is a well known idea that if something is not broken, one should not fix it.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Deputy did not take heed of that on the one-parent family allowance.

Deputy Joan Burton: Women in Ireland would be outraged if the payment on a monthly basis of child benefit in respect of children were changed. I would be horrified if Fianna Fáil were to support this proposal, which would be very damaging to families.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Considering the Deputy cut child benefit.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Deputy decimated one-parent family payment when she was Minister.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Like Rapunzel in the tower.

Deputy Joan Burton: Will the Tánaiste reassure the House that the reports in the newspapers yesterday were wrong?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Burton, your question is clear.

Deputy Joan Burton: My second question is on the education Estimate which was published yesterday and debated last night. As in the budget last year, the Estimate includes funding of €2 million which is set aside for the technological universities. It is now 126 days since any legislation was passed by Dáil Éireann. What has happened to the Technological Universities Bill?

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have a debate on the matter.

Deputy Joan Burton: The technological institutes and colleges in Ireland are major drivers

of education and investment and business development.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Burton.

Deputy Joan Burton: Can the Tánaiste say when it is proposed to reintroduce the Technological Universities Bill? Are major changes proposed under the programme for Government?

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot get into the detail of the Bill. There are two questions.

The Tánaiste: There are no proposals on the table to change the way child benefit is paid. What is on the table is the paternity leave legislation of which Deputy Burton is a very strong supporter. I am very keen to see that paid in September. It went through Cabinet this week and will be debated in the Dáil as soon as time allows. With the co-operation of everyone, it should pass through the Dáil-----

Deputy Joan Burton: Was yesterday's report in the media wrong?

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot start discussing-----

Deputy Willie O'Dea: It is a serious matter, but Deputy Burton is suddenly worried.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Where was she for the past five years?

The Tánaiste: I agree with Deputy Burton that the-----

Deputy Simon Harris: This is like "What is in the newspapers or on Morning Ireland?"

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not discussing newspaper reports.

The Tánaiste: All right.

Deputy Joan Burton: This concerns future legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not discussing newspaper reports. We are on the Order of Business.

Deputy Joan Burton: It is important to women in Ireland.

The Tánaiste: There is no legislation planned such as Deputy Burton has outlined. The other Bill that she asked about is on the Order Paper and is awaiting Committee Stage. I believe that the Deputy heard the Minister, Deputy Bruton, speaking in the Chamber on this matter last week in terms of reviewing certain issues that had arisen. At present, it is on the Order Paper and awaiting Committee Stage.

Deputy Mick Barry: Condolences to the friends and families of the Berkeley victims.

I have two questions for the Tánaiste. The Government did not listen on the issue of water charges. Working class people, through the protest campaign, made it listen. The Government would be well advised to listen to the growing anger on the issue of bin charges. If it does not, working class people will again make it listen.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, Deputy, not statements.

Deputy Mick Barry: Given the derisive response of people via text and Twitter in the past

30 minutes to the plan to send the Minister, Deputy Coveney, to meet the bin companies next week and the feeling that this is not good enough and is a shambles, I will give the Tánaiste another opportunity to answer the question of whether she is prepared to reverse before the weekend the legislation that opened the door to this situation. Is she prepared to reverse the privatisation of bin services and introduce legislation that takes control of this crucial industry away from profiteers?

The Tánaiste: I have already made it clear that the Minister is working on this issue right now. Part of his response will be meeting the companies. I have said very clearly that he will take action to deal with this issue, which is causing concern. If the spirit of the legislation is being abused or if the companies seek to exploit the situation by increasing charges when the intention behind the legislation was to reduce them for families, action will be taken.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Broughan.

Deputy Mick Barry: There was a second question, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: What was it on?

Deputy Simon Harris: Nationalising the bin companies.

Deputy Mick Barry: Is the Tánaiste prepared to introduce legislation to reverse the privatisation, which has put these profiteers in charge of the industry?

The Tánaiste: That does not arise. We have a situation-----

An Ceann Comhairle: It does not arise. I thank the Tánaiste.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I would like to be associated with the expressions of sympathy to the Berkeley disaster families and victims.

Regarding the Road Traffic Bill, has the Tánaiste received a report from the Garda Síochána about the withdrawal of prosecutions of fixed-charge notices in respect of the NCT? Will she bring the report to the House, given that this is the latest in a series of penalty point messes? Do the withdrawals also relate to other penalty point offences, how many are there and when will she report to the House?

The Tánaiste: I have initial details in respect of that issue. The Garda has started an urgent examination of how many cases are involved. In the first instance, every one of those individuals who are involved broke the law. Clearly, inappropriate action was taken. People had paid a fine and subsequently received summonses. Clearly, this issue must be dealt with. I will put as much information as I possibly can before the House. I do not have any information at present on whether this situation arose in terms of any criminal charge other than the one that the Deputy has mentioned. However, it is important that confidence be maintained in the penalty points approach. I am very concerned about what happened. It was an administrative, procedural error. Thankfully, it has now been realised that this was happening. Action will be taken to deal with the matter where points have been added to people's licences inappropriately.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish to refer to two items of legislation, the first of which is the EirGrid Bill. Communities in my area in the south east are very concerned about overhead pylons and they want to know when there will be legislation.

We passed a referendum recently on children's rights, and we also passed the Children First Bill. I have been inundated with calls from around the country from people who are concerned about the behaviour of Tusla. They are only allegations. I ask that the Minister for Children deal with this and conduct a review. In years to come it will be too late if this is not addressed. There are huge tribunals and investigations, and there are many concerns about the way Tusla-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Perhaps the Deputy will have a discussion with the Minister.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I will, indeed. I refer to the behaviour of Tusla in respect of certain families.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are very tight on time.

The Tánaiste: Preliminary work is being done in the Department on the EirGrid legislation.

Tusla is doing very important work. If the Deputy has any particular concerns in regard to it, he should feel free to correspond with the appropriate Minister. He did oppose the referendum on children-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I did, and maybe I had good reason.

The Tánaiste: Very important powers have been given to Tusla to protect children as a result of that referendum.

An Ceann Comhairle: I want to bring in three remaining Deputies who have been offering all week, the first being Deputy David Cullinane.

Deputy David Cullinane: The programme for Government commits to a public sector pay commission, to be established in due course. One of the sorest points for public sector workers concerns the treatment of the post-2011 new entrants. We have a two-tier parallel pay structure in place.

An Ceann Comhairle: Has the Deputy a question?

Deputy David Cullinane: Will that be a priority for the Government?

The Tánaiste: On the first point the Deputy made, the Minister informs me that, in the first instance, he is consulting the relevant stakeholders on the Lansdowne Road agreement. The arrangement is being set up at present and it will be concluded very shortly. Afterwards, the Minister will be in a position to move forward.

On the second point the Deputy raised, the matter could be considered. There will be discussions on that.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The criminal justice Bill and the criminal justice (suspended sentences of imprisonment) Bill are both promised and listed as being scheduled for pre-legislative scrutiny at a date yet to be determined. Has the date been finally fixed? Is it expected that both Bills will be in place before the recess or soon afterwards?

The Tánaiste: Both Bills will be going to Cabinet on Tuesday. We will be deciding then on the exact process to be followed.

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Deputy Robert Troy: On the health Estimates to be taken later today, I understand the contract of the sole sarcoma cancer specialist in Ireland, based in St. Vincent's hospital, is not being renewed at the end of this month. That will have serious consequences for patients who rely on her expertise. Why is the Government allowing this? Perhaps the Tánaiste can make a statement on this now.

An Ceann Comhairle: That sounds like a matter for the Topical Issue Debate.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is referring to an individual contract. It would not be a good precedent to have a discussion on that. Of course, the Minister will be happy to discuss that issue with the Deputy. The decision is one that is being taken by a particular hospital. There will obviously be an opportunity to discuss these issues in the broadest sense during the debate on the health Estimates today.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes the Order of Business. I thank everyone for their co-operation.

Establishment of Select Committees: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Regina Doherty): I move:

(1) That Select Committees as set out in column (1) of the Schedule hereto are hereby appointed pursuant to Standing Order 84A.

(2) Each Select Committee shall perform the functions set out in Standing Order 84A in respect of the Government Department or Departments listed in column (2) opposite each Committee (in anticipation of the coming into effect of the necessary Government Orders in relation to names of Departments and titles of Ministers and transfer of Departmental Administration and Ministerial Functions).

(3) The number of members appointed to each Select Committee shall be seven.

(4) Each Select Committee shall have the powers defined in Standing Order 85 (1), (2) and (3).

(5) Each Select Committee shall be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann to form a Joint Committee to carry out the functions set out in Standing Order 84A, other than at paragraph (3) thereof.

(6) Each Joint Committee shall have the powers defined in Standing Orders 85 (other than paragraph (2A) thereof), 114 and 116.

(7) The Select Committee on Justice and Equality shall have the powers defined in Standing Order 115(1)(b).

(8) The Order of the Dáil of 10th March, 2016 in relation to the Standing Order 112 Select Committee is hereby rescinded and the Committee is accordingly dissolved.

SCHEDULE

	(1) Committee	(2) Department(s)
1	Select Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine	Agriculture, Food and the Marine
2	Select Committee on Children and Youth Affairs	Children and Youth Affairs
3	Select Committee on Communications, Climate Change and Natural Resources	Communications, Climate Change and Natural Resources
4	Select Committee on Education and Skills	Education and Skills
		Finance
		Public Expenditure and Reform
5	Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach	Taoiseach
		Foreign Affairs and Trade
6	Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence	Defence
7	Select Committee on Health	Health
8	Select Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government	Housing, Planning and Local Government
9	Select Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation	Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation
10	Select Committee on Justice and Equality	Justice and Equality
11	Select Committee on Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht	Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht
12	Select Committee on Social Protection	Social Protection
13	Select Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport	Transport, Tourism and Sport

Question put and agreed to.

Standing Orders: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Regina Doherty): I move:

1. Standing Order 81 is hereby amended by the insertion of the following paragraph after paragraph (2):

‘(2A) The rules as to procedure in Select Committees shall apply, as appropriate, to procedure in sub-Committees of such Committees.’.

2. Standing Order 84 is hereby amended by the insertion of the following subparagraphs after paragraph (2)(b):

‘(c) it shall not consider any matter which is being considered, or of which notice has been given of a proposal to consider, by the Committee of Public Accounts pursuant to Standing Order 186 and/or the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993; and

(d) it shall refrain from inquiring into in public session or publishing confidential information regarding any matter if so requested, for stated reasons given in writing, by--

(i) a member of the Government or a Minister of State, or

(ii) the principal office-holder of a body under the aegis of a Department or which is partly or wholly funded by the State or established or appointed by a member of the Government or by the Oireachtas:

Provided that the Chairman may appeal any such request made to the Ceann Comhairle, whose decision shall be final.’.

3. The following additional Standing Order is hereby adopted:

‘84A. (1) The Dáil may appoint a Select Committee to consider and report to the Dáil on—

(a) such aspects of the expenditure, administration and policy of a Government Department or Departments and associated public bodies as the Committee may select, and

(b) European Union matters within the remit of the relevant Department or Departments.

(2) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann for the purposes of the functions set out in this Standing Order, other than at paragraph (3), and to report thereon to both Houses of the Oireachtas.

(3) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), a Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall consider, in respect of the relevant Department or Departments, such--

(a) Bills,

(b) proposals contained in any motion, including any motion within the meaning of Standing Order 187,

(c) Estimates for Public Services, and

(d) other matters as shall be referred to the Select Committee by the Dáil, and

(e) Annual Output Statements including performance, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of public monies, and

(f) such Value for Money and Policy Reviews as the Select Committee may se-

lect.

(4) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), a Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may consider the following matters in respect of the relevant Department or Departments and associated public bodies:

(a) matters of policy and governance for which the Minister is officially responsible,

(b) public affairs administered by the Department,

(c) policy issues arising from Value for Money and Policy Reviews conducted or commissioned by the Department,

(d) Government policy and governance in respect of bodies under the aegis of the Department,

(e) policy and governance issues concerning bodies which are partly or wholly funded by the State or which are established or appointed by a member of the Government or the Oireachtas,

(f) the general scheme or draft heads of any Bill,

(g) any post-enactment report laid before either House or both Houses by a member of the Government or Minister of State on any Bill enacted by the Houses of the Oireachtas,

(h) statutory instruments, including those laid or laid in draft before either House or both Houses and those made under the European Communities Acts 1972 to 2009,

(i) strategy statements laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas pursuant to the Public Service Management Act 1997,

(j) annual reports or annual reports and accounts, required by law, and laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas, of the Department or bodies referred to in subparagraphs (d) and (e) and the overall performance and operational results, statements of strategy and corporate plans of such bodies, and

(k) such other matters as may be referred to it by the Dáil from time to time.

(5) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), a Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall consider, in respect of the relevant Department or Departments--

(a) EU draft legislative acts standing referred to the Select Committee under Standing Order 114, including the compliance of such acts with the principle of subsidiarity,

(b) other proposals for EU legislation and related policy issues, including programmes and guidelines prepared by the European Commission as a basis of possible legislative action,

(c) non-legislative documents published by any EU institution in relation to EU

policy matters, and

(d) matters listed for consideration on the agenda for meetings of the relevant EU Council of Ministers and the outcome of such meetings.

(6) The Chairman of a Joint Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order, who shall be a member of Dáil Éireann, shall also be the Chairman of the Select Committee.

(7) The following may attend meetings of a Select or Joint Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order, for the purposes of the functions set out in paragraph (5) and may take part in proceedings without having a right to vote or to move motions and amendments:

(a) Members of the European Parliament elected from constituencies in Ireland, including Northern Ireland,

(b) Members of the Irish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and

(c) at the invitation of the Committee, other Members of the European Parliament.’.

4. Standing Order 85 is hereby amended by--

(a) the insertion of ‘oral presentations and’ before ‘written submissions’ in paragraph (2);

(b) the insertion of the following paragraph after paragraph (2):

‘(2A) power to send for persons, papers and records;’;

(c) the deletion of all words after ‘new legislation;’ in paragraph (4);

(d) the insertion of the following paragraphs after paragraph (4):

‘(4A) power to examine any statutory instrument, including those laid or laid in draft before either House or both Houses and those made under the European Communities Acts 1972 to 2009, and to recommend, where it considers that such action is warranted, whether the instrument should be annulled or amended;

(4B) for the purposes of paragraph (4A), power to require any Government Department or instrument-making authority concerned to submit a Memorandum to the Select Committee explaining any statutory instrument under consideration or to attend a meeting of the Select Committee for the purpose of explaining any such statutory instrument: Provided that such Department or authority may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil;’; and

(e) the insertion of the following paragraphs after paragraph (6):

‘(6A) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State shall attend before the Select Committee and provide, in private session if so request-

ed by the member of the Government or Minister of State, oral briefings in advance of meetings of the relevant EU Council of Ministers to enable the Select Committee to make known its views: Provided that the Committee may also require such attendance following such meetings.

(6B) power to require that the Chairperson designate of a body or agency under the aegis of a Department shall, prior to his or her appointment, attend before the Select Committee to discuss his or her strategic priorities for the role.’.

5. Standing Order 95 is hereby amended by the substitution of the following paragraph for paragraph (1):

‘(1) The member of the Government in charge of the relevant Department shall be an *ex officio* member of a Select Committee appointed pursuant to Standing Order 84A for the purpose of consideration of the matters referred to in paragraphs (3)(a), (b) and (c) of that Standing Order, and shall be entitled to vote in Select Committee proceedings: Provided that such member of the Government may nominate another member of the Government or a Minister of State to act in his or her stead for that purpose.’.

6. The following additional Standing Order is hereby adopted:

‘97A. (1) Unless otherwise provided by these Standing Orders or by Order of the Dáil, the quorum of a Select Committee or of a sub-Committee thereof, shall be three.

(2) A member of Dáil Éireann attending pursuant to Standing Order 95(3) shall not be counted for the purposes of determining a quorum.

(3) A member of the Government or Minister of State attending pursuant to Standing Order 95(1) shall be counted for the purposes of determining a quorum.

(4) The quorum of a Joint Committee shall be the combined quorum of the two Select Committees of which it is comprised, minus one: Provided that for the purposes of determining a quorum, at least one of the members present shall be a member of Dáil Éireann and one a member of Seanad Éireann.’.

7. Standing Order 114 is hereby amended by--

(a) the insertion of the following proviso to paragraph (3)(c):

‘Provided that the Dáil may substitute, add to or otherwise vary, the reasoned opinion set out in the Committee’s report by way of amendment to the motion tabled by the Chairman under this paragraph;’; and

(b) the substitution of the following for paragraph (3)(d):

‘(4) Where the Dáil agrees a motion tabled pursuant to paragraph (3)(c) of this Standing Order, either with or without amendment, the Ceann Comhairle shall cause a copy of--

(a) the Resolution agreed by the Dáil,

(b) the reasoned opinion agreed by the Dáil, and

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(c) the report of the Committee referred to in paragraph (3)(c),

to be sent to the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission.’.

8. Standing Order 186 is hereby amended by the insertion of ‘Standing Order 85 (2A) and’ before ‘Standing Order 88’ in paragraph (4)(a), and the deletion of ‘twelve’ and the substitution therefor of ‘thirteen’ in paragraph (9).”

Question put and agreed to.

Final Report of Committee of Selection: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Regina Doherty): I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

(a) approves the First Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 27F, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 15th June 2016, and appoints members to Select Committees accordingly; and

(b) pursuant to Standing Order 93(2), appoints the following members as Chairs of Committees:

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin - Chair of the Committee on Justice and Equality

Deputy John McGuinness - Chair of the Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach

Deputy Fiona O’Loughlin - Chair of the Committee on Education and Skills

Deputy Maria Bailey - Chair of the Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government

Deputy John Curran - Chair of the Committee on Social Protection

Deputy Brendan Smith - Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence

Deputy Peadar Tóibín - Chair of the Committee on Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht

Deputy Michael Harty - Chair of the Committee on Health

Deputy Pat Deering - Chair of the Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Deputy Hildegard Naughton - Chair of the Committee on Communications, Climate Change and Natural Resources

Deputy Brendan Griffin - Chair of the Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport

Deputy Mary Butler - Chair of the Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation

Deputy Jim Daly - Chair of the Committee on Children and Youth Affairs.

Question put and agreed to.

Presentation of Estimates 2016: Motion

Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality(Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I move:

That, notwithstanding Standing Order 182(1) and (2) of the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business, the following Revised Estimates for the Public Services for the year ending 31st December 2016, be presented to the Dáil and circulated to members on 16th June 2016, being a date later than that prescribed for the presentation of Estimates and that the Revised Estimates be referred to Select Committees pursuant to Standing Orders 84A(3)(c) and 182(3).

Vote 1 - President's Establishment (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 2 - Department of the Taoiseach (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 3 - Office of the Attorney General (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 5 - Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 6 - Office of the Chief State Solicitor (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 7 - Office of the Minister for Finance (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 8 - Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 9 - Office of the Revenue Commissioners (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 10 - Office of the Appeal Commissioners (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 11 - Public Expenditure and Reform (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 12 - Superannuation and Retired Allowances (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 13 - Office of Public Works (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 14 - State Laboratory (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 15 - Secret Service (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 17 - Public Appointments Service (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 18 - National Shared Services Office (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 19 - Office of the Ombudsman (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 27 - International Co-operation (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 28 - Foreign Affairs and Trade (*Revised Estimate*).

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Vote 29 - Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 30 - Agriculture, Food and the Marine (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 31 - Transport, Tourism and Sport (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 32 - Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 33 - Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 34 - Environment, Community and Local Government (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 35 - Army Pensions (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 36 - Defence (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 39 - Office of Government Procurement (*Revised Estimate*).

Vote 40 - Children and Youth Affairs (*Revised Estimate*).

Question put and agreed to.

Estimates for Public Services 2016

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I move the following Estimate:

Vote 38 - Health (Revised).

That a sum not exceeding €13,649,033,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2016, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Health and certain other services administered by that Office, including grants to the Health Service Executive and miscellaneous grants.

I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the Revised Estimate for 2016 for my Department - Vote 38. It comes in the context of the Government's determination to put the fruits of economic success to work for the people by improving the services that really matter and make a difference to their lives. I am privileged to have become Minister for Health at a time when we are in a period of reinvestment in the health service which gives me the opportunity to address some immediate issues facing patients, as well as meeting programme for Government commitments on which I want to deliver in my first 100 days in office. They include a winter initiative to manage overcrowding in emergency departments, an integral part of which is the provision of increased resources for home care services.

It is also of particular importance that the Revised Estimate places the health service on a sustainable financial footing. I welcome the statement by the director general of the Health Service Executive that the additional funding has stabilised the finances for 2016 and allows a realistic target to be achieved, with the emphasis he placed on the need for effective financial management. Additional funding of €300 million was provided in budget 2016 and this, with the Supplementary Estimate of €600 million remaining in the health sector base moving into 2016, resulted in an increase of €900 million on the 2015 budget, albeit that some of this had to be used to address once-off measures from the previous year. While the funding secured in

the budget was welcome, it was becoming increasingly clear that the HSE was facing financial challenges in 2016, including the national service plan, as approved. The late approval of the 2016 Estimates has allowed the Government an opportunity to reconsider the health Estimate in the light of the emerging financial pressures and the economic position in which the country finds itself.

I am very pleased to announce that the Government is asking the Oireachtas to allocate a further €500 million in Exchequer funding for the health sector in 2016. This brings the gross current budget for the health sector in 2016 to €13.695 billion. This is equivalent to an increase of €1.4 billion compared to the original 2015 allocation of €12.295 billion and €736 million more than the final revised allocation for 2015. In percentage terms, this represents a 6% increase on the final revised budget for 2015 and an 11% increase on the original voted budget for 2015. This very welcome additional funding will stabilise the health sector financially and allow the HSE to set realistic and achievable targets for service areas, while still requiring it and service providers to demonstrate effective management control. It is an indication of the Government's commitment to reinvestment in the health service.

I o'clock

While I am confident that we are in a far more stable financial position than we have been for some time, 2016 and beyond still contain real challenges. We have an increased and ageing population in this country, an increase in chronic conditions and new and expensive medicines and treatments. Our progress in diagnosis and screening for cancers and chronic illness means more people require treatments. Health services throughout the world are struggling with rising costs and Ireland is no exception. We must recognise the additional resource demands that come as a result of these new pressures.

I acknowledge these pressures and I am particularly pleased that the Dáil recently passed a motion to set up the Committee on the Future of Healthcare to develop a single long-term vision for health care and the direction of health policy in Ireland. I firmly believe that the Irish health service will benefit greatly from a single unifying vision that we can all get behind and that can help to drive reform and development of the system over the next decade. In particular, it is important that we work towards achieving universal health care. The motion establishing the committee notes the importance of achieving a single-tier health service in which access to services is based on need. The committee is due to provide a report to the Oireachtas within six months of its initial meeting. As Minister, I wish to assure the House that I will provide full support to assist this committee as necessary and as it requires. I am grateful to my colleagues, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, for their support and understanding in dealing with the challenges faced by the health sector.

The level of health services to be provided within the available funding is as set out in the HSE 2016 national service plan along with some additional programme for Government commitments, which I will outline later. The service issues which will be addressed under the Revised Estimate, as outlined in the service plan, include funding to reduce delayed discharges and emergency department overcrowding through providing additional funding for community beds and long-term residential care. It also provides for continuing the investment to improve the standard of care in residential services for persons with a disability through providing enhanced staffing levels and improving the quality and standard of their surroundings.

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In the primary care arena the full-year effect of the under six and over 70 free general practitioner care is provided for, along with the extension of GP care without fees for all children under 12 years of age in the latter part of this year. The further roll-out of BreastCheck, enhanced provision of speech and language therapy, developments to our maternity services in line with the maternity strategy and further additional funding for mental health, which will be outlined by my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, were also provided for in the Estimate.

In the budget and this Revised Estimate the additional funding required to maintain existing levels of service in the acute sector is provided. Funding is also provided for ongoing strategic developments in areas such as paediatric scoliosis, strokes, the living donor programme and organ donor services, acute coronary care, bilateral cochlear implants and cancer services.

Earlier this year the Government launched the first national maternity strategy, a significant milestone in terms of the development of national maternity policy. Additional funding has been provided for maternity service developments in 2016, all of which will be allocated in line with the strategy.

The programme for Government emphasises the need for sustained commitment to improving waiting times for patients, with a particular focus on those patients waiting longest. It commits to €15 million funding for the National Treatment Purchase Fund for an initiative targeted at those waiting longest from a continuing investment of €50 million per year to reduce waiting lists. The Department is currently engaging with the NTPF and the HSE in planning a dedicated 2016 waiting list initiative focused on endoscopy. The NTPF clearly has an important role to play and next week I will be meeting those responsible to discuss further waiting list initiatives.

Delayed discharges and waiting lists for acute services can arise when sufficient supports are not available for our older citizens in the community. Our population is ageing rapidly, with advances in health care leading to a dramatic rise in our older population. There is now a stronger emphasis on home care and other community services that provide a greater range of options to avoid admission to acute hospitals, support early discharge, and, where appropriate, to rehabilitate and re-able patients after periods of particular difficulty.

The HSE provides a range of community-based services aimed at ensuring older people receive safe, timely and appropriate care and treatment at the lowest level of complexity and as close to home as possible. However, demand for these services is rising as more people are supported in their homes rather than in hospitals or nursing homes, and I am delighted that the Government has been able to respond to this demand by providing an additional €40 million for home care in 2016 in this Revised Estimate.

For the future, A Programme for a Partnership Government commits to increasing funding for home care packages and home help year on year.

Of the additional €40 million we are announcing today, €20 million will be allocated to ensure that the 10.4 million home help hours, 15,450 home care packages, 130 intensive home care packages and 313 transitional care beds provided in 2015 are maintained; €10 million will ensure that the rate of service allocation can be maintained during the summer months; and €10 million has been ring-fenced for home care as part of the new winter initiative. There will, however, always be a cohort of older people who require a quality long-term residential care

option. This must continue to be available to anyone who needs it.

The Government, together with the statutory and non-statutory agencies which provide services to people with disabilities, have been working towards empowering people with disabilities to live independent lives, provide them with greater independence in accessing the services they choose and enhancing their ability to tailor the supports they require to meet their needs and plan their lives. This year funding of €1.59 billion in total is being provided for health and personal social services for a wide and complex range of services and supports for people with disabilities, including the additional €31 million which was secured for disability services as part of this Revised Estimate today, details of which were outlined by the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, last week.

The additional funding will cover costs incurred from compliance with national residential standards, services provided to meet the changing needs of people with disabilities and, importantly, the provision of emergency residential places. Of this additional funding, €3 million is earmarked for new initiatives, including an additional provision for services to meet the need of school leavers with disabilities and the anticipated cost of a number of emergency residential placements arising this year.

There is an onus on us all to use this substantial resource more effectively and efficiently. Most important, we must ensure that we are achieving real and significant improvements in the lives of people with disabilities.

Enhancing primary care and integration of care between primary and secondary are priorities for the new Government. Significant progress has already been made. GP care without fees has been successfully introduced for children under the age of six and all people aged 70 years and over. This has resulted in approximately 800,000 people now being eligible for GP care without fees, without having to undergo a means test. The service for those aged under six includes age-based preventative checks focused on health and well-being and a cycle of care for children with asthma. Other service developments include: the introduction of a diabetes cycle of care for adult patients with type 2 diabetes; an enhanced support framework for rural GPs; and a revised list of special items of service under the contract to encourage the provision of more services in the primary care setting.

There will be further investment in primary care, an essential element of which must be a comprehensive new GP contract, including an extension of GP care without fees for all children aged 11 years and under, including the asthma cycle of care. Other measures proposed are expanded GP access to diagnostic services and allowing more GPs around the country to offer minor surgery procedures.

There are two areas in particular to which I would like to refer in the context of these Revised Estimates and they are home care services and mental health, areas under the control and remit of the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee. Members will be aware that in the context of the approval of the national service plan, it was agreed that €20 million in time-related savings would be utilised to support services. I am pleased to say that as a result of the increased provision for health, we can provide the required funding for home care without relying on these time-related savings and can therefore restore the full ring-fenced mental health budget.

The Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, and my Department will work with the HSE to ensure that our mental health services get the maximum benefit from this funding, including,

where appropriate, its use to support the development and refurbishment of the necessary facilities to house our new staff and provide more therapeutic surroundings for our service users.

In addition to the services set out in the national service plan, I am also pleased to announce that there is also scope for us to provide for the implementation of programme for Government commitments for the first 100 days. In particular, the additional funding being debated in the Dáil today allows us to provide €40 million in funding for a winter initiative to help address overcrowding in emergency departments. This initiative is currently in the early planning stages by both the Department and HSE. I have met the ED task force and asked for its input and there will be a specific ED task force meeting on this initiative. It will seek to support actions which improve patient flow through acute hospitals, as well as enhancing primary care and social care services.

As an integral part of this initiative, I will increase resources for home care services. As a result, we are not only maintaining home care and transitional care services at 2015 levels but are increasing them. The programme for Government acknowledges the need to improve services to our older citizens. The provision of additional home care services and transitional care will assist more older people to leave our acute hospitals when they are clinically ready to do so and this will allow patients awaiting admission in our emergency departments to be admitted.

Both my Department and the HSE recognise that the need for ongoing strengthened accountability and good governance within the HSE and voluntary bodies remains of critical importance. The HSE has reviewed its accountability framework after its first year of operation in 2015 and is involved in the ongoing implementation of the recommendations of that review. This is focused on strengthening the operation, effectiveness and application of the accountability framework throughout the organisation to date, and will identify further changes to improve the process.

The allocation to address the budget overrun in the HSE must and will be underpinned by improved governance and accountability. My officials and the HSE will be working on the development of new and strengthened measures in this regard over the next two weeks. Health service management will be accountable for performing within the budget set by these additional resources. The Government believes the greatest need for improved accountability and control is in the acute hospital sector. For this reason, the programme for Government contains a commitment to establishing a performance management unit, which will work with individual hospitals where there are difficulties in achieving improvements. The establishment of this unit will contribute to a stronger focus on operational control and accountability in acute hospitals. I also see an enhanced role for the Oireachtas and Oireachtas committees. Those who are responsible for spending taxpayers' money on vital public services must be accountable.

When we talk about the need for improved performance, it is important for us to acknowledge the progress that is being made and the work people are doing to deliver improvements. The Department of Health is publishing the second annual report of the national health care quality reporting system today. This report, which presents health information related to immunisation uptake, cancer screening and survival, and the management of chronic diseases including asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, stroke and heart failure, shows that clear progress is being made. It also sets out areas where there is room for more improvement.

The Government is committed to the development of a modern and patient-centred health

service. While there is undoubtedly a strong case for increased health funding in the years ahead, it is also important to acknowledge that at a time of growing demand, more funding alone will not resolve the difficulties our services face. There must also be a focus on building a more effective health and social care service. Our experience during the boom years of the Celtic tiger, when satisfactory returns did not always accrue from considerable increases in health spending, is a stark testament to that.

I would like to take the opportunity presented by this debate on the allocation of additional resources to the health service, with the consent of the Oireachtas, to pay tribute to the health care staff who have taken us through some very difficult years. While issues have undoubtedly arisen, there have always been positive elements in our health service that are too often overlooked in this House. It was due to the hard work, commitment and dedication of the staff of the health service that it survived the most challenging period in its history. While we still face challenges, there is every reason to be optimistic and to believe things are now more manageable. We have a chance to embark together on a journey towards a better place for patients and front-line staff.

I thank the Members for their consideration of this Revised Estimate. I ask the House to consent to the provision of these much-needed additional resources to our health service. We are now in a period of reinvestment in the Irish public health service. I look forward to working with all Members of the Oireachtas in this regard.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I would like to share time with Deputy Browne.

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

Deputy Billy Kelleher: We are here again - this time in June, rather than October - to discuss a Supplementary Estimate for the Department of Health and the HSE. We accepted in recent years that the accounting practices, the assessment of demand and the provision of the funding needed to meet that demand were under pressure because of the financial downturn. The budgeting system in the Department of Health and the HSE has been chaotic over the past five years. The only people who thought the health budgets that were being proposed were believable were the Ministers of the day and those who worked closely with them when they were presenting those budgets to the House. I suggest they were in denial. No one other than the Ministers and their senior officials in the Department of Health believed the budgets that were being presented. On several occasions, Mr. O'Brien of the HSE said publicly at Oireachtas committees that the budgets which had been provided were not sustainable for the delivery of the required services.

Those who talk about the new political dispensation have said there is a need to involve everybody in the compilation of a new health strategy. A committee is being established to consider the preparation of a ten-year plan. The Dáil and the existing health committee have a role in discussing the budgetary systems that are in place. I suggest the best thing to do would be to start with an honest debate about the type of health service we want, how much we are willing to pay for it and what we expect out of it. We have never had such a debate. People waltz around this place on a regular basis promising the creation of a free health care system. We could have a system that is free at the point of use, but there would be costs somewhere else. Who is going to access health care? Who is entitled to free health care? Who needs health care? These are fundamental issues that need to be discussed. Over the five-year term of the previous Government and indeed prior to that, this House consistently listened to spin and non-

sense about sustainable health budgets and real investment in health services.

The bottom line is that we will be rationing health forever and a day. Any modern country in western Europe will always be rationing health. Somebody somewhere will be playing God with somebody's life when decisions are being made about where resources and funds should go and who should be prioritised. I will give a case in point. The Minister just said that free GP care for those under the age of six and over the age of 70 has been "successfully introduced". Of course that has been done. As a result of that scheme being "successfully" rolled out to people in those age groups, some of those between the ages of six and 70 are suffering. They cannot get the resources they desperately need because others have been prioritised. The successful roll-out of a scheme in one area can have profound implications for the lives of people in another cohort of the population or of society. When we talk about investment in health services, we must be clear that we are talking about prioritising one group over another group. We must acknowledge that in our public health system, accessibility is based on one's private health insurance or one's ability to pay, rather than one's clinical need.

Even though he supported the previous Government, the Minister, Deputy Harris, is in no way responsible for some of the policies that were pursued by that Government. The reality is that as soon as the then Government decided the same cost would be imposed on all private health insurance companies for public beds, it chose to prioritise the private patient over the public patient. Hospitals immediately saw this measure as something that could be used to raise revenue at a time when they were starved of resources and funding. Policies that were introduced during the previous Government's term prioritised the private patient over the public patient. It is still happening to this day. If two people are wheeled in, one of whom can pay and the other of whom cannot pay, of course the hospital will take the patient who can pay. We need to be very honest about what we want.

I wish the committee on the ten-year strategy well. Deputy Browne and I will be joined by one more Fianna Fáil Deputy on the committee. We will absolutely play our role. I want to make it clear that the committee faces a massive undertaking. This nation has spent 60 years trying to come up with a health strategy. We are still talking about coming up with a strategy. Fundamentally, I do not expect the committee to come up with a complete strategy for health care over the next ten years in just six months. We will need to have ideological debates on issues like how health care should be funded, who should be able to access health care, the role of private health care providers, the role of private health insurance and the obligations of the State. Such fundamental issues will need to be debated as we consider how to move towards a sustainable and affordable system of universality. Of course some people will have views on universality, which is a noble concept but comes at an inordinate cost and has significant implications.

We could throw an additional €3 billion or €4 billion into the health system this year. It is clear that the more one invests in health care, the better the outcomes should be. The funds being invested have to come from somewhere else, however. It is at that point that the competitiveness of the economy starts to be undermined. We are always trying to strike a balance and to ensure the decisions we make do not have profound implications somewhere else. Health care is always prioritised in that process. Over recent years, we have consistently pretended that we are always trying to look after the most vulnerable people in our society and ensure funding is directed at those who most need it. However, that has not been the case when numerous decisions have been made. Mental health service budgets have been raided on a continual basis. They have been pillaged year in, year out. At the same time, the Minister has come

in here to say that medical cards or free GP cards have been successfully rolled out to people under the age of six. I do not believe this approach has been successful. It cannot be said to be successful if people who are suffering with mental health issues, or people who are waiting an inordinate length of time to access essential care, do not have all the resources they need available to them. One should not prioritise people for electoral purposes, but that is what the previous Government did. Nobody in this Dáil would argue that a healthy six year old has more entitlement to a free GP service than a nine year old child who is dying with leukaemia, but that is what has happened. We have to be honest that, as a State, we are consistently rationing health care. We must prioritise the clinical needs of the individual over political expediency. We have been slow to admit it in recent times.

This particular Supplementary Estimate, which is €500 million, is essential and required because the budgetary proposition announced last October to fund health services was not sustainable. This was highlighted by the HSE's Mr. Tony O'Brien and accepted by most Members, except the former Minister who said it was the first realistic budget in several years. It was not a realistic budget, although there was an increase in the moneys required. However, all the needs assessments from the HSE's service plans identified the changing nature of medical provision due to demographic changes and that this was not a sustainable budget.

We have been talking about primary care since 1987 when the then Minister for Health, Dr. Rory O'Hanlon, spoke in this Chamber about the need to reconfigure our acute services and ensure primary care became the bulwark and the main mechanism for delivering health care. We are now in 2016 and still talking about it. We have done very little with primary care. We have opened buildings but have not opened people's minds to the concept of primary care being the major way of delivering health care. We need to actually turn our thoughts to how we deliver care. Home care packages, home helps, community nurse services and GP-led services have all been put under significant pressure in recent years. We wonder why a 92-year-old is lying on a trolley in hospital for three days when they should not have been there in the first place. They are not sick but elderly and dying. However, they are put in corridors and wards of our acute hospital services.

I hope the health strategy committee, first proposed by Deputy Shortall, can take the politics out of health. I hope it will allow us to be honest with ourselves as a society in what we value, what we prioritise and, more importantly, what we need to do to provide health care and how we are willing to pay for it. That will take a significant effort on everybody's part because of some strong ideological views people have on health care.

For the past several years, we have consistently pretended we are prioritising health care and the vulnerable when, in fact, the opposite is the case. This Supplementary Estimate is testimony of this again.

Deputy James Browne: I welcome the allocation of additional funding for health care. However, it is only necessary as a result of the lack of credibility in the previous Estimates which had no real honesty.

My concern and focus is on mental health. I welcome the return of the €12 million funding to mental health services. I know it was hard fought for but the availability of it is only the first step. We must ensure this money is well spent and targeted. Going on past HSE figures, people have a trust issue as to whether this money will be spent. It is critical this money is distributed and is spent on mental health with further spending next year.

People with psychiatric illnesses do not have access to community-based interventions or support ten years after the launch of A Vision for Change. The full implementation of the policy is part of the agreement between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to support a minority Government. We will be watching closely to ensure the money is spent to fully implement A Vision for Change. We must also review A Vision for Change and see where we are going over the next ten years in mental health service provision to ensure it is kept as a priority. We need 24/7 access to mental health services, particularly in our community and primary care centres for recovery-led mental health care. As well as 24/7 community health care teams, we need a proper plan for the attraction and retention of mental health staff. Last week, psychiatric nurses threatened to go on strike not just about pay but the conditions under which they must work. They are short-staffed and under pressure, seeing those looking for help cannot get the supports they need. We need a clear plan for keeping nurses and psychiatrists, including career pathways for them.

Emergency departments are not appropriate places for people suffering acute mental health episodes. They need to get support in the community. If one is suffering from a serious mental health situation, going to an emergency department is stressful enough. Many of these departments do not have psychiatric nurses and those that do, have them only from nine to five, Monday to Friday. We know psychiatric episodes are worse at night times and at weekends when people are alone or have taken alcohol and so forth, which may exacerbate the situation.

If one goes to the emergency department in Wexford hospital after 5 o'clock, one will be seen by a triage nurse after four or five hours. This nurse will have basic training in mental health and he or she will do his or her best. The triage nurse will telephone a psychiatrist at Waterford hospital who will make an assessment over the phone. If the psychiatrist deems further assessment necessary, the patient will be told to make his or her way to the Waterford emergency department, where one could wait another four or five hours. We know there is a significant level of walkouts from our emergency departments, particularly from people suffering from psychiatric episodes. It is understandable. If they are under stress, the last place they need to be sitting for five hours is in an emergency department. If a patient is deemed not to be a priority by Waterford hospital, he or she will be told to make his or her way home. This is not acceptable. We need to ensure there are supports in place for people with psychiatric issues.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I wish to share time with Deputy David Cullinane.

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

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Despite all of the marketing language of the budget for the health services, against the backdrop of the Supplementary Estimates for the past several years, there are serious problems not only for this year but for the years ahead. The position for acute hospital groups into the future is particularly challenging. The plans for hospital trusts in the programme for Government raise serious concerns. What we see there is not a blueprint for a public health system but a private health business. The programme for Government concerns us as a charter for privatisation of our health services, putting them further out of the reach of the people who need them the most. It is undeniable our public health system continues to suffer acute and chronic underfunding. The annual deficits run up across the system every year, alongside lengthening waiting lists and numbers of patients on trolleys. These are a testament to the failure of successive Governments to allocate adequate funds. Not only that, but it is a testament to how we have failed to develop a long-term vision for our health services.

I very much welcome the newly constituted committee. I want to record once again my appreciation to Deputy Róisín Shortall for proposing it. We will, of course, participate in this committee. We will be constructive and solutions-focused, as we always are. The fact is that we must become better stewards of our health spending. This is not about pursuing efficiencies in order to facilitate cuts to the overall health budget. Rather, it is about ensuring we deliver the best care possible from the funds available.

While I will touch on some of the specifics of the Estimates and the ministerial announcements made in the past week, I would like to take this opportunity to touch briefly on two areas where I believe there must be greater emphasis in terms of health spending. The first is reducing reliance on agency staff and the second is reining in the pharmaceutical bill. In the first instance, we all know that a moratorium on recruitment across all areas of the public sector was introduced in March 2009. Many Deputies may not be aware that the moratorium in the health service was, in fact, brought in years previously, in 2007, and it created a health system propped up by agency staff. We need to ensure that the HSE reduces reliance on expensive agency staff and makes permanent posts more attractive for qualified applicants.

The current approach is clearly costing us dearly, not alone financially. In financial terms, however, in the period from January to May, over €68 million was spent on agency staff, which amounts to 2,378 whole-time equivalents. If progress is being made on this, what progress has been made to date in the conversion of agency staff posts to permanent positions? How many posts have been converted in the last six, 12 and 18 months? What are the approximate savings to the Exchequer through converting these positions? The Minister has already agreed with me that agency staff do not represent good value for money, although we cannot deny they do very valuable work. We need to see exactly what the Minister is doing about this.

The second issue is one that has been topical in recent weeks and one which I believe will become more prevalent in the future. The undeniable fact is that the Irish taxpayer is still paying too much for on-patent medicines by international standards and, importantly, our system still uses far too much of them. On-patent drugs account for 78% of the State's public health drug budget. It is clear the State health service has a limited and finite budget, and this will always be the case. Therefore, it is important that issues of cost effectiveness and value for money are considered.

Sinn Féin does not accept that these two policy objectives are mutually exclusive. We have proposed a range of measures in our "Better 4 Health" policy document that would address the serial impasses in regard to access to new medicines. The Minister, the Department of Health, the HSE and the pharmaceutical industry all have clear responsibilities in this regard. Indeed, the European Commission, on page 74 of the Commission working document that is part of the country-specific recommendations process, noted:

For medicines no longer patent-protected but which fall outside the system of interchangeable groups, no price benchmarking exercise has been performed. As before, the authorities seem reluctant to activate their pricing powers gained under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act.

The Government, the EU and the international community should not allow pharmaceutical companies to hold citizens or states to ransom. This is, in effect, what they are doing and what they will continue to do until such time as the structure for funding the research, development and commercialisation of new medicines is redirected towards the public good and the

interests of citizens, and away from big global corporations. The Government needs to play a prominent role in calling for this much-needed change at EU level. Bulk buying, risk sharing, State funding of research and development and compulsory licensing are all possible options that must be considered. I would like to know if further engagements are intended with the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association in regard to proprietary drugs, and with the Association of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers in Ireland in regard to generic drugs. What further engagements does the Minister intend to have? Is he seeking to achieve new and increased savings through agreement with both of these bodies? On a very important point, has he identified targets in this area?

Before I come to the Estimates, I want to ask on one important detail in regard to the health Estimates. Has the Minister put money aside for compensating Amanda Mellet and any future women who will need compensation until the eighth amendment is removed? The UN found that our laws violated Ms Mellet's entitlement to freedom from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. The UN further found that Ireland, which is a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is obliged to provide Ms Mellet with an effective remedy, including adequate compensation and the psychological treatment she may need. We received the Estimates yesterday morning, and I apologise if I have missed it, but given the equivocation of this Government in dealing with this issue, which means it is almost certain that other women will be placed in the very unfortunate and tragic, but very avoidable, position in which we placed Ms Mellet, I have to ask whether the Minister has put money aside. The bills and the need for compensation will rack up until something is done in this regard. More women will be subject to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment for which they will be entitled to compensation. It is a shame that we are here talking about compensation when we should be talking about real remedies. We should be talking about taking care of these women, not compensating them. Even on the issue of compensation, I see nothing in the Estimates to give me, as a woman, or Ms Mellet, as someone who has been through this, any comfort that money has been put aside to deal with these awful circumstances. This is an issue that will not go away. The Minister can dismiss it, kick it into a citizen's assembly and deny it, but it will not go away. It is very real and it needs to be addressed.

With regard to the Estimates, particularly the ministerial announcements this past week, I welcome that the €12 million plundered from the mental health budget earlier this year will be restored. I would take issue with references being made to this as restoration, which was said in some of the Minister's press releases, or as additional funding. This is not additional funding but funding that was callously removed from this area and that is now being replenished after a public outcry.

I read the Estimates in the short time allowed to us before this debate and I am not impressed. I fail to see any meaningful investment and it is clear to me that the publication of the Estimates spells bad news for those who are on waiting lists - those who will spend tonight on a trolley, those who will continue to wait for vital services, those families who will be diagnosed with a fatal foetal abnormality and those who are depending on this Government to respond to their very real needs.

Deputy David Cullinane: In 2011, in addressing the previous Minister for Health, Senator James Reilly, I told him he could be a reforming, radical Minister for Health. I then said the same to the Minister, Deputy Varadkar. Unfortunately, both failed in their jobs - both failed to reform the health system and both failed to bring us any closer to a single-tier, fair universal health care system. The Minister, Deputy Harris, now has the opportunity to do that. I hope he

will not be the third health Minister of this Government who will fail in that duty.

The Minister and the Government present this as new money. The so-called extra €500 million for health is typical of Government spin. Not even Fianna Fáil in its darkest days, and it was very good at spin, would have had the brass neck to come in and present this as new money when everybody knows it is not. The Government knows it cannot introduce a supplementary budget because of rules which Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil supported. What we have here is a supplementary budget by another name. This €500 million is not extra money but funds necessary to stop parts of the system from literally shutting down. This is why the money is being allocated. Why can the Government not provide adequate funding to our health system at budget time rather than having these continuous underspends every year? We point this out and provide for increased funding for health in our alternative budgets but they are knocked back and criticised by the Government, which then comes in here months after the budget to seek more money because Sinn Féin was right when we said not enough money was put into health in the first place.

The Government purposely underfunds health and then announces emergency funding as some kind of bonus. It is some sort of gift that extra money will be spent. This is cynical. It is cynicism of the worst kind. There is a need for real reform of our health service. The Minister and the Government paint a very rosy picture of our health service when it suits, and they give the sense the Government is improving our health services and that it is making a difference. Let us see if it is true. Let us deal with a number of facts. I received from the HSE a response to a parliamentary question tabled to the Minister on the number of patients at University Hospital Waterford who were languishing on hospital trolleys for the first nine weeks of this year in comparison to the number of patients languishing on hospital trolleys in the same period in 2015. The figure for the first nine weeks of 2015 was 281. The figure for this year was 710, which means almost three times as many patients were left lying in hospital trolleys at University Hospital Waterford. This was just with regard to the accident and emergency department. This was according to the reply to a parliamentary question and the Minister shaking his head does not alter facts. Facts are facts.

Deputy Simon Harris: Distortion of facts.

Deputy David Cullinane: This is as a result of many problems in many areas of the hospital in Waterford with regard to orthopaedics, ophthalmology and ear nose and throat. There are real pressure points in all of these areas. All of these bottlenecks merge in the accident and emergency department and create the crisis we have. We have record numbers of people awaiting treatment and not only in Waterford. This morning, the Minister was in the Chamber when Deputy Mattie McGrath raised on Leaders' Questions the issue of what is happening in the acute hospital in Tipperary. The Minister recognised and accepted there are capacity issues. There are capacity issues in acute hospitals throughout the State. The Minister needs to get real about the extent of the crisis and deal with it.

I wish to discuss public sector pay and what might happen in respect of the public pay commission which the Government will establish. The Minister needs to prioritise post-2011 new entrants. We cannot continue with a two-tier pay structure. I believe in the principle of equal pay for equal work. If the Government agrees with this, it must deal with this as a priority in health and throughout the public service generally. I appeal to the Minister to push this as a priority for the Department when these opportunities arise.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I wish the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, well in what is a very difficult area. This is their first engagement of many and I congratulate them on their appointments. Their combined age is probably younger than some of their predecessors singular.

Deputy Simon Harris: That is true.

Deputy Alan Kelly: With regard to the Estimates, most of us who observe these things knew this day would come and the €500 million is obviously necessary now. This has been going on for decades under Fianna Fáil and other Governments. It is like a figure is picked from the sky for the health budget and it is constantly supplemented, as everyone knows. We cannot continue like this. Collectively, I hope all of us who deal with the issue of health care will come to a process by which we can support proper budgeting.

I note from the briefing document, for which I thank the Minister although unfortunately I received it only this morning, the Department states it is working towards the development of programme budgeting and changing the structure of the health Vote. It is incredible that in this day and age the process by which the Vote is announced and the way in which it is segmented and structured does not work. We need to change this. The document states it will take time to do this but I find this strange. Why it cannot be changed quickly is, perhaps, something Deputy Harty will want to examine as part of the committee's work.

Later this year the Minister will seek more money. We all know this. That €500 million will do it will simply not happen. I will lay this bet with the Minister right now, and I guarantee him he will be looking for more money. It is a simple fact.

I welcome the comments the Minister made earlier about the prioritisation from a budgetary point of view of the management of the acute hospital network. It is the right way to go. With regard to the mid west and south east, to be frank, I could never accuse those managing non-acute areas of not managing their budgets well. They manage them particularly well. I am not convinced I could state this confidently about the acute side. This is not through the fault of management in these areas. Different circumstances exist, which we might get onto later, and I appreciate this.

I am very much taken by the committee, which I believe is a good idea, but I agree with Deputy Kelleher that we will have to be realistic. What will we achieve in six months? It will not be utopian. We will not be able to achieve everything. There are ideological differences in the House, which is why we are here, on health care and health care management, which we will not solve in six months. I ask that we identify what we will try to achieve as regards some form of pathway to a consistency of approach in health care. Somebody will replace the Minister eventually and that person will deal with the same issues. I hope we will have laid the foundations through the committee to create some form of pathway for managing a better health service, particularly with regard to how we manage funding the health care system.

It is necessary for all of us, particularly those who are spokespersons for various areas of health and the Minister, to make it above politics. I know this is a cliché but we must adopt a different approach not only because of the political nature of the House but in general we will have to do it differently to achieve results.

I have a number of questions about some of the specific provisions the Minister has brought forward. Many of these questions remain unanswered and I hope the Minister will be able to

answer them. I do not expect he will be able to answer all of them today but he might do so in writing to me afterwards.

Will the Minister give us a breakdown of how the much vaunted accident and emergency department winter initiative will work? Where will the funding be allocated, in what measure and how will it be appropriated? It needs to be appropriated in various ways. I would like to see a breakdown of how it will work. I know the Minister was left in a position where the funding was not there but it cannot be just a case of throwing the money out there. It must be used in a quality way.

I lament the fact the post of Minister of State with responsibility for primary care was got rid of. According to the *Irish Medical Times*, which I presume is correct, the Minister stated he would personally take control of the primary care portfolio. I am glad to hear that. He might explain how he will do that. During the term of the previous Government we rolled out 90 primary care centres and commenced the construction of 73 more, and they will go some way towards the provision of facilities for people into the future. How many will be funded over the duration of this Government? What are the Minister's projections in that regard? What is the target for primary health care provision and centres? How will he measure that? Is there a figure that he will stand over for the optimum number of primary care centres that we need across the board and the various jurisdictions?

Regarding free general practitioner care, I welcome what the Minister has said about moving on from care for under sixes towards later this year increasing that to under 12s, but when will that be delivered? When and at what time of the year will he commence doing this? How does he see it being rolled out? Has he abandoned the plan to extend GP care from over 65s to over 70s or is that something that he intends to do?

I wish the new Minister of State for Mental Health very well. In fairness, she has a hard act to follow. The previous Minister was a very good one. A Vision for Change, while a fine document and something that was broadly supported, is in an implementation phase that must continue rapidly. Will that happen? Does the Minister believe he has the resources to do that? It is not something that can be done piecemeal, stopped halfway through or not implemented to the level that was planned.

I welcome the funding allocation for home care packages. This is a bugbear of mine about which I have spoken to the Minister previously. I believe the allocation will only allow matters to stand still. I have made my own inquiries about this and believe the allocation only fills a gap that was previously filled by taking funding from other sides of the budget, particularly in mental health. The allocation will only ensure that existing home care packages will be funded. It will not allow for any more home care packages. It might allow for a few extra hours for a few people in various areas but I do not believe it will have a huge impact on the totality of people. The Minister's figure is €10.4 million. That is up from €10.3 million, I think. I would like to see how that figure will work. Ultimately, we must consider what home care packages cost, at approximately €639 per week, compared to €12,000 or €15,000 for a nursing home or multiple thousands for somebody in a hospital on an acute bed. It makes common financial sense and health sense that we fund this area appropriately because it helps with pathways to the management of people, it prevents bed-blocking and financially and from the point of view of health it is the best way. The Minister will hear as a common commentary from me in my time as spokesperson on health that I am a huge advocate for this. There are multiple wins in this regard, and I ask the Minister to prioritise home care packages and home help hours. I know of

people who are simply sitting in hospitals and cannot be discharged, will not be discharged or are refusing to be discharged because the home help hours are not provided to deal with them.

Does the Minister have a timeline for the beginning and conclusion of negotiations on the new GP contract, which is obviously essential for the rolling out of GP care and enhanced primary care services? Has he met GP representatives? If not, will he do so and when will he do so? They are asking to meet, as the Minister knows. A number of us in this House have a real concern about GPs in rural areas. There are serious issues in this regard and it is something that I would like the Minister to prioritise.

Has the Minister undertaken a cost-benefit analysis of the reactivation of the National Treatment Purchase Fund? It is prioritised in the programme for Government.

How will the accident and emergency and the emergency department, ED, task force, which I welcome, be managed? This is a priority. If one considers the situation in Limerick, Beaumont, Galway and many other hospitals, what we need regarding this task force is to see how pathways will be put in place for the management of people who are going through ED units. There needs to be new thinking around this, and it is a critical area. Will there be sufficient funding, given what the task force will have to come out with, to ensure that happens? Not all of this is bricks and mortar or funding for staff, by the way. It is about managing processes, pathways and people who come into ED units in the first place. How can we ensure the primary issue we should be ensuring, namely, that first, patients get a good service but second, that some of them who are going into EDs are treated somewhere else because they should not be there in the first place? I think we are all aware of this.

I have a number of specific questions which I want to rattle through and on which the Minister may come back to me. There is a cut in the budget in the drugs initiative and he is saying that that is a transfer to the community. Can we get figures for and transparency on that? There was a big hullabaloo when about 17,000 Ministers visited the north inner city in Dublin a few days ago, yet the communities will probably want to see an explanation for this.

The allocation for medical cards on day one was not correct. Is the Minister happy that the allocation that he has now specified will work? There has been a huge increase in legal fees, according to what we are hearing. Why is that?

I welcome what the Minister has said about scoliosis. This is something I have personally advocated for and I would appreciate if he would inform me of the details of what he is doing about this because it is something that has needed to be addressed for a long time.

I wish to raise two final issues. One of them does not relate to the Minister for Health directly but relates to the Minister for Finance, and I hope the Minister for Health will speak to him. We have a serious issue in this country regarding graduate doctors.

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It cannot continue. If it does, I do not know where we will end up. There must be some provision in this regard. The average cost for somebody who is training to be a doctor is about €16,000 to €18,000. If one multiplies that by five years, one can see what the cost is for them. The issue is also a societal one because it is my belief that if mammy and daddy or somebody else does not sponsor these people or if they come from a certain social background, they simply will no longer be able to become doctors because it is too expensive.

What can we do, maybe through the Finance Act or the budget, to facilitate and help these people and, as part of that, to ensure that they stay in this country for a period of time, if not forever? Can we put them on a pathway that would ensure that they want to and will stay in this country? One of the Minister's colleagues made a proposal previously - I will not be exhaustive, but this was one of them - regarding doing something about the interest on the loans that they take out to educate themselves. I ask the Minister to consider that and talk to his colleague. I would support that.

Finally, as the Minister is aware, this morning there is a HIQA report about South Tipperary General Hospital which is quite damning. It is incredible. I have never heard the like of it before and I ask the Minister to visit the hospital with me or with others.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I am concluding, in case the Chair jumps in again. There was one such famous incident. The issue is that the hospital is in such a state that it really needs direct intervention. I have never in my life heard of representatives from HIQA going into a hospital and things being so bad that they suspended their visit and contacted the CEO of the hospital group in order to have issues addressed. They did not want to continue their visit because it was such a serious issue. Can we therefore please have some process for managing and dealing with this quickly? The Minister will not have all the solutions immediately, but the matter does need a specific intervention because people being left outside in reception areas and on trolleys with no access to critical equipment, oxygen etc. in this day and age is simply unacceptable.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I congratulate the Minister on his new post. I hope he will not be called Chopper Harris, after a famous footballer, for his cuts and so forth.

2 o'clock

Deputy Alan Kelly: Chelsea.

Deputy Gino Kenny: Yes. The crisis in the health service is universally accepted as a fact, and with good reason. Waiting lists and trolley queues are not a seasonal aberration but a permanent fixture. The state of mental health service staffing, after ten years of A Vision for Change, is a national scandal. It is extraordinary that the Government's acceptance of this crisis is still in doubt. The publication of the Revised Estimates for health shows that the Government, which has presided over the health crisis over the past five years, seems to be still stuck in denial.

During the past five years, the Fine Gael mantra was "more for less". First James Reilly and then Deputy Leo Varadkar expected us to believe the cutbacks in health funding would do no harm. A child could have predicted this. Patient support groups and staff representatives told the Government about the devastating effects of austerity cuts on patient care. All of this advice fell on deaf ears. Less service for less funding would have been bad enough. However, Fine Gael wanted to introduce the market and the private, for-profit sector, which is its answer for everything, and we got even less service for more money. As a result of the additional €5 billion spent on health insurance and out-of-pocket expenses, Ireland has ended up with health spending that is above the EU average and quality that is below the EU average. We get less for more, not more for less.

Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have misled the country about our health service and they contin-

ue to do so. All through its time in government, Fine Gael lectured the left on costing, insisting that the figures for alternative health proposals did not add up. Meanwhile, it never costed its flagship health policy of universal health insurance, UHI. Fine Gael introduced this UHI policy of private, for-profit health insurance in 2009 as FairCare. It announced it as policy in the Fine Gael 2011 election manifesto and the programme for Government. However, when it finally outlined the policy in a White Paper three years later, in 2014, it still had not costed it and could not say how much the health insurance would cost or what it would cover. I doubt Fine Gael has learned a lesson from this.

The approximately €500 million increase in the health budget announced in the Revised Estimates is almost entirely consumed by current real spending in health. This is not an over-run as the Government claims. In 2008, eight years ago, the health budget was the same, €13.6 billion, as it is today after the so-called additional money. Inflation in the same period was cumulatively more than 30% and the population is increasing in number and in age. This means there is less spending on health care than ever before. The smoke and mirrors of health funding continues. While the overall budget increases by just 6% year-on-year, the Minister has increased spending on consultancy fees in his Department by a whopping 96%.

Given the level of public concern and outcry about the neglect of mental health services, the Minister's failure to address mental health is amazing. Staffing of mental health is only three quarters what it should be and only half the recommended level for children's mental health services. Despite this, while the overall budget has increased by 6% the mental health budget has increased by only 2%. In the Revised Estimates, the €35 million noted as not yet allocated for new developments in mental health is described as additional funding. However, even when it is added in, the total is no more than the general increase in the health budget. The level of funding in mental health is only half what it should be, based on international comparisons, resulting in a deficit of €800 million.

While the announcement of developments in primary care, speech and language and psychology services is welcome and overdue, it is dismaying that no specific funding or staffing targets are addressed. While Fine Gael recently said it is committed to developing a one-tier, publicly funded health service, confidence is not inspired by the failure to be honest about deficits in capacity, staff, hospital beds and primary care centres. Continued talk of superficial fixes through buying and selling care in the National Treatment Purchase Fund and the setting up of hospital trusts can only lead public representatives, such as us, to conclude that Fine Gael, supported by Fianna Fáil, is still up to its old tricks. It is time for the Minister to stop running and spinning the numbers and address the staffing and funding crisis in the health service.

Deputy Mick Barry: Although I could probably speak on 20 different issues under this heading, given the time available I will speak on only one issue in more detail, namely, the rates for nurses in general and for young nurses in particular. Even from a young age, I have always found it telling how many capitalist societies force nurses, who save lives, to live on relatively low wages while paying handsome salaries to members of the elite, who play, to put it mildly, a far less valuable role in society. For example, a student nurse in his or her fourth year working in a hospital, with onerous duties and responsibilities receives €9.48 per hour, which is 33 cent above the minimum wage. The starting pay for a fully qualified staff nurse is less than €23,000 per year and yet the salary pay cap for bank executives is €500,000 per annum. Gerry Gannon, one of Anglo Irish Bank's Maple Ten, receives a salary of €170,000 per year from NAMA. A failed developer is paid eight times more than a young nurse and a bank executive can be paid more than 20 times the salary of a young nurse. This is a sure sign of a society which has its

values screwed up.

Late last year, the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, published the results of a survey of 600 student nurses which showed 93% of nurses had considered emigrating. More than 2,000 young Irish nurses have left the country and gone to work in Australia alone. Meanwhile, there are more than 600 vacancies for psychiatric nurses. Why are young nurses leaving and why can these positions not be filled? Let us take a few reports from the front. Claire Treacy, the industrial relations officer for the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, speaking in late 2014 on the situation pertaining in Galway University Hospital, said:

On average there are nine nurses on duty and they can be caring for 70 or 80 patients. There were nine nurses to 120 patients one day. These nurses are burned out and stressed. The hospital has been offering counselling and well-being sessions over the last few months but it is not enough. It is not one bad day at work, like other people have; every day is a bad day.

Tony Fitzpatrick, the INMO representative in the north east of the country, said of the situation in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital:

Everything is stressful. They [young nurses] go home crying. Several have told me on the drive home in the car they have tears running down their faces, that they cannot sleep at night thinking about the patients, still thinking about their colleagues at work. They know it has been impossible for them, on that day, to deliver quality care for patients.

Young nurses are leaving the country because the job is so utterly stressful. It is a downward cycle when that happens. The key to breaking that cycle is an improvement in nurses' pay. If it is increased, nurses who have gone to Australia, the UK and elsewhere will be attracted home. Increasing the number of posts will result in more nurses on wards and will lead to a situation where there will be sufficient nurses on them. The work will become less stressful and, as the word spreads, more people will be attracted home. This will then become a virtuous cycle compared to what has gone before.

In recent weeks, Luas workers achieved a pay increase of 18.3% and I congratulate them on having done so. Why not give an 18.3% pay increase to nurses, not over a period of four years but as a bold stroke over one year? The Minister and the Government will no doubt say the country cannot afford it. However, the country cannot afford a scenario where money is spent educating and training young nurses before forcing these incredible national assets to emigrate and resulting in us losing the benefit of that investment? This is skilful economics as well as a humane approach to the issue. The hidden pay traps in place for nurses need to be removed in addition to giving them a pay increase. The nurses' hand-over involves one nurse coming off duty while another is coming on. He or she has to be informed of the position regarding the patients on the ward, which can take half an hour. Nurses do not get paid for that in many cases. On wards where there should be three nurses, there are two because of cutbacks. What happens when they need a lunch break? They cannot go to the canteen or off campus. They have to eat their lunch in a room beside the ward but they are not paid for that. What about the position of the many nurses who, de facto, do the work of ward managers but who have not been promoted to the relevant positions? In other words, they are ward nurses in practice but not in the context of title or salary and they have to take a hit as a result. What about the many opportunities for training and, flowing from that, promotion that have been denied to them during the austerity years? These issues need to be tackled and resolved.

I refer back to the example of Luas workers. I urge the Government and the House to implement these policies. I believe they make sense but I have no confidence in a Fine Gael-led minority Government implementing such policies. The issue, therefore, needs to be driven by workers and the unions that represent them. They could do a lot worse than consider the example of the Luas workers who set out their case and made a militant stand for pay increases. If nurses make a similar stand for an increase, the vast majority of ordinary people in this nation will be fully behind them.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I deplore the fact that we did not receive a briefing document earlier. I understand from a telephone message I received that the document was only made available in the past hour. That is not a way to deal with this. The Minister is shaking his head but I will not use my time on this other than to record that we did not receive a briefing document as should have been the case. We should also have received a copy of the Estimates before yesterday.

I would like to raise a number of issues. I welcome the Revised Estimate but it is a drop in the ocean for a health system that is creaking at the seams because of previous decisions. The word “ideology” has been used in the debate. I am no ideologue; I am a practical woman when it comes to services. I believe in a public health service funded by taxation and the vast majority of people want that. It makes sense even on an economic level and I will outline a number of examples from the documents that have been circulated. I would like the Minister to stop referring to elderly people as a burden. Perhaps he might be doing it indirectly but the language in his documents states that elderly people place an increased demand on the health service because of an ageing population. I would like to balance this comment with a few figures. Only 4% of our elderly are in nursing homes and a further 5% receive home care services. The other 90% of elderly people live independent lives. It was established that the elderly make a substantial contribution in terms of spending and taxation to society in England following a costing that was done there recently. We should get away from looking on the elderly as a burden and consider the talent and the money they contribute.

Reference is made to stroke on page 24 of the briefing document. I welcome the positive statement on the improvement in services for stroke victims. However, Professor Harbison, the clinical director in respect of stroke at St. James’s Hospital, has made figures available through a newspaper article and they are worth examining. They outline what the failure to implement the national stroke strategy is costing the State. He pointed out that an amount that is less than the amount proposed to be spent on two new drugs over five years has been spent on the strategy. Strokes costs the economy €500 million annually but at least 50% of them are preventable. This year alone, 8,000 people will suffer a stroke, yet six of our acute hospitals do not have the most basic requirement, namely, a special ward or unit for the treatment of stroke. Professor Harbison stated, “Despite the successes, we still have huge deficiencies in stroke care in Ireland”, with only 40% of the stroke unit beds required. Currently, only half of stroke patients are treated in special units. That is a clear example of where money could be saved and then put into education and prevention and proper treatment in order that stroke victims would spend less time in hospital. They would spend less time taking up beds if money was invested in order to provide appropriate care in the home.

A total of 140,000 children live in consistent poverty. We have a major housing crisis and, yesterday, I outlined literacy figures. All those factors contribute to an unhealthy society and lead to people having to avail of health services, which would not be necessary if basic homes were provided for our people and if problems relating to illiteracy and alcohol were addressed.

In the briefing document, one page is given over to mental health services. The document does not refer to the cost to the economy of the failure to treat patients who are mentally ill. I use these figures deliberately because this is a debate on the Estimates. A Vision for Change was a revolutionary document published in 2006. I am reluctant to quote one figure it contains - the figure is incredible - because it must be a mistake. Extrapolating from the Northern Ireland figures, it is said that the cost to the economy of the failure to treat mental illness is more than €11 billion per year. I use that figure very carefully but if the cost to the economy is anywhere near that, do we not have a serious problem due to our failure to treat mental illness appropriately? There is no mention in the Revised Estimates of a review of the mental health strategy, A Vision for Change. No timespan is given for that. The period of time that plan covered expired in January of this year and it is now June. I do not see a reference to where that review is at. During that ten-year period, there was an inbuilt mechanism for monitoring progress and the independent monitoring group, along with the Mental Health Commission, repeatedly pointed out that the implementation of the mental health strategy was both inconsistent and tardy. The then Government's response to that was not to have a third implementation body, so it sat for two three-year periods and was then disbanded. The mental health vision set out has not been monitored and we have actually gone backwards.

During the many very sensitive debates in this Chamber on mental health, suicide was mentioned, as were all of the problems that we have. I sat here in utter frustration simply because all those problems were identified in 2006. The suicide levels ten years ago were very acute. A strategy was clearly set out but none of it was implemented. As was said previously, when we hear the whirring blades of the helicopter in Galway, it means something completely different to us now as week after week somebody is taken from the water. The problems were identified as were the solutions to them. However, the solutions were not implemented.

With regard to hospital beds, I have watched the underpinning of the public health system since I was first elected, particularly since I was elected to a health forum in 2006. Certainly Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats were responsible for that and certainly Fine Gael and the Labour Party followed suit. I hope this Government will change the direction and commit to a public health system funded from taxation. The Government cannot keep giving money to the National Treatment Purchase Fund, a special delivery unit and agency staff.

I would like to ask the Minister specifically about our obligation under the EU directive whereby if one can succeed in borrowing money from the credit union or any other credit establishment, one can go abroad for treatment. Where is that factored into the Revised Estimates? When we see all the money that is being allocated to agency staff, the special delivery unit and the National Treatment Purchase Fund and all the money going out of the country, would it not occur to the Minister or his staff to propose we put it into the public system and thereby increase the bed capacity, as we have a lack of intensive care beds and many doctors have gone out on a limb. Doctors have put their names repeatedly to letters to *The Irish Times* and other newspapers begging for the bed capacity to be increased, and for a very long time, we have had to listen to the mantra that we need fewer beds.

We have been told we cannot employ staff. Having had a depletion of our public health system and an embargo on recruitment, we now cannot find staff. We have not changed our recruitment system in trying to find staff. If we have spare money in the recruitment budget, could it go to Console, the Samaritans or to the other organisations that are literally saving people from the water? I listened with dismay to an interview where the director of mental health said she could not possibly spend that €35 million before the end of the year. I welcome the U-

turn but should the Minister have any difficulties in the future in spending funds in the budget, will he come back to us? We will certainly tell him where it could be spent, and Console would be one of those organisations.

I will conclude on a final parochial note. We require a new hospital in Galway. I raised this matter with the Minister and he gave me a bureaucratic answer to the effect that there were no plans at the moment, and that is despite the fact the clinical director of the hospital in Galway said everything they are doing is a fire-fighting exercise and that the lack of capacity and the inadequacy of the hospital is the No. 1 risk factor.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I thank Deputy Connolly for sharing her time with me. I want to specifically address the situation at South Tipperary General Hospital and I appeal to the Minister to give it the urgent and immediate support that it needs. I invite him to visit it to see the excellent work that is going on there. I have raised this issue repeatedly since this Thirty-second Dáil was convened a short period ago. I speak as somebody who knows the hospital intimately. I was the hospital administrator for 21 years. I have been a patient there, my family members have been patients there and I am in the hospital on a regular basis. Only yesterday, I was there as a director of the Friends of South Tipperary General Hospital, which is planning fund-raising efforts to support the hospital.

Today's HIQA report confirms what we have known for some time. South Tipperary General Hospital is a very progressive and successful hospital. It is working well in excess of capacity but it is under-resourced, underfunded and understaffed. To use a colloquialism, the hospital is bursting at its seams. Staff are working above and beyond the call of duty on a daily basis and, indeed, on hourly basis. The hospital is working at about 120% capacity on a daily basis and the medical department, which has 79 beds, is working at somewhere in the region of 150% capacity. That is when 85% capacity would be accepted as full occupancy. Inpatient and outpatient attendances have increase beyond all expectations. There are huge difficulties in the accident and emergency department. The trolley count at the hospital increases all the time. The trolley count for 2011 was 750 but the trolley count now is well in excess of 3,000 and over the last period, on no fewer than five occasions, the hospital has had the highest number of patients on trolleys. I have met patients and have seen patients who were accommodated in the foyer of the hospital near the vending machines, the lifts and the cafe and it was shocking. I have to accept what HIQA has said on that issue but it arises because of underfunding and under-resourcing of the hospital.

South Tipperary General Hospital is effectively a regional hospital but it is operating on a completely underfunded and under-resourced basis. The background to that is that about 25% of the budget, approximately €12 million, has been taken out of the budget on an annual basis over the past number of years and we have lost well over 100 staff during that period. We need urgent and immediate action to ensure a quality hospital service for the people of Tipperary. A number of steps need to be taken, both in the short term and in the long term. We need the immediate opening of step-down beds, beds we were promised three years ago. Our Lady's Hospital, Cashel, which is located fewer than 15 miles down the road from this hospital, is a modern hospital, properly refurbished following millions of euro having been spent on it, but its door is locked. That hospital should be opened and beds in it should be made available to support South Tipperary General Hospital. We need additional nursing and support staff at the hospital and we need full-time community intervention teams. We need to put back into the system the help hours that were taken out it during the past number of years. Two million home help hours were taken out of the system during that period, and that is unacceptable. A scanning

unit is currently under construction. The first floor of that unit is a shell. We need the Minister and the Department to fund turning that shell into a modern ward with additional beds for the hospital. In the long term, we need the commencement of the development of phase two of the hospital, the modernisation of the old hospital area and the putting in place of a proper hospital structure to deliver health services and hospital services for 2016. I hope the Minister will take up my invitation to visit the hospital in the very near future.

Debate adjourned.

Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): 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 Martin Kenny - the closure of McCormack Fuels and Services in Sligo-Leitrim and the social and economic consequences of this; (2) Deputy Brendan Griffin - concerns of parents who believe their children developed adverse side-effects from the human papilloma virus vaccine drug Gardasil; (3) Deputy Frank O'Rourke - extending the period of time a person can participate in the Tús workplace initiative, giving consideration to a person's age; (4) Deputy Jackie Cahill - crisis in beef prices with a reported warning of a catastrophic collapse in demand; (5) Deputy James Browne - unemployment in the south east; (6) Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick - the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to give an update on Friday's (10 June) meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council in respect of the Narrow Water bridge project; (7) Deputy John Brassil - provision of an acute stroke unit at University Hospital Kerry; (8) Deputy David Cullinane - the Central Statistics Office's quarterly household survey for quarter 1 of 2016, which shows unemployment in the south east at 12.5%; (9) Deputy Alan Farrell - the need to prioritise the delivery of the new metro north in line with the previous Government's commitment; (10) Deputies John Curran, Bríd Smith, Dessie Ellis, Fergus O'Dowd, Paul Murphy, Thomas P. Broughan and Barry Cowen - review of the pay-by-weight scheme, which is due to be introduced from 1 July 2016; (11) Deputy Imelda Munster - the matter of the Department of Education and Skills's refusal to release funds for a seven-classroom extension for Scoil Naomh Fheichín, Termonfeckin, County Louth, despite an earlier commitment to begin construction this year; (12) Deputy Thomas Byrne - the need for the Minister for Education and Skills to discuss urgently the review of school bus services which is currently being carried out and implemented despite the Department publicly stating that this would not happen until next year; (13) Deputy Eamon Scanlon - the exclusion of persons who are dependent on social protection from the incremental tenant purchase scheme for local authority housing; (14) Deputy Clare Daly - to discuss the spike in US military usage of Shannon, and whether it is connected to the NATO military exercises in Poland; (15) Deputy Robert Troy - the need for the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources to discuss broadband availability for Irish businesses; (16) Deputy Catherine Connolly - the consultation process (and lack of information provided) surrounding the Marine Institute's application for a foreshore lease of 35 years to construct an off-shore electricity generating station between Furbo and Spiddal and the urgency in relation to same given the unreasonable time limit set for the receipt of third-party submissions; (17) Deputy James Lawless - the delays in resolving outstanding issues surrounding the unfinished Naas town shopping centre and in particular those delays arising from the fact that a single individual arbitrator is available across the entire State and thus has a backlog of hearings; and (18) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - the issue of penalties from Irish Water for unpaid bills.

16 June 2016

The matters raised by Deputy Robert Troy and Deputies John Curran and Bríd Smith, Dessie Ellis, Fergus O'Dowd, Paul Murphy, Thomas P. Broughan and Barry Cowen have been selected for discussion.

Estimates for Public Services 2016 (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following Estimate which was moved by the Minister for Health on Thursday, 16 June 2016: Vote 28 - Health (Revised).

Deputy Michael Harty: I am not going to carry out a forensic examination of the health Estimates. I will focus more on solutions to our health service problems rather than on criticism. Many of these solutions will not cost any money to implement and indeed might save money in the long term. The first issue the Minister and his Ministers of State must address is the morale in our health service. Morale in our health service is at an all-time low because waiting lists, notwithstanding the best efforts of those working in the service, are getting longer. Accident and emergency overcrowding continues and there is not enough capacity in the system. This leads to low morale in our health service. When referring to the health service, the Minister must speak about his doctors, his nurses, his therapists and his support workers. That is not to patronise, but to be inclusive and to empathise with the problems. If we can increase morale, we will certainly improve outcomes and increase efficiency. In that regard, a well-constructed ten-year plan to lay out a pathway for the health service will be very important. This plan must be implemented year-on-year once it is devised. We are not going to wait ten years for it. There should be an immediate dividend from the plan.

My second point also relates to morale. The Minister and his Ministers of State must go to our educational facilities, including our nursing and medical schools to speak to our new nurses and new graduates, including those from post-graduate programmes. We must not allow our best-educated nurses and doctors to leave the country. There is a huge problem with retention of staff, but also of recruitment of staff. We need to encourage our doctors and tell them the health service will improve and that we would like them to stay to be part of that. We must give our doctors and nurses hope. In many of our nursing schools, an entire class will go to one hospital in England, be it St. Thomas's or Great Ormonde Street, Liverpool Royal Infirmary or Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. They are taken entirely out of the system and we need to encourage them and give them hope to allow them to stay in it.

The next issue is the integration of primary and secondary care. This is not going to cost any money but it will produce tremendous efficiencies and savings. We need to develop our ambulatory care centres. There is a pilot centre in Kilkenny which is working very well and I encourage the Minister to visit it. If we can investigate patients with a view to avoiding admitting them rather than to admit patients with a view to investigation, we can save huge amounts of funding and bed space. When an elderly person goes into a bed and spends two or three weeks in it, he or she becomes immobilised and loses his or her independence. It is hard to reintegrate them back into primary care and community care. We must stop having patients go into hospital as much as we can. Obviously, acute illnesses occur and we cannot prevent everyone going into hospital but if we can keep our chronically ill patients out of casualty, it would free up casualty for true casualties, which is to say accidents and emergencies. So many of our accident and emergency departments are full of patients who would not be there if they were looked after in primary care. We need to develop our primary and community care services. We must

look after our elderly patients within the community, but that needs support and resources. If that support and resourcing is provided, there will be a dividend from that infrastructure by preventing patients getting into secondary care. We need to change the focus of where we spend our money. This is not going to cost any money.

When we make decisions in relation to our health service, we must fully involve those supplying the service on the front line. So many decisions are made by HSE management without consulting the front-line staff. Front-line staff are often bewildered by decisions made by HSE officials who have not properly consulted and integrated their decisions with those supplying the front-line service. The Department of Health must take ownership of the HSE and force it to be more transparent. Many decisions are made and it is quite difficult to know why or who made them.

We have spoken in relation to primary care about extending free GP care to children between the ages of six and 12. Most medical organisations and the majority of the medical profession want to see free care at the point of contact. There is no dispute about that. There is a problem in giving free care without increasing the capacity of general practice. The introduction of free care to under sixes and over-70s has overwhelmed general practice and taken up any spare capacity if there was any. It has meant that there are now waiting lists to see one's GP in Ireland which was not the case before. It is commonplace in the UK to wait six days, ten days or two weeks to see one's GP for a routine appointment. That never happened in Ireland before. Now, however, the capacity of general practice has been exceeded by giving free care without extending the number of GPs and developing general practice to cope with the increased workload. Waiting lists are developing within general practice and we do not want to see that. If we were to give free GP care to everybody in the community, we would need to double our GP numbers but there is a problem because the GPs are not there.

We are operating under a contract which is now 44 years old and completely out of date. That contract is an impediment to the recruitment of GPs. Deputies Billy Kelleher and Alan Kelly referred to it. We cannot recruit GPs. Rural practice is the most sensitive part of general practice and we have experienced huge difficulties in recruiting GPs over the past few years. Of our GPs, 33% are over the age of 55 while 20% are over the age of 60. As they begin to retire, young GPs are not coming in to replace them because the contract is too onerous. Our GP contract is 24/7, 365 days a year. The GP has to provide the locum if he or she takes a holiday, gets ill or wants to attend an educational course. There is a huge problem in recruiting young GPs because when they come out of their training programmes they emigrate. The responsibility and administration involved in taking on a practice is too overwhelming. We have proposed that in areas where it is difficult to fill a GP post, GPs should be put in on a salaried basis. That should be an integral part of the new contract. That contract must come very quickly. It needs to come in the next year. It was promised before July this year and it has not happened. If it does not come before July 2017, general practice will be decimated.

Another serious problem with general practice is that we were decimated by the FEMPI legislation. We all had to take income cuts in relation to the emergency in our financial management, but general practice was disproportionately affected by FEMPI because not only was income taken out of the income for general practice, it was taken from the support structures that kept general practice working. General practice is now lacking huge infrastructural support. Rural GPs were also hit by their geographic locations. There was a recognition that GPs in rural areas served a widely dispersed population, but the supports that allowed that to happen were taken away as well.

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The Minister has had to depart, but I will make a suggestion to the Ministers of State. In 1985 an educationist and psychologist by the name of Dr. Edward de Bono developed the six hats system for analysing problems and finding solutions. One put on a hat to teach in one way, a hat of a different colour to teach in another and so on. I would love to give the Ministers of State the reference for this system which they could use in analysing and planning change in the health service.

Deputy Michael Collins: According to the study of the impact of reconfiguration on emergency and urgent care networks, SIREN, the farther one lives from a centre of excellence, the poorer the outcome in the event of a serious emergency. The SIREN report found that, while survival rates in Dublin were the best in the country, those in the south - counties Cork and Kerry - were the worst. This is in stark contrast with the aim of the reconfiguration programme, namely, to achieve the best possible health outcomes for the people it served. The people of west Cork have not been well served by the programme. Many find themselves having to travel up to 100 miles at night by ambulance to Cork University Hospital, CUH, a journey that could take three hours. They may then have to wait for several more hours before receiving medical attention. The appointment of a night-time casualty officer would mean the extension of the Bantry General Hospital emergency department's night-time service. More patients could be treated without needing to be transferred to CUH, resulting in more ambulances being freed for other emergencies and a reduction in the numbers presenting at and overcrowding in CUH's emergency department.

Recent figures released show that 50,000 patients per year are walking out of emergency departments because of long waiting times and overcrowding. Some leave without being seen by a nurse, which is further evidence of the failure of the reconfiguration of acute hospitals.

Home help and home care packages are a major issue throughout the country, particularly in west Cork. An underlying cause of overcrowding and bed blocking in hospitals is the fact that many elderly patients cannot return home owing to a shortage of home helps and a lack of investment in home care packages. I call on the Minister for Health to invest in this area immediately. In doing so, he would automatically reduce overcrowding and free hospital beds for those in need of more urgent medical care. When I spoke to the Taoiseach about this issue last week, he directed me to the Minister. I will take up that opportunity in the days ahead, but we need to consider the question of home help services as recipients are being treated poorly.

According to the Lightfoot report, CUH takes the longest time in Ireland to clear an ambulance from the time it arrives at the emergency department until it is available for its next deployment. The report recommends further investment in ambulances and related vehicles.

I wish to address the issue of waiting times for the assessment and delivery of services for children with special needs. I have been informed that some children are waiting a year and a half or more for initial assessments and a further six for the service to be delivered. Under the Disability Act, children have a statutory entitlement to an assessment of their needs within a six-month period if they were born after 2002. The Government is failing in its duty to these children under the Act.

I wish to address the cuts to disability services, specifically the €1 million cut in funding for CoAction in west Cork. With growing numbers availing of CoAction's disability services and supports, the organisation has been put under severe financial strain. Complying with the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, standards has taken more than €350,000 out

of its stretched budget. No additional funding has been made available for the residential, respite care or transport service in the past eight years. Many parents of adults with intellectual disabilities are ageing and finding it increasingly difficult to care for their adult children without the support of respite and residential care services. They are also under increasing stress to provide for the future care of their children owing to the decrease in the number of places available in full-time residential services. I call on the Minister to reverse the savage cuts to a service that is vital for more than 600 children and 140 adults across west Cork.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Deputies Stephen S. Donnelly and Eamon Ryan are sharing a 15-minute slot. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: We are debating whether to sign off on an additional €500 million for the health budget, an issue I will address alongside the lack of an analysis provided for the Dáil on same. While we are discussing health services that need more funding urgently, I wish to raise a particular matter, that of Cappagh National Orthopaedic Hospital, about which a constituent of mine contacted me in recent weeks. She needs a hip replacement and is in severe pain and her condition is deteriorating. She is on her way to being in a wheelchair, something I have had confirmed by her surgeon. She was told that she would have to wait 15 months.

When I looked further into what was happening at Cappagh hospital, what I discovered was disturbing. If a general practitioner, GP, believes someone in the greater Dublin area needs orthopaedic surgery, or if anyone in the country needs complex orthopaedic surgery, it will take 15 months to see a consultant. It will take a further 15 months to get into an operating theatre. As such, it takes two and a half years to get from a GP to the operating theatre. In the United Kingdom it takes four months and in New Zealand, three.

I have spoken to surgeons in this field. To say they are demoralised, frustrated and angry would be a gross understatement. Anyone who attends a GP and needs orthopaedic work, be it on a hip or a knee, is typically already in serious pain. In the two and a half years someone will wait for surgery, the pain will escalate, the person's condition will deteriorate and the complexity, cost and recovery time of the operation will move in the wrong direction, as will the clinical outcomes.

I will explain what is happening in Cappagh hospital and why people in Ireland are waiting two and a half years for a hip operation. By the way, if someone needs the other hip or knee to be operated on, he or she must go back to the start of the list. Compare this with the figure of 12 weeks in New Zealand and 16 across the water in the United Kingdom. In 2014 Cappagh hospital suffered a serious cut in Government funding, which meant that it needed to reduce the number of procedures it could carry out that year by 700. It let staff go and scaled down. In 2015 the situation was so bad that the Government increased its funding. Last year Cappagh hospital started to scale up again, but it incurred higher costs by hiring agency staff because it did not want to have to fire anyone again. At the start of this year the HSE could not tell the hospital how much money it would be given for the year. For the first three months it operated on the understanding that it would have the same budget as last year. After the first quarter, however, it discovered that it would suffer a further cut in funding. It must let staff go and scale back again.

There are six operating theatres in Cappagh hospital, only three of which are being used. Typically, an orthopaedic surgeon can perform five procedures in an operating theatre on a given day. The surgeons in Cappagh hospital have been instructed to stop after three. The State

is paying all of the hospital's fixed costs - for the six operating theatres, the wards, the beds that are not being used, the theatre staff and the surgeons - but the hospital no longer has money for implants, which typically cost between €1,500 and €3,000 each. For a complex operation, it might cost up to €6,000 and, obviously, the cost increases. I told the patients that, were my relative affected, I would borrow the money to buy an implant on eBay and bring it to the hospital, but when I asked them about doing this, they said they were not allowed to do so. When I asked the surgeons what they did after performing the three procedures, they told me that they went home or into private practice where they could actually treat patients.

Since the Minister, Deputy Harris, had to leave the Chamber, I ask the Ministers of State who are present, Deputies Helen McEntee and Finian McGrath, to raise as a matter of urgency the fact that, owing to Government cuts, Cappagh National Orthopaedic Hospital has not got the money for the implants needed for patients who have been waiting for two and a half years for orthopaedic surgery. However, the problem is even worse because, as I found out, the target of being admitted to an operating theatre within 15 months of meeting a consultant is a HSE target. Cappagh National Orthopaedic Hospital will now miss the targets. The HSE will, therefore, fine it and it will have less money for implants. The waiting lists will get longer and the HSE will fine the hospital again. That is happening right now in our national orthopaedic hospital. If we are to have a conversation about a budget of €13.7 billion and additional expenditure this year of €500 million, the Minister should, as a matter of urgency, engage with Cappagh hospital. It needs approximately €5 million or €6 million for the rest of the year.

Cappagh National Orthopaedic Hospital also needs multi-annual funding. I cannot understand why this is not made available. Imagine a hospital not knowing in the first three months of the year how much funding it will have for the year. Other organisations just do not operate like that. The hospital needs funding for this year, and it needs multi-annual funding. It needs more ambitious targets. It is unacceptable that the HSE target for orthopaedics is 15 months. This period needs to be reduced.

There is no load balancing across the hospitals. Thus, the waiting lists in Limerick are much smaller than in Dublin. There is no national patient database. There is no co-ordinating function whereby one would be asked whether, on the basis that one must wait 15 months in Dublin, one would be willing to wait six months on a list in Limerick. There is no load balancing in this regard at all. I will send the Minister the notes on this. Will he please consider providing a low number of millions of euro to Cappagh National Orthopaedic Hospital? I will be more than happy to send him all the details.

What is happening in Cappagh, including the mismanagement by the health care system of the funding for the hospital and the results for patients and the medical staff, is symptomatic of a Health Service Executive that clearly does not know how to run budgets. The Government is asking the Dáil to sanction an additional €500 million. To put that in perspective, that is more than half the total fiscal space we will be debating in October for the entire budget for next year. An extra €0.5 billion — over half the entire budgetary space for next year — is being sought by the Government. I apologise if the analysis is unavailable. I have tried to obtain it. We have contacted the Minister's office and looked at the website of the Department of Health but I cannot find any breakdown of the €500 million. I have read through the Minister's speech and have found explanations for allocations of €40 million here, €50 million there and €15 million in other places.

I have to hand the revised book of Estimates. It gives the revised budget for this year,

€13.69 billion, but nowhere is it explained where the extra €500 million has come from. There are references to some allocations in the Minister's speech but I cannot find a table indicating how the €500 million breaks down. There is €200 million for additional services and €300 million for overruns. It ought to be stated that the €200 million for additional services is going to listed places based on certain cost-benefit analyses.

The Dáil voting through an extra €0.5 billion is a massive undertaking but we are not being provided with the kind of analysis one would expect to see if asked to sign a cheque for €0.5 billion unexpectedly. I apologise if we were provided with it. This debate is about whether the Dáil is willing to sign a cheque for the HSE of an additional €500 million. Now that the committees are being formed, surely the Minister should offer an explanation of the allocation and the overruns to the health committee, finance committee or the new budgetary committee.

The Minister mentioned in his speech the new accountability framework that the HSE is putting together. It is very welcome to see an accountability framework coming together. If in my pre-politics world people said they had overspent by €0.5 billion, there would have been serious accountability. I am not talking about the Minister as he is new in the job; I am talking about the HSE. Has anyone been fired? Has anyone been demoted? Someone, somewhere, has overspent by hundreds of millions of euro. Will the accountability framework actually hold anyone to account for over-expenditure of hundreds of millions of euro?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: This is a useful debate. Our most significant budgetary categories are social welfare, health and education. They reflect the three big Departments where the money goes. Our history over the past 15 or 20 years, including in the lead-up to the crash, shows that most of the money went into these categories. Expenditure on health increased dramatically in the period. Obviously, we have experienced a particularly harsh and difficult time in the past seven or eight years as the budgets came down again. They are starting to expand, which is welcome, because our economy is starting to grow but we should be careful to avoid the trap into which we fell in the early 2000s when we were just putting money into a system without getting value for it. We must be razor sharp and clinical in assessing the benefits of our health expenditure.

I am conscious that the Minister has a task ahead of him in conjunction with the rest of us in the Parliament as we are running our health system, or changing the entire system. I am very glad a joint Oireachtas committee is now examining how we can, in mid-flight, change some of the engines of our system to move towards a single-tier system. I do not see any of that set out in Estimates. This relates to one of the questions I was asking during Leaders' Questions earlier today. There is a need for detailed work in the committees whereby the Minister would outline, through his budgetary provisions for 2017 rather than through what we are discussing today, how he wants to make the desired shifts.

There are a number of other shifts I do not see in the spending priorities and on which I want to reflect and comment. Various Members have raised concerns about using specific examples to outline the problems at large. I am concerned that we are not allocating enough money for ICT. We are spending approximately 1%. When we invest in ICT systems — be it PPARS, electronic voting machines or Eircode — and the investment does not work out as originally planned, it becomes a big story. I fear that this freezes the public service such that it is afraid to take a risk or change the way it does business. Officials do not want to risk their career by suggesting some innovative ICT approach. We are not spending enough on ICT. The Green Party's assessment of health policy is that we radically need to increase ICT expenditure be-

cause it may result in productivity in all the other areas where we are spending the money.

I agree with the comments of Deputy Stephen Donnelly on where the money is going. Parsing the figures as best I can, I believe the money is being spent on wages and staff primarily. Are staff being used to best effect? By investing in ICT, we can ensure our health and emergency systems and some of the processing in that regard are carried out in a more careful, creative and humane way. We could direct patients to where resources are under-used.

ICT investment would allow us to treat patients at home. It would allow us to change fundamentally the structure of the health system and the means of providing services, including through remote sensory systems, remote diagnostic tools and remote delivery of medicines. This is all available. We have most of the leading companies in this country that are interested in this space and which are good at what they do in this area. We should be using their expertise. We are not budgeting sufficiently in this space. I flag that for the Minister.

I wish to give a personal example. We have all used personal examples. One of my strongest memories concerning the health system is that I was once invited to an event by the great Risteárd Mulcahy, the professor of medicine in UCD and cardiologist in St. Vincent's. I was once very proud to be involved with him on a cycling campaign. This is a very important example of preventive activity in the area of health in which we need to invest. Creating a healthy environment will actually cut the budget more than anything else. Professor Mulcahy brought me to the preventive centre in St. Vincent's. It may have changed since my visit was a number of years ago. I will always remember walking through long corridors with massive machines and considerable resources only to finally arrive at the centre of preventive health in the hospital. It was a broom cupboard. That is the only way to describe it. We now have the opportunity not only to put funding back into the health service but to reform it.

3 o'clock

The Minister should push preventive medicine, the use of information and communications technology, residential care and community design systems. I do not see this being done and it is the Minister's job to change it.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Revised Estimate with reference to disability services in this important debate. I listened with great interest to the views and concerns expressed by Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly. Ministers had an important meeting on the health service this morning, at which we addressed the issues of accountability and proper management in the health service. We are listening to Deputies' views and pushing the accountability agenda. I am specifically demanding investment in disability services, reform and accountability. My aim is to empower people with disabilities to live independent lives, provide them with greater independence in accessing the services they choose and enhance their ability to tailor the supports they require to meet their needs and plan their lives. In this context, I am particularly pleased that the €30 million in additional funding secured last week will support the programme for Government commitment to ensure all 18 year old school leavers with disabilities will have access to supports and services which meet their needs at this crucial point in their lives. Service providers must also be able to respond effectively and sensitively when people experience crises in their lives and require immediate support. The additional funding secured will also cover costs incurred in meeting compliance with national residential standards, services provided to meet the changing needs of people with disabilities and emergency residential places already provided.

It is important to get that message across.

Deputies should note that funding of €1.56 billion was allocated by the Health Service Executive for disability services in the national service plan 2016. Together with the additional €31 million I managed to secure last week, the total allocation for disability services now stands at €1.59 billion. We must ensure these services are managed efficiently and properly. Investment will be made; reform will be introduced and accountability achieved.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank my colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, for his commitment to the health budget, as is clear from this discussion. In particular, I welcome the additional funding provided for home care services. In recent weeks I have engaged with numerous advocacy groups, officials from the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive and, most importantly, individuals who use home care services. Older people have consistently stated they want to stay in their homes and communities for as long as possible. Home care services are key to achieving this objective. In 2016 the HSE has a core provision of €324 million for home care services. Notwithstanding the significant improvements in the overall economic position, pressures continue to apply and demand for home care services is rising with an ageing and growing population. People want to be supported at home rather than in hospitals or nursing homes.

Without a shadow of doubt, home care services need more resources than are available. For this reason, the programme for Government commits to increasing funding for home care packages and home helps year on year in the coming period. Of the additional funding of €40 million provided for this area, €20 million will be allocated to ensure the services provided in 2015 are maintained; €10 million will be used to ensure the rate of service allocation can be maintained during the summer months, while €10 million has been ring-fenced for home care services as part of the new winter initiative. While there is always scope to do more, Deputies will agree that this is a step in the right direction.

Long-term care is one of the most challenging issues facing older people. Many reports, reviews and other documents have been written in the past 20 years, all of which ask the same question, namely, “How can we make Ireland a great place for older people to live in?” For the most part, the answer is the same - older people will live longer, healthier and happier lives if they live in a family or home setting.

As Deputy Michael Harty correctly stated, we need to change the current approach and move away from secondary to primary care services. It is my intention to set out a clear plan for how we can progress that vision.

As the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health services, I welcome the reinstatement of €12 million to the development budget. Just this week, I conveyed sanction to the HSE for the spending of €18 million in 2016. In addition, sanction has been given to spend €4 million, on a once-off basis, on minor capital works. A further €6.55 million will be spent in significant service areas, including in providing additional bed capacity, peer support services, to meet the additional cost of private placement of complex cases and additional posts to provide for improved patient safety in certain areas. Some €11.37 million will be spent on new developments outlined in the HSE national service plan. These include the development of early intervention and counselling services in primary care, further expansion of Jigsaw services in three cities, opening new acute care units and high-observation units and the provision of funding for the child and adolescent eating disorder service, the homeless and the mentally ill. A

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sum of €80,000 will be spent in meeting other commitments commenced in previous years. I am engaged in discussions with the Health Service Executive and other Departments on the figure of €12 million and will revert to Deputies on the matter as soon as possible.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I wish the new Minister and Ministers of State the best of luck in their portfolios. I welcome the allocation of an extra €500 million for health services.

As a representative of County Tipperary which no longer has a Government Deputy or Senator, I will focus on the lack of mental health facilities in the county. With a population of 160,000, County Tipperary does not have psychiatric beds, while the clinic in Thurles is under-resourced. For example, it does not have an occupational therapist; a psychiatric counselling service is not available and it is only open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. five days each week. This means that people from the north of the county must travel to Ennis to avail of care, while people living in the south must travel to Kilkenny. This issue must be addressed and I look forward to the Government making proposals in that regard.

The Minister did not provide detail on how much funding is being provided for home care services and home care packages. Two completely different policies on managing home help hours are applied in north and south Tipperary, respectively. The service in south Tipperary uses its entire allocation of hours with HSE staff and thereafter employs agencies, whereas the service in north Tipperary uses a combination of HSE staff and agencies throughout the year. A consistent approach is required because the use of different approaches in the same county is preventing the system from operating efficiently. In any case, the service requires more funding if an adequate service is to be provided for those who need it most.

The HSE practice of offering home help hours in half-hour segments must be addressed as it is not an efficient use of resources. It is certainly not satisfactory for the service user and employees of the service.

I would like to know if any of the additional funding will be used to tackle the ever-increasing numbers on waiting lists. The numbers on the inpatient and day case lists have increased by almost 50% in the past two years. Figures for May this year show that 509,994 patients are either waiting for an operation or an outpatient appointment. The number waiting for an outpatient appointment has increased from 407,257 to 415,584 in the space of one month, while more than 62,000 of these individuals have been waiting for more than one year. In addition, the backlog of patients who need surgery increased from 74,274 to 74,986, having stood at 50,000 in 2014. This is an increase of approximately 50%. Last year's targets are being missed, with more than 5,000 waiting for surgery for more than 15 months in May. This is a significant jump when one compares it with the figure of 4,603 who were enduring the same delay in April.

The figures also show that the number waiting in excess of 18 months for an outpatient appointment to see a specialist increased from 8,570 in April to 13,095 in May. Of those waiting for surgery, 4,704 are children, 58 of whom have been waiting for more than a year and a half. More than 60,000 people, including more than 4,500 children, have been waiting for more than one year for an outpatient appointment.

As a first-time Deputy, I find that the annual merry-go-round of health budget overruns followed by the introduction of a Revised Estimate smacks of poor planning. It appears that the HSE runs the service until its budget runs out before being bailed out by the Government. Surely a budget should be presented for a 12-month period. In every year since 2011 the HSE

has required a substantial supplementary budget. Given the *ad hoc* approach to health planning and changing demographics, does the Minister agree that we are storing up major problems for the future? The population grew by 23% in the past 15 years and is set to grow by a further 30% in the next 25. The 65 to 74 age group is set to grow by over 33% and the 75 years plus age group is set to grow by an incredible 82%.

We need careful planning to ensure the health service, which has come in for extensive criticism in recent years, does not run into even more trouble in the coming years. Deputy Healy referred specifically to South Tipperary General Hospital, Clonmel. Some things could be done in Tipperary which would not cost a great deal to the HSE budget. Our Lady's County and Surgical Hospital, Cashel, is fully furnished but its doors are closed. It must be re-opened as a set-down facility. The Dean Maxwell facility in Roscrea, a residential home for elderly people, urgently needs investment and more beds are required. Mount Sion in Tipperary must be kept open as a residential home for people with mental illness and the Community Hospital of the Assumption in Thurles also needs more investment and capacity.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I wish to begin by thanking everyone for their contributions. We have had a constructive debate. There is significant merit in much of what has been said on all sides of the House.

It is fair to say that today is a good day for the Irish health service. Any day when those of us in the Oireachtas decide to spend an additional €500 million on the Irish public health service can only be described as a good day. It is evidence that we are putting the fruits of our functioning economy to work for the public services that our citizens rightly demand.

This Revised Estimate does five things. First, it puts the health service on a stable footing. These are not my words; they are the words of the director general of the HSE. It is now up to him and his managers throughout the service to manage and live within their budgets. That is what they are paid to do and that is the job they must do.

It also does four other things. It allows us to have money for a winter initiative larger than the winter initiative last year. A total of €40 million is included to ensure we can put additional supports into our emergency departments for the winter period, a time when they come under particular pressure. It allows us to restore the mental health budget to €35 million, as outlined by my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Helen McEntee. The Minister of State will be getting on with drawing up plans to spend that money. It allows us to increase home help hours and home care packages rather than simply keep the levels we had in 2015. It allows us to have more home care packages and home help hours this year than last year, a welcome development. As outlined by my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, it has allowed him to increase the disability budget by €31 million, including €3 million specifically for the important issue of school leavers.

This debate has been constructive in the sense that there has been recognition on all sides from all speakers that we cannot do things the way we used to do them in budgeting for the health service or in debating the health service. We need to try to find consensus, where possible, on the general direction of travel for the Irish public health service. That is why I have undertaken to co-operate and work with the establishment of the special committee to develop a single vision for our health service for the next decade. I am a supporter of the committee. Ministers of Health come and go. It is not fair that every time a new Minister arrives the health service gets tinkered with but there is no continuity in direction. I do not underestimate the

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challenge being put up to this committee, but I am certainly looking forward to working with Members in this regard. Reference was made to a short timeframe of six months and I agree, although that was the timeframe put forward in the motion. It is now a matter for that committee to do its work and see how it gets on in that timeframe.

Today, we published the national health care quality report. I wish to make a point for our front-line staff. There are major challenges in our health service. We have discussed the challenges and problems as we always discuss problems - that is our job. I urge our front-line staff to read the report. It is available on my Department's website. It shows the progress we have made. When I say "we" I am not referring to the Government, but "we" as in the Irish public health service. It will show the progress through successive Governments and improvements in outcomes in our health service. It is important that front-line people working in our health service today have that acknowledged by Members and by the media as well. Good things are happening in the health service every day.

There are still significant challenges, some of which have been referenced today. I take the point Deputy Kelleher makes about people talking about primary care since the time Dr. Rory O'Hanlon was Minister for Health in the 1980s. He is right. We must show significant progress. I agree that we cannot simply measure progress in terms of the number of primary care centres built. We must consider what happens in primary care centres and how many services and facilities can be provided in the community which, previously, had to be provided in acute hospitals. I have strong views about this. A crucial element of this is the new general practitioner contract. We have not had a new GP contract in 44 years. The patient values the relationship with the GP and the State must value that relationship as well. We will get the negotiation for a new GP contract under way. We also need to look at the provision of diagnostic equipment in the community. The programme for Government refers to incentivising health care professionals who purchase and place diagnostic equipment in the community in order that patients can get a scan or X-ray in primary care centres or GP centres rather than having to go to the emergency department.

I am keen to debunk some myths. I am all in favour of constructive politics, but I get frustrated when people try to say that I represent something that I absolutely do not represent. Deputy Louise O'Reilly is very constructive and I enjoy my engagements with her, but she referred to a charter of privatisation. That is nonsense. She referred to cuts to the overall health budget. There are none. We are giving an extra €500 million today. She referred to this representing bad news. If we are going to have an honest debate, then let us have an honest debate. This Government and I are committed to the development of the Irish public health service and to a singular vision for the development of that public health service in which access to services is based on need and not ability to pay. That is what I want to work towards with this Oireachtas. This Oireachtas is diverse but we need not necessarily be divided on all these issues.

We have significant challenges but I believe that putting the additional funding into our health service today - provided the Oireachtas chooses to pass this Estimate - will enable the HSE to get on with the job of providing the services that people need and will enable us to make the necessary service improvements.

Debate adjourned.

Rent Certainty Bill 2016: Second Stage (Resumed)

An Ceann Comhairle: A division was claimed on Tuesday, 14 June 2016 on the question that the Rent Certainty Bill 2016 be now read a Second Time. In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), that division must be taken now.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 43; Níl, 87.</i>	
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Adams, Gerry.</i>	<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>
<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Brassil, John.</i>
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>
<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>
<i>Daly, Clare.</i>	<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>
<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>
<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>	<i>Casey, Pat.</i>
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>
<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>
<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	<i>Chambers, Lisa.</i>
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>
<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	<i>Curran, John.</i>
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>Deasy, John.</i>
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>
<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>

<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>
<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	<i>Gallagher, Pat The Cope.</i>
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>
<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>
	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>
	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>
	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>
	<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>
	<i>Lahart, John.</i>
	<i>Lawless, James.</i>
	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>
	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>
	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>
	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>
	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>
	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>
	<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>
	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>
	<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>
	<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>
	<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>
	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>
	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>
	<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>
	<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>
	<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>
	<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>
	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>
	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>
	<i>Neville, Tom.</i>
	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>
	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>
	<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>
	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>
	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>
	<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>
	<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>
	<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>

	<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>
	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>
	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>
	<i>Rock, Noel.</i>
	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>
	<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>
	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>
	<i>Stanton, David.</i>
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Eoin Ó Broin and Aengus Ó Snodaigh; Níl, Deputies Regina Doherty and Michael Moynihan.

Question declared lost.

Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998: Motion (Resumed)

The following motion was moved by the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, on Tuesday, 14 June 2016:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that sections 2 to 4, 6 to 12, 14 and 17 of the Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 (No. 39 of 1998) shall continue in operation for the period beginning on 30th June, 2016 and ending on 29th June, 2017.

An Ceann Comhairle: A division was claimed on Wednesday, 15 June 2016 on the question that the motion be agreed to. In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 97; Níl, 33.</i>	
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Adams, Gerry.</i>
<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>
<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>
<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Daly, Clare.</i>
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>

<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>
<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>
<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>
<i>Chambers, Lisa.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>
<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>
<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>
<i>Deasy, John.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>
<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat The Cope.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	

<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	
<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	
<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>	
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	
<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	
<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>	
<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>	
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>	
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>	
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	
<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	

16 June 2016

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Regina Doherty and Alan Farrell; Níl, Deputies Clare Daly and Aengus Ó Snodaigh.

Question declared carried.

Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009: Motion (Resumed)

The following motion was moved by the Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality, Deputy David Stanton, on Wednesday, 15 June 2016:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 (No. 32 of 2009) shall continue in operation for the period beginning on 30th June 2016 and ending on 29th June 2017.

An Ceann Comhairle: A division was claimed on Wednesday, 15 June 2016 on the question that the motion be agreed to. In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), that division must take place now.

4 o'clock

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 96; Níl, 33.</i>	
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Adams, Gerry.</i>
<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>
<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>
<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Daly, Clare.</i>
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>
<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>
<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>
<i>Chambers, Lisa.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>

<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>
<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>
<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>
<i>Deasy, John.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>
<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat The Cope.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	

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<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	
<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>	
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	
<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	
<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>	
<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>	
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>	
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>	
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	
<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Regina Doherty and Alan Farrell; Níl, Deputies Clare Daly and Aengus Ó Snodaigh.

Question declared carried.

Priority Questions

National Broadband Plan Implementation

1. **Deputy Timmy Dooley** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if all premises covered by the national broadband plan will be connected by 2020; if he is satisfied with the download speeds it envisages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16375/16]

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Will all premises covered by the national broadband plan be connected by 2020, as was originally envisaged, and is the Minister satisfied, since coming to the Department, with the proposed download speeds that are identified? Does he have any view on the upload speeds, which are also an aspect of appropriate Internet connection? Can he give assurances to the many people throughout rural Ireland who are exceptionally dependent on the delivery of this service that it will be delivered on time and to a standard that will meet the future needs of those people?

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Denis Naughten): The Government's national broadband plan aims to ensure that every citizen and business, regardless of location, has access to a high-quality, high-speed broadband service. This will be achieved through a combination of commercial investments and a State-led intervention in areas where commercial services will not be provided.

The broadband intervention strategy for Ireland, available on my Department's website, sets out a detailed service specification, including the requirement that the State-funded network must be capable of delivering high-quality, high-speed broadband with a download speed of at least 30 Mbps and an upload speed of 6 Mbps to all citizens; be capable of catering for higher performance in the future so as to keep pace with consumer demand; and ensure the availability of high-quality wholesale services to allow retail competition to develop. The emphasis, therefore, is on putting in place a high-quality infrastructure network capable of being scaled up to meet current and future demand, with 30 Mbps as a minimum rather than a ceiling for consumers.

In addition, the intervention strategy requires measures to meet the specific needs of businesses as well as ensuring scalability in terms of future anticipated growth in demand for bandwidth. Bidders will therefore be invited to put forward minimum speeds for businesses, which can be built into the service standards of the winning bidder's or bidders' contract. The winning bidder's or bidders' network will be subject to periodic reviews on a three-to-five-year basis to ensure that it is keeping pace with demand.

Over 750,000 premises are the focus of the procurement process, which formally commenced in December 2015 with the publication of the pre-qualification questionnaire and the project information memorandum. Five responses were received from prospective bidders at this stage of the competitive procurement process by the deadline of 31 March 2016.

The second stage in the procurement process will be a formal invitation to participate in dialogue, the ITPD, to shortlisted bidders, following the assessment of the responses to the pre-qualification questionnaire stage.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I will allow the Minister to contribute again.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Minister for the outline, but the principal part of the question concerned whether the roll-out will, in his estimation, be completed by 2020? Does he not accept that putting forward standards as low as a base of 30 Mbps for downloads and 6 Mbps for uploads is utterly futile when what people expect in this day and age are speeds associated with a fibre-optic link? In the United States the Federal Communications Commission has declared that speeds below 25 Mbps cannot even be referred to as broadband, and we are setting a base at 30 Mbps, just within that parameter. It is way below where it needs to be.

Who will own the network, which will be funded by the State? Will it be owned by the winning bidder or will it remain an asset of the State?

Deputy Denis Naughten: The minimum requirement will be 30 Mbps. At the moment, at EU level, there is a guideline of 30 megabits per second. It is not binding, it does not state that it is a minimum or maximum and there is no way of enforcing it. During the consultation process - as the Deputy knows, there have been a number of rounds of consultation about this - some of the prospective bidders said that 30 Mbps was too high. At present the UK is considering a universal service obligation of 10 Mbps in rural areas. What we are saying, therefore, is that this would be the very minimum and would be reviewed on an ongoing basis, based on needs and demands. Based on the technologies that are used, the actual speeds may be higher than that when it comes about.

Regarding the Deputy's specific question about the timeline, what we are being told by the experts who are advising us is that it will take between three and five years to roll out this network. We expect that we will have 60% of the network rolled out within the first two years, but to roll it out to every single building and premises in Ireland will take time. If we are bringing high-speed broadband up the side of a mountain, that will not happen overnight, but we will see once the contracts are signed. The Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Heather Humphreys, will be very engaged very early on in this process. Questions will be taken later regarding this, but we expect that whoever the contractor is will hit the ground running and will start rolling out broadband, and a substantial number of the houses in question will get access to that quite quickly.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: For the sake of clarity who will own the network? Do I have another minute?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Yes.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Minister for his response, and while I accept it is an onerous task to roll out the service, there needs to be an incentive for the winning bidder to try to complete it in a timeframe shorter than that. It is all about money at the end of the day. I am still not happy about this, regardless of what the British are doing in their rural areas and regardless of the discussion that is taking place at the level of the European Commission. It should be open to us to set our own minimum standard at a much higher level and then build in the redundancy. Saying that they can offer a higher service for future expansion is not strong enough because, depending on the objective criteria that one sets for consideration of the final

bids, I fail to understand how it will be possible to come down on the side of somebody who is offering a higher or better option if the minimum standard is just 30 Mbps.

I again ask the Minister to identify who he expects will own the network at the end of the process.

Deputy Denis Naughten: To deal with the issue of the speeds, under the procurement rules at EU level, we must be technology-neutral in this. We must get State aid approval at the end of this process and we must be conscious of that. If we were to set the speed that we want, for argument's sake, at one gigabit per second, then there would be only one solution to that. We must therefore try to set a benchmark that is achievable across a range of technologies. What we have tried to do with this, and what is built into it, is that it will be future-proofed for the next 25 years, and it is up to the contractors themselves then to decide which technology to use. We would very much like if they could come in and roll this out more quickly, and if they can, we will consider that, because our objective is to roll this out as quickly as possible.

Regarding the Deputy's question about the ownership model, that is an issue that we are considering at the moment, whether we go for a commercial stimulus or a full concession model. There is a debate one way or the other in that regard, and if the Deputy has suggestions or ideas and thoughts on that I would like to hear them because we must make a decision in the next phase as to what type of a model we take. There are pros and cons on this aspect. As the Deputy knows, five models were considered initially. We have narrowed it down to two models. One would involve gap funding, where the concessionaire would own it at the end of it. The other would involve it reverting to the State at the end of the process.

Post Office Network

2. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the action he will take to preserve the services delivered by rural post offices. [16173/16]

Deputy Carol Nolan: I am asking the question on behalf of Deputy Brian Stanley. The survival of rural Ireland will require a committed strategy from the Government, which has been sorely lacking in recent Administrations. This includes the preservation of our network of rural post offices. This has been a major issue in my constituency of Offaly and north Tipperary, as it has been throughout the country. People want a commitment by the Government to protect the rural post office. The previous Government oversaw the closure of dozens of post offices around Ireland and encouraged business away from the post offices by shifting social welfare payments from the post offices to the banks. What actions will the Minister take to preserve the services delivered by post offices, particularly those in rural areas?

Deputy Denis Naughten: I thank Deputy Carol Nolan and wish her a long career in the House. I send my good wishes to Deputy Brian Stanley.

It is Government policy that An Post remains a strong, viable company in a position to provide a high quality postal service and maintain a national network of customer focused post offices in the community. The post office network plays an important role in serving the needs of business and domestic customers alike. However, the postal sector is undergoing systemic change, with migration towards electronic communications resulting in core mail volume decline year on year.

In recognition of the changing commercial environment, my predecessor established the Post Office Network Business Development Group last year, the remit of which was to examine the potential from existing and new Government and commercial business that could be transacted through the post office network. Mr. Bobby Kerr was appointed as the independent chairman of the group and he brought a depth of knowledge and experience in identifying and developing business opportunities for the post office network.

The final report of the group, which was published in January of this year, details 23 recommendations with network renewal, a basic payment account and motor tax being the three key actions. The final report recommended that An Post should, following appropriate consultation with postmasters and others, review and amend the five-year strategy for the post office network.

A number of working groups have been established, including a network renewal implementation group, which is being independently chaired by Mr. Bobby Kerr. This group is examining the number and spatial distribution of branches, branch modernisation, the streamlining of products and services, postmaster payments and contracts and training and qualifications for post office employees. An Post and the Irish Postmasters Union, IPU, are members of the group, which is of fundamental importance to the long-term future of the network. Good progress has been made in a collective environment and that work remains ongoing in the group.

The programme for Government commits to acting on all of the recommendations of the final report, including supporting the implementation of a basic payment account and enabling the payment of motor tax through the post office network. My officials have been actively engaging with other Departments and agencies on these issues over the past six months. Responsibility for implementation of the recommendations in the final report will shortly transfer to the Minister for Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Heather Humphreys. A number of staff with expertise will transfer with it.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister for his response. I question why people received letters from the Department of Social Protection which strongly encouraged them to transfer their payments from the post office to the bank. As the Minister knows, we have a responsibility for rural Ireland. I welcome the fact the Minister is considering the payment of motor tax through the post offices. I urge him to write to the Department of Social Protection and urge it not to encourage people to move their payments from the post office to the bank. We need security and supports for post offices in our rural communities.

Deputy Denis Naughten: In recent days, I have received correspondence from the Irish Postmasters' Union, including a copy of a letter that was circulated regarding people in receipt of jobseeker's allowance. The letter offered a number of options for receiving payments and it did not include the post office. This is of concern to me. I will not be hypocritical. People know when I was on the other side of the House I was very critical of the manner in which social welfare issued some of these letters in the past. I have directed my officials to make contact with the Department of Social Protection on this.

We are moving away from this. With the introduction of the basic payment account, An Post and the post offices will be on an equal footing with every single banking institution. Significant progress has been made on the basic payment account. There is ample evidence that the inclusion of it will not only benefit An Post and postmasters in bringing new business in, but will enable us to provide electronic accounts to hundreds of thousands of people who do

not have access to electronic banking and transactions, particularly people in rural areas. It will provide them with a range of services. Many of the banks have abandoned rural Ireland. As the Acting Chairman, Deputy Eugene Murphy, would know, some banks give out cash only on certain days. It is important that we support the post office network. The basic payment account will be a significant step forward in that.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the fact the Minister has been so committed to the future of the post offices. I take it there will be no more letters from the Department of Social Protection urging people to transfer their payments.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Department of Social Protection has been of great assistance to my Department, as have NewERA, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Department of Finance. We have been in a working group on the basic payment account. It has far more potential than just helping An Post to retain business. Sadly, post offices have become more dependent on social welfare customers. The basic electronic account will allow people to do their transactions in the local post office rather than having to go into a town to access the bank. Post offices want to engage with people on a face-to-face basis rather than encouraging them away from teller and cash services. It opens up great opportunities not just for the traditional business that has been going through post offices, but hopefully to attract new business.

Postal Codes

3. **Deputy Timmy Dooley** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources his views that the establishment of Eircode has provided value for money; if he is satisfied with the rate of take up by industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16216/16]

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The question relates to the setting up of Eircode. The Minister will be aware that it ran €20 million over budget. Is the Minister satisfied with the take up and use of Eircodes in the transport and delivery business?

Deputy Denis Naughten: International experience shows that it takes a number of years for postcodes to become widely used after their introduction. Since the launch of Eircode, just under a year ago, there have been more than 4 million look ups on the Eircode finder, with average daily hits running at approximately 19,000. More than 80 million records across 15 public sector bodies were encoded before the launch and more than 3 million pieces of correspondence containing Eircodes have been issued by public sector bodies since July last year. Some examples of usage by public sector bodies include the Emergency Call Answering Service, ECAS, which takes emergency calls made to 112 and 999 numbers. It has updated its systems and changed processes to enable the use of Eircode postcodes when presented by callers. The National Ambulance Service, NAS, has installed a new computer-aided dispatch system, which incorporates the Eircode postcode. This allows callers in any part of the country to phone the ambulance control centre and give their Eircode postcodes, facilitating a speedier dispatch of ambulances. The passport card online application form was introduced in October 2015 and all passport card online application forms request a postcode. All 2016 census forms included a postcode. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has started uploading the National Vehicle and Driver File, NVDF, with Eircode postcodes. This database includes address particulars in respect of the 2.6 million licensed vehicles and 2.74 million driver licence holders in

the country. The motor tax database of the NVDF went live in January 2016 with postcodes.

The Revenue Commissioners have uploaded postcodes in some of their main databases and started issuing Eircode postcode-enabled correspondence in July 2015. In November 2015 alone, one database issued more than 800,000 items of correspondence with postcodes. The Department of Social Protection started issuing postcode enabled correspondence in October 2015 and, since then, more than 877,000 items of correspondence have issued with a postcode. The educational grants authority, SUSI, processes over 120,000 grant applications per annum and it now requests that college grant applications include a postcode. This has assisted SUSI to determine more efficiently the location of student addresses saving them time and facilitating faster processing times for issuing grants. Electric Ireland issued 680,000 electricity bills in February which had a postcode included on them.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The logistics and supply chain confidence index 2016 is a study that involved discussions with 53 large companies. They said this system will not have a positive impact for them. A total of 93% of respondents expect no net gain from the Eircode postcode system. While most companies welcomed the introduction of a postcode as a positive development, 96% of respondents said they had not adapted their businesses to process postcodes. I wonder whether much of this is rooted in the design of the system. Eircode is a world first in assigning a random code to every address in the State. At the outset, the national postcodes project board, which comprised representatives of the public sector and various other organisations, recommended the adoption of a hierarchical code that would enable grouping and bundling of packages for delivery, which would assist these companies in doing their business much more efficiently. As a result of a campaign by some newspapers, which through freedom of information requests have succeeded in securing access to information that had been restricted for some time, it was established that there was a recommendation to go down the route of a hierarchical code but, sadly, that did not happen. The system in place is based on random assignment. It is not being used for that reason by the companies for which it should have been introduced in the first instance and which would benefit most in respect of reducing the back end processing of the delivery of parcels. The Minister probably needs to have discussions with his officials to establish why that happened.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I read the report on the survey. It noted that two thirds of respondents said the introduction of the Eircode postcode system was a positive development for the domestic market with 73% of shipping respondents and 64% of logistics and e-commerce companies saying its introduction was a positive development. The Deputy is selectively quoting. There is positive feedback regarding the postcode system. I was probably one of the first Members to advocate for this system. I have particular difficulties with it, as I am sure the Deputy has coming from County Clare with adjoining counties such as Limerick. The Cathaoirleach will be aware of these as well. The reason I sent literature to every home in the constituency in the run-up to the election was that by using Eircode postcodes, I could identify individual houses. Under the cluster model, I could not do that. No more than in County Clare, we had a huge problem in County Roscommon with ambulances going missing and getting delayed as they tried to find various townlands. However, now because the NAS is linked to the Eircode postcode system, if callers give their postcodes over the telephone, the ambulance personnel can identify their homes precisely.

The difficulty is that approximately 35% of addresses in the State are replicated elsewhere in the State. Milltown is a good example. How many Milltowns are there in County Clare? There is a litany of them in counties Roscommon and Galway. Which one should the ambu-

lance be sent to? An Eircode postcode will bring the ambulance to the front door of the emergency. When seconds count, having an additional 15 or 20 minutes to get the ambulance there will have a significant impact. This is a wider issue than just facilitating logistics companies. There was always going to be a slow lead-in in respect of the uptake for this system but it was significant that the NAS came on board earlier this year. I have absolutely no doubt that will save lives. I encourage the Deputy to visit the national ambulance centre in Tallaght to see the Eircode system in operation. I hope to visit soon.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am anxious not to cut across Members and to ensure fair play for everyone on both the ministerial and Opposition sides but if I do not adhere to the agreed time limits, we will not get to the questions tabled by some Members. I will give Deputy Dooley a minute to reply.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: There is no doubt the introduction of a postcode system was the correct decision to take for Ireland and there are benefits for the NAS. I have visited the centre in Tallaght and have witnessed the excellent work that goes on there. However, the national postcodes project board said a hierarchical structure was needed, which would assist other sectors of the business community, but that has not been provided. Concerns have been expressed as to why that might have been the case. Was one operator favoured over others? The Minister needs to get to the bottom of that. A hierarchical structure would not take away from the capacity to divert an ambulance to the scene of an incident. Other surveys indicate that only 5% of the public know their postcode and, therefore, that will be the greatest inhibitor to benefitting the NAS in the long run because if somebody comes upon an accident and does not know the postcode of the location, it will not be of any assistance.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I understand why the Deputy is sceptical. One of the criticisms is we that should have opted for a cluster model. That is all well and good in Dublin where there are many houses in a small area. However, there are large townlands in the country and there could be 20 different families with the surname Murphy living on them. There could be five heads of household called Eugene Murphy. Which of them does one go to?

Deputy Ryan was critical of the system because he believes it should be sequential. The difficulty with that, particularly in rural Ireland, is what happens when a young couple is granted planning permission between two current addresses. What happens in Dublin as we try to develop brownfield sites? A sequential system would fall down quickly. We tried to put a system in place for the long term. I was critical in respect of the confusion over county addresses and I relayed that to my officials but the postcode system is saving lives today. It has saved lives over the past six months and it will be of massive benefit to our health service. When that system can be put on a sat nav it will be a different story. When personal public service, PPS, numbers were introduced, people did not have a clue about them, but many people now know their PPS number because it is very useful. I believe the same will happen with Eircode.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Question No. 4 cannot be taken as Deputy Mattie McGrath is not in the Chamber.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Does Deputy Harty wish to raise it or has he been nominated to do so, as he is member of the same group as the Deputy?

Deputy Michael Harty: No.

Question No. 4 replied to with Written Answers.

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Other Questions

Mobile Telephony Services

5. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the commitments in the programme for Government on improving mobile telephone coverage and his timetable for action; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16180/16]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Question No. 5 is in the name of Deputy Michael McGrath but I understand that Deputy Dooley will introduce it.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: We were talking about rural Ireland and rural constituencies and the Minister will be well aware of the difficulty encountered by many people who use mobile phones in rural areas and the propensity for call drop-out on a very regular basis. In my view and in the view of many of my constituents there has been a significant deterioration in the quality of that network over a period. What is the Minister's view on how he would ensure an improvement in the existing mobile network?

Deputy Denis Naughten: I thank Deputy Dooley for that question. The programme for a partnership Government commits to the establishment within 100 days of a mobile phone and broadband task force which will consider immediate measures to address telecommunications deficits in rural Ireland. My Department is engaging with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in regard to the terms of reference for the task force to ensure delivery of the programme for Government commitment within the timelines set out. It is likely that the task force will involve a number of Government Departments and agencies, as well as engagement with telecommunications operators. My Department has already conducted a number of meetings with vendors and mobile operators to help inform the process and identify what tangible measures can be taken. I intend to set a challenging timeframe for the delivery of actions arising from this task force.

The provision of mobile telephony services is undertaken by telecommunications service providers operating in a fully liberalised market under licences provided by the Commission for Communications Regulation, ComReg. It is subject to a requirement to secure access to the required radio spectrum by way of licence. The management of the radio spectrum is a statutory function of ComReg and, accordingly, I have no statutory responsibility in this matter.

I am aware, however, that licences issued by ComReg apply terms and conditions on mobile network operators such as quality of service and minimum population coverage obligations. The design of the network is a matter entirely for the operator concerned although operators tend to exceed their minimum coverage requirements for commercial reasons. ComReg monitors compliance with licence requirements by means of bi-annual drive tests. I understand that current testing is designed to cover all national primary and secondary routes, with measurements being performed on all mobile networks.

There are several ways in which improved wireless broadband and mobile services can be achieved. This includes the Government and local authorities working to reduce barriers to the deployment of telecommunications infrastructure through better planning laws and processes, and working with telecommunications operators to improve information on various aspects of their activities, including upgrades and changes in their networks. My Department continues

to liaise closely with industry and other relevant Departments and agencies to assist in the commercial deployment of telecommunications networks and this will be a focus of the mobile phone and broadband task force.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

A programme for a partnership Government also commits to measures to assist in the roll-out of the network once a contract under the national broadband plan is awarded. In this regard, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, will lead on the establishment of county or regional broadband task forces, working with local authorities, local enterprise offices, Leader groups and other relevant agencies to help accelerate the broadband network build in rural Ireland, once a contract or contracts have been awarded. These measures should also assist in the roll-out of mobile telecommunications services.

The commercial telecommunications sector has invested over €2 billion in upgrading and modernising networks which support the provision of high speed broadband services, including acquiring spectrum under ComReg's 2012 multi-band spectrum auction for roll-out of 3G and 4G mobile services. These investments will further improve the coverage and quality of broadband and mobile voice and data services throughout the country, although I understand that some temporary disruptions to service have been encountered as upgrades take place. ComReg is also planning the further release of spectrum to assist in the roll-out of wireless services, particularly in rural areas.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Minister for his reply. He will be aware that in 2012 ComReg awarded a number of individual rights to use the spectrum that provides for 4G services and certain conditions were applied at that time to provide minimum coverage obligations of, I believe, 70% of the population, and many operators claim to be providing that service or in excess of that. That is fine when it comes mobile broadband and all the additional services that reside thereafter. The issue is about access to basic telephony. Interestingly, under a UK 2014 agreement, all four of its mobile operators have collectively agreed to guarantee voice and text coverage from each operator across 90% of the UK geographic area by 2017. That should set the template for us in ensuring that voice calls and texts are at least accessible. We do not expect to be able to access enhanced fast download speeds on mobile phone in every rural or remote area.

We spoke about the importance of being able to direct an ambulance to the location of an accident when we dealt with an earlier question. Cellular telephony and technology has provided the greatest tool in getting ambulances and emergency services quickly to the site of an accident but accidents happen in rural and isolated areas and, sadly, in many cases there is a delay in getting personnel there because of the poor coverage. I humbly suggest that the Minister examines what has happened in the UK and the arrangement that has been made between its commission and the operators to put in place something along those lines about achieving 90% coverage of the landmass. There is no doubt that anybody familiar with the geography of the UK would recognise that it is as testing, or probably more testing, than the topography of our own landscape, therefore, it should be possible to reach 90% to 95% coverage for mobile calls and texts.

Deputy Denis Naughten: On the Deputy's comment regarding what has happened the UK, we will look at that. It is a matter for ComReg but we will look at what is happening in UK. My Department works very closely with colleagues in the UK.

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Vodafone has 98% 3G coverage and 95% 4G coverage, Meteor has 99% 3G coverage and 75% 4G coverage, 3 has 96% 3G coverage and 73% 4G coverage but that is on the basis of population. Approximately 70% of premises are in about 4% of the land area, and therein lies the problem. A number of actions have to be taken. There are bottlenecks in the system and we will consider the Deputy's suggestion. If anyone else has suggestions on that, I would be happy to examine them.

I had a meeting earlier with Vodafone Ireland and Vodafone International at which we raised this issue and their representatives made the point about development contributions. To take my constituency as an example, the development contribution in County Galway per telecommunications mast is €20,000 but across the River Suck, in County Roscommon, it is zero. There is a huge variation across the country in that regard and that is part of the problem.

Another part of the problem is that the demand for data is increasing dramatically. The volume of data on the landline network across Europe is doubling every 40 months and on the mobile network it is doubling every 18 months. That conflict is part of the problem. We need to examine how we can roll out infrastructure quicker, and not just wireless and mobile infrastructure because that needs to be backed up by fibre broadband. It is about engaging with local authorities, dealing with anomalies such as this and with issues of road opening licences and access to ducting. The cost of existing ducting is a significant problem.

I believe we can make significant progress if all of us work together, engage with our own local authorities, deal with the challenges that exist and use the existing State infrastructure available to us to try to roll out that network.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Do I have another minute?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): No. I have to cut off the debate when the six and a half minutes have concluded. I have been liberal-minded with the Deputy in allowing him go over time-----

Deputy Denis Naughten: You are awful hard.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): -----but I am anxious that we deal with as many questions as possible. Deputy Dooley has 30 seconds to introduce the next question.

Renewable Energy Generation Targets

6. **Deputy Timmy Dooley** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if Ireland is on track to meet binding European Union 2020 renewable targets; the fines that will be realised if these are not achieved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16220/16]

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Minister is well aware of the binding commitments made in the European agreement, Towards 2020, regarding renewable targets. Significant fines will accrue to the State if those are not achieved. Will the Minister outline his views on our position in that process and if he expects we will reach the targets set out?

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Deputy should do the lotto on the way home. He has done very well in the lottery on this occasion.

The 2009 EU Renewable Energy Directive 2009/28/EC set Ireland a legally binding target of meeting 16% of our energy requirements from renewable sources by 2020. In order to meet this target, Ireland is committed to meeting 40% of electricity demand from renewable sources. We also plan to achieve 12% renewables in the heating sector and 10% in transport. The Government has adopted a range of support measures designed to meet our binding target and although good progress towards our target has been made to date, meeting the 16% target remains challenging. Provisional data from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, or SEAI, indicates that we had reached 9.2% of the overall 16% target at the end of 2015. In the electricity sector, the primary support mechanisms introduced for renewable electricity are the alternative energy requirement, or AER, schemes and the renewable energy feed-in-tariff, or REFIT, schemes. These schemes have proved successful at incentivising the development of the renewable electricity generation capacity necessary to meet our 40% renewable electricity target. Provisional figures show that in 2015, some 25.3% of electricity demand was met by renewable sources.

In the heating sector, my Department is working on the introduction of a new renewable heat incentive, or RHI, to support the deployment of renewable energy in the sector. The primary aim of the RHI is to build on the progress already made in heating and to help reach our 12% target by 2020. In 2015, it is estimated that 6.8% of heat was derived from renewable sources. In the transport sector, Ireland aims to meet its renewable target mainly through the increased use of sustainable biofuels with electric vehicles also making a small contribution. In 2015, provisional figures indicate 5.7% of our energy needs in the transport sector were met from renewable sources.

In the event of a member state not meeting its targets, the renewable energy directive sets out arrangements to purchase compliance and thereby avoid infringement proceedings by the EU Commission. These include a flexibility measure known as a statistical transfer. While the precise cost of purchasing statistical transfers or of any potential shortfall in Ireland's target of 16% has yet to be established and will depend on a number of factors, the focus remains firmly on meeting our 2020 target. The SEAI has estimated that the cost to Ireland may be in the range of €100 million to €150 million for each percentage point Ireland falls short of the overall 16% renewable energy target. The energy White Paper, Ireland's Transition to a Low Carbon Energy Future, published in December 2015 sets out a vision for transforming Ireland's fossil-fuel based energy sector into a clean, low carbon system by 2050. The clear focus of my Department is on implementing the range of actions set out in the White Paper and the programme for Government which are aimed at meeting our energy and climate change targets.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Minister. From discussions I have had with the sector generally, it would appear that we are on target with regard to meeting 40% of electricity demand from renewable generation. There is a great deal of concern around the heat sector and I look forward to the proposals the Minister has on encouraging home owners to be more efficient in the way they manage their heating requirements. My reading and discussions with the industry indicate that there is no expectation we will meet the target on the transport side of things. The Minister referred to biofuels, about which there was a great deal of talk a number of years ago and in respect of which there were some interesting pilot programmes. No more than the Minister, those of us in the House travel the country quite a bit and I do not know when I last saw any reference to biofuels or any station providing them. There is widespread concern that we are in trouble in regard to those two aspects. The sooner the Minister can bring the proposal on heat to the marketplace the better. That is great, but we have a big problem in

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regard to biofuels and the transport sector and the Department will have to take a lead. It is not going to come from transport or anywhere else. Hopefully, the Minister can bring proposals to the House on that in due course.

Deputy Denis Naughten: There is no doubt that there is a challenge in regard to transport. It is an uphill struggle for us, mainly because we are technology takers. We are not big car manufacturers and we are not a big market. As the Deputy knows, electrical vehicles are useful in big cities, but they will not be a solution in rural Ireland given the type of batteries we have. I am very supportive of and have met with Commissioner Cañete on a number of occasions. The Commissioner is ensuring that additional investment is being made in battery technology, because that is the solution to the electricity quandary. When that technology is available, all we can do is be ready to accept it.

On the heat sector, we can make significant progress. The cheapest barrel of oil is the one which is not burned. If we can reduce the cost of heating and energy for families by making their homes more energy efficient, that will reduce the amount of energy they use. To give the Deputy a simple statistic, the SEAI tells me that there are 1 million home heating boilers in the country which need to be upgraded. If they were, it would reduce the cost of heating homes and make them far more efficient. Today's *Irish Examiner* indicates that EPS, a company in Cork, has spent €200,000 on upgrading the energy efficiency of the homes of its own employees. It is the equivalent in the energy sector of the cycle to work scheme. Employers get involved, assist with carrying out assessments on homes and assist with upgrading them. The families get interest free loans which they pay off against the savings they make. That is an innovative approach we need to support.

Energy Efficiency

7. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if he will consider introducing an opt-in provision for customers in the national smart metering programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16236/16]

Deputy Timmy Dooley: There are proposals out there on the introduction of smart meters. While it is recognised that there are benefits to a smart metering programme, meters are not for everybody. Unless one has particular characteristics in the way one uses electricity, they may not benefit one. Is it the Minister's view that they should be rolled out on an opt-in basis whereby if somebody wants one, he or she can have it or does he expect that they will be rolled out and provided to everybody regardless of choice?

Deputy Denis Naughten: The EU's third energy package stipulates that "where roll-out of smart meters is assessed positively, at least 80% of consumers shall be equipped with intelligent metering systems by 2020". In Ireland, the national smart metering programme, which includes both electricity and gas meters, is managed by the Commission for Energy Regulation. The regulator is developing a cost-benefit analysis on the roll-out of smart meters. The cost-benefit analysis results are due in the first quarter of next year and that will be the key determinant in relation to the scale, scope and timing of the roll-out. The roll-out will include replacement with new smart meters of electricity meters by ESB Networks and gas meters by Gas Networks Ireland.

I have been informed by the regulator that a customer who does not want an upgraded me-

ter will be able to decline to have this new meter installed. However, the intention is that the default position will be the installation of a smart meter for newly constructed dwellings and other premises or where meters are due for replacement at the end of their life. It is important to recognise that the full benefits associated with smart meters will only be realised by people using this technology to change their behaviour by reducing their energy usage or moving their use to times when energy costs less. To help inform people, the regulator is working with the network companies, energy suppliers and consumer interest groups to develop the necessary information for people on the benefits of smart meters. As a result, people will have greater awareness of the benefits and be more likely to view the roll-out of smart meters positively.

5 o'clock

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It seems the Minister is referring to an opt-out rather than an opt-in, and one that will not be mandatory. I have some concerns in that this has the potential for unfair pressure being placed on a cohort of people who are often referred to as fuel-poor customers. What is effectively being put in place is a technology that can charge more at peak times. That is helpful if someone is in a position to manage his or her budget, but it could be used unfairly in respect of a certain cohort.

I hope that all aspects are made clear to consumers. The installation of meters is a cost that must be borne by them. I know how they will be sold by the organisations, namely, that one can manage a fuel bill better and consume energy at cheaper times. However, we all know that if one uses electricity at 1 a.m., it is cheaper for the companies, but one cannot feed children and large families cannot be expected to do their washing or drying at that time.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I thank Deputy Dooley for raising that concern, as it had not yet been raised with me directly. I would be concerned by anything like that happening.

The approximately 500,000 meters that must be replaced will be replaced with smart meters. I do not know whether there will be an option at that stage to opt out. In terms of the cost-benefit analysis, there is still a question mark over whether there will even be a general roll-out. Within 12 months of a smart meter being installed, the energy company must provide the customer with the option of time-of-use tariffs, but it is up to the customer to decide whether to accept it or use the current flat-rate tariff. No decision has been made to phase out the existing charging regime. Even if a smart meter is installed in a house, a person will still receive the same charging structure. People can opt into time-of-use tariffs.

The Deputy may correct me if I am wrong, but his concern seems to be more about the time-of-use tariffs than the smart meters. I appreciate that it may be an issue and something that needs to be addressed, but I will allay the Deputy's fears. The Commission for Energy Regulation, CER, has carried out a number of consultations on this matter and engaged with several consumer interest groups, including the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Money Advice & Budgeting Service, MABS. We will take these concerns on board and have them addressed in the overall context. It is important that there be an uptake, that this measure only be positive and that there be no stick to penalise any family.

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Public Service Obligation Levy Increase

8. **Deputy Shane Cassells** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the rate at which the public service obligation, PSO, is levied on electricity bills; his views on increasing this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16205/16]

Deputy Shane Cassells: I welcome the opportunity to contribute. I wish the Minister well in his role and look forward to working with him closely in the months ahead in order to ensure that he instructs EirGrid to run its cables underground and save us from the proposed monstrous pylons that would otherwise desecrate County Meath.

What are the Minister's views on increasing the PSO levy on electricity bills for hard-pressed families? Is it justified?

Deputy Denis Naughten: I wish Deputy Cassells the best of luck, not just for the current term but also for a long-term career in the House.

The PSO levy has been in place since 2001 and consists of a set of support schemes designed to facilitate the Government's electricity policy objectives for renewables, indigenous fuels and security of supply. It also supports employment in the renewables and peat industries.

The PSO has supported the connection of more than 2,000 MW in renewable energy to the electricity grid and will continue to support the development of renewable energy so that we can meet our target of 40% renewable electricity penetration by 2020.

Recent international studies have shown that Ireland has had one of the lowest per unit supports for renewable energy in the EU.

The calculation of the level of the PSO is a matter for the CER. The CER has published a consultation on the proposed levy of €441 million for the period 2016 to 2017, equating to just less than €7 per month for domestic consumers and representing an increase on 2015 of €1.61 per month or €19.32 per year. The greatest drivers for the proposed levy increase are the lower predicted wholesale market electricity price and increased deployment of renewables.

I am conscious of the impact of energy costs on industry and households alike. As the wholesale electricity price is falling, this decrease should be passed on to domestic electricity customers and more than outweighs the proposed levy increase in the current period. In that regard, I am pleased that some electricity suppliers have recently reduced their prices. Consumers can also avail of discounts either by contacting their suppliers directly or using the price comparison websites accredited by the CER, such as *bonkers.ie* and *switcher.ie*, to switch to discounted tariffs. A customer consuming the average amount of electricity could save over €150 by switching suppliers.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I thank the Minister. This morning, many Deputies discussed bin charges but the PSO increase of €20 for a residential customer and €65 for a small business is another hit on families and small businesses that are trying to survive, and all to create a fund of some €300 million for promoting renewable sources of energy such as that produced by wind turbines, a technology that is being forced on small communities in my county of Meath from Loganstown and Carlanstown to Longwood in the south. Communities do not want them, never mind what I already mentioned in the context of EirGrid.

Ireland has the third highest average price of electricity in the EU at €1,900 per annum. I am concerned by the high retail energy prices. The Minister stated that some providers had reduced their prices. However, any decrease will be negated by the planned PSO levy increase of more than 30% in October. He referred to the CER but does he believe that this increase is justified, given the current scenario?

Deputy Denis Naughten: Electric Ireland's reductions in the past two years have amounted to approximately €184 per electricity customer, which is multiples of the PSO levy increase. SSE Airtricity recently announced discounts. A 5% discount on electricity would save €60 on a typical annual bill of €1,200, and an 8% discount could be applied to any customer who moves to direct debit billing. Given that the PSO levy accounts for just under €20, which is a small percentage of the overall bill, it is more than made up for by the reductions.

The PSO levy exists for a purpose, namely, to support wind and biomass. A significant biomass project to come on stream in the Deputy's constituency will be supported by the levy. There are other renewable energy projects. Every Deputy has contacted me about biomass, biogas, pyrolysis, solar and wind projects across the country. All are funded through the PSO. As the Acting Chairman would know, the levy also supports two peat-fired power stations in the midlands, namely, in Lanesborough and Shannonbridge. It is specifically to deal with energy security. A complex calculation is used but there is a specific purpose. The cost of renewables in this country is far lower than anywhere else in Europe.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I acknowledge what the Minister said about the proportion of the overall bill attributable to the PSO. The fact still remains that the price is still going up at a time when people can least afford it. Wholesale prices decreased by some 30% but the retail equivalent was only 5%. The decrease is not reflected in people's bills.

Alternative Energy Projects

9. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources his plans for developing an alternative energy sector in line with current and future requirements, the need to meet carbon dioxide emission reduction targets and the need to ensure a robust and reliable energy grid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16168/16]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question is to ascertain the extent to which the Minister proposes to lay the foundations for a reliable and robust energy grid, which will obviously have to be sustained with renewable energy, and the extent to which he expects to meet emissions targets at the same time. This is similar to the question on the grid asked a few minutes ago.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I do not need to wish Deputy Durkan, of all people, longevity here in this House.

The White Paper on Energy Policy has set out a vision for a low-carbon energy system in Ireland, where greenhouse gas emissions from the energy sector will be reduced by between 80% and 95%, by comparison with 1990 levels, by 2050, and where alternative and renewable energy will play a dominant role in Ireland's future energy mix. In addition, the programme for Government sets out a range of priority climate actions and interventions, a number of which have a direct bearing on the energy sector. In combination, these will help to increase and diversify Ireland's renewable energy mix across the electricity, heating and transport sectors.

Work is now ongoing to examine the design and cost of introducing a new renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, to encourage the development of Ireland's abundant and indigenous renewable energy resources. This scheme will examine the viability of supporting a range of new renewable energy technologies in Ireland, including solar, bioenergy and ocean energy, and will help to further reduce emissions in the electricity sector.

During this transition, maintaining a robust, secure electricity grid for the benefit of all electricity consumers will be paramount. EirGrid's Delivering a Secure, Sustainable Electricity System, DS3, programme and the future energy scenario planning exercise will ensure the electricity network is designed to meet the transition to a low-carbon energy future in a secure manner.

In the heating sector, my Department is working on the introduction of a new renewable heat incentive, RHI, to support the deployment of renewable energy for commercial and industrial users of heat in the non-ETS sector. The primary aim of the RHI is to build on the progress already made in the renewable heat sector and help to reach Ireland's 12% renewable heat target by 2020. In 2015, it is estimated that 6.8% of heat was derived from renewable sources. The new RHI scheme is expected to become available in 2017.

In the transport sector, Ireland aims to meet its 10% renewables target mainly through the increased use of sustainable biofuels, with electric vehicles also making a small contribution, out to 2020. Provisional figures indicate 5.7% of our energy needs in the transport sector in 2015 were met from renewable sources. Our renewable transport target will be largely met through the biofuels obligation scheme, which has been in place since 2010. It will increase the percentage of biofuels in transport fuels between now and 2020.

The Government recognises the importance of fostering the development of other energy-related technologies, such as biomass, solar, energy efficiency technology, offshore technology and smart meters, all of which can support the future transition to a low-carbon energy future.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I congratulate the Minister on his assuming office, and I also congratulate his colleague. I reciprocate the good wishes offered and hope the Minister reigns for many a year and enjoys it.

To what extent has the Minister tested the targets? I would like him to refer in particular to the use of electric motor cars. To what extent can these cars replace cars running on conventional fuels? Are the targets in this regard much lower than I would have anticipated?

Is the Minister satisfied with the robustness of the various provisions to meet the challenges ahead given that agriculture must continue to exist, that emissions will continue and that the requirement in terms of economic development is likely to increase? Is the Minister satisfied that, with continued economic growth in this country, it will be possible to meet the targets? Have these already been factored into the projections?

Deputy Denis Naughten: One would want about a week to get through all the questions. In any case, I will start with renewable transport technology. There is a binding target of 10% set. The Deputy is saying he believes it is low. The officials in my Department are telling me it would be very challenging to meet the target. The reason is we have not had the take-up in regard to electric vehicles that was projected or expected. This is mainly because the technology has not developed internationally to the extent that it should have.

At one of my meetings with Commissioner Cañete, who is in charge of energy and climate action, he made the point that the European Union is now investing significantly in developing battery technology that will result in longevity so that if one is going to Belmullet, one will be able to get there and back with one charge.

In fairness to the ESB, it has rolled out the charging network across the country. At present, electric vehicles are very useful in large urban conurbations but there is still a challenge in rural areas. Therefore, the current focus is on biofuels, in addition to putting in place structures such that when the technology develops internationally, we will be in a position to seize it.

Broadband Service Provision

10. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources his plans to expedite the roll-out of genuinely high-speed broadband to rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16119/16]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As the Minister knows, the most urgent step in rural areas is the rolling out of real high-speed broadband. I look forward to getting details from the Minister on the progress made since he entered office. I seek assurance from him that we will not be told a speed of 30 Mbps is high-speed broadband in the modern world. I hope he will be aspiring for at least 100 Mbps, and ideally 1 Gbps.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The national broadband plan aims to deliver high-speed services to every city, town, village and individual premises. A programme for a partnership Government commits to the delivery of the plan as a matter of priority. This is being achieved through private investment by commercial telecommunications companies and through State intervention in areas where commercial investment is not forthcoming. The formal procurement process for the State intervention commenced in December 2015.

The high-speed broadband map, which is available at www.broadband.gov.ie, shows the extent of the State intervention area, which is the subject of procurement. The areas marked blue represent those areas where commercial providers are either currently delivering or have previously indicated plans to deliver high-speed broadband services. The Department continues to monitor the commercial deployment plans in the blue area to ensure those services are delivered. The areas marked amber on the map represent the target areas for the State intervention. The map provides information on a county-by-county basis with a breakdown of coverage across the townlands in every county.

More than 750,000 premises are the focus of the procurement process, which formally commenced in December 2015 with the publication of the pre-qualification questionnaire and the project information memorandum. Five responses were received from prospective bidders to this stage of the competitive procurement process by the deadline of 31 March 2016. The second stage in the procurement process will be a formal invitation to participate in dialogue to short-listed bidders. I expect that my Department will move to this stage in the next month. The third stage of the procurement process involves the issue of final tender documentation which follows the dialogue process. Following the submission of final tenders by bidders, a winning bidder or bidders will be selected for the contract which will comprise one or two lots, as set out in the national broadband plan intervention strategy. The Department will then enter into formal contract negotiations with the winning bidder or bidders. It is expected that a con-

tract or contracts will be awarded by June 2017.

As part of the competitive process, the Department will engage with the winning bidder or bidders on the best roll-out strategy in order to target areas of particularly poor service, business needs and-or high demand. This will need to be balanced with the most efficient network roll-out plan. A prioritisation programme will be put in place in this regard in consultation with the Minister for Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht. A detailed roll-out plan for the network will be published once the contract or contracts are in place.

The programme for a partnership Government commits to measures to assist in the roll-out of the network once a contract is awarded. In this regard, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, will lead on the establishment of county or regional broadband teams, working with local authorities, local enterprise offices, Leader groups and other relevant agencies to help accelerate the broadband network build in rural areas once a contract or contracts have been awarded.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I thank the Minister for the large amount of information he provided. The amber on the map may no longer be amber because one telecommunications company has indicated it intends to cover a significant part of the area in question privately and commercially, starting this year. Will this be taken into account when the contracts go to tender, as proposed next February, because it appears the Minister is aiming at a moving target? Will he confirm that the Department still considers speeds of 30 Mbps high-speed broadband and that the tender will seek minimum speeds of 30 Mbps? While I accept that the speed can be increased, is it the case that the Department will legally accept 30 Mbps under the tender? Does the Minister consider such a speed adequate in the modern world given that all the providers have far exceeded it? For example, all the advertisements feature broadband speeds of at least 100 Mbps. We should seek to have speeds of 1 Gbps available to every premises and get the job done once and for all.

Have the Minister's officials indicated to him when the final house will be connected through the national broadband scheme? I have asked a series of specific questions to which no doubt I will receive specific answers.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The minimum requirement is 30 Mbps. The contract will include a provision for a review every three to five years. If, therefore, in five or ten years demand in Cornamona is for 40 Mbps, 50 Mbps or 60 Mbps, it must be possible to achieve these speeds under the contract. This process is future-proofed for the next 25 years. In 20 years, 100 Mbps may be completely inefficient and speeds of 1 Gbps may be required to meet needs. The contract will allow for such flexibility.

The Deputy also asked a question related to areas where an operator is rolling out the broadband network. Any operator which has announced plans to roll out high-speed broadband services has been invited to submit details of its plans to the Department in order that they can be assessed. The criteria for assessing these plans were published on the Department's website in October 2015. Any operator seeking to have its plans reflected in the high-speed broadband map in the amber areas must sign a specific commitment of agreement, the heads of which have been published on the Department's website. If contractors are prepared to sign a contract to deliver high-speed broadband to house A, B and C, we will amend the map. However, not one single operator has signed such a contract.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The time for the question has expired.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I have one final brief question.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I will allow the Deputy to put his question because I allowed the Minister great latitude. However, I do not want to exhaust other Deputies' time.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The minimum broadband speed of 30 Mbps provided for in the plan is utterly redundant and I am disappointed the Minister is buying the Department's line on the issue. Why are all the companies opting for speeds of 100 Mbps? What will happen if a company does not sign a commitment to deliver high-speed broadband but subsequently provides broadband services?

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Department has been engaging directly with all of the commercial providers, not one of which has been prepared to commit. Deputies have all been given promises that broadband would be provided in particular villages by particular dates and it has not happened. Many of us have ended up with egg on our faces. We are willing to amend the map but if we are to do so, a contractor must put pen to paper. It is as simple as that. Wireless and wired operators may be advertising speeds of 100 Mbps but Deputy Ó Cuív should ask people living in the areas concerned whether they are getting this speed. The Department has set a speed of 30 Mbps as a minimum requirement. Some people have asked me to examine the model in place in the United Kingdom. The requirement for rural areas of the UK is only 10 Mbps, which is completely inadequate.

Energy Prices

11. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources his views that the Electricity Supply Board should consider reducing its charges for electricity, given its reported profits of €635 million in 2015; and that high energy prices are being maintained to make the Electricity Supply Board an attractive proposition for privatisation. [16116/16]

Deputy Mick Barry: The ESB clocked up profits of €635 million last year. Surely the Minister is not satisfied with the minimal 6% cut in electricity prices by Electric Ireland. Does he agree that the company must go much further than this? Does he believe the ESB is being fattened up for privatisation?

Deputy Denis Naughten: The electricity and gas markets are commercial, liberalised and competitive and operate within national and European regulatory regimes. I have no statutory function in the setting or review of electricity or gas prices. Price setting by all electricity suppliers, including the ESB's Electric Ireland, is a commercial and operational matter for the companies in question.

Responsibility for electricity and gas market regulation is a matter for the Commission for Energy Regulation, CER, which is an independent statutory body. The CER ceased regulating retail electricity prices in 2011 and retail gas prices in 2014. Business and domestic customers may avail of competitive offerings from a number of supply companies. The competitive energy market results in choice for consumers and businesses in terms of suppliers, products and prices, exerting downward pressure on prices. Under various relevant statutory instruments, the CER carries out statutory market monitoring functions and has responsibility for ensuring

the market operates competitively for the benefit of the consumer.

On 29 April last, Electric Ireland announced a 6% reduction in its unit rate for domestic electricity consumers and on 18 May, the company announced that its customers could avail of additional savings of up to 8.5%. On 1 May 2016, SSE Airtricity announced a 5% electricity and 5% gas price cut and an 8% reward discount by moving to direct debit and e-billing. While I do not have a statutory role in the setting or review of energy prices by energy supply companies, I welcome these reductions.

The level of profit in ESB fluctuates due to market forces over which I, as Minister, have no control, nor do I have any function in the matter of the regulation of electricity or gas prices. The figure of €635 million does not take into account ESB debt and taxes paid to the State. The company's profit for 2015 after tax is €286 million. It is vital that the ESB is resourced to enable it to reinvest in maintaining generation capacity and the electricity network. There is no question of the ESB being privatised.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Minister sounds a little like Pontius Pilate because he is washing his hands of the issue. When one strips out taxes and levies, electricity prices here are the second highest in the European Union. Regardless of how one looks at it, the ESB made bumper profits last year, yet the price cuts announced by Electric Ireland were minimal by any standards. While I welcome what the Minister has said about the ESB and privatisation, is it not the case that prices are being kept high to allow the private companies on the market, which are uncompetitive, to compete, rather than give price cuts to ordinary families?

Deputy Denis Naughten: I will address Deputy Barry's last question first. Prices are not being kept high. No one in this country can keep prices high because they are unregulated. There is an open market. Representatives of ESB tell me the company makes little of its money from the Electric Ireland arm. Thankfully, ESB is in the black and making profits a little short of €300 million. A considerable amount of this profit comes from other arms of the company, including the network and electricity generation arms. I am told that of the pre-tax profits generated by the ESB, approximately 14% relate to the retail arm.

Other companies in the sector make margins as well. It does not seem to me to be excessive. The CER is accountable to the House and the relevant Dáil committee. I call on Deputy Barry to make direct contact with the Chairman of that committee and bring the commissioners before the committee to quiz them on the issue.

Deputy Mick Barry: There the Minister goes again. Like Pontius Pilate, he is washing his hands of the situation. I will ask the Minister a far simpler question. How does the Minister feel about the fact that consumers in this country are paying the second highest electricity rates in the European Union, while, at the same time, the ESB is making profits which, whether we use the Minister's figures or my figures, run to hundreds of millions of euro?

Deputy Denis Naughten: Electricity prices are higher here than in most parts of Europe. However, we need to remember that Ireland is on an island. We have a small electricity market. It includes the North and South and we have had reference to the single electricity market on the island of Ireland. There are geographic issues.

The other point is that we have to import a substantial amount of our energy. We are not self-sufficient in the energy sector and that adds to the costs. As a result of the size of the market, there are additional transmission costs and such costs are not incurred in continental

Europe. As a result these particular challenges are built into the cost.

I am not trying to wash my hands of it. By law I cannot directly intervene in this matter. However, Deputies can question the Commission for Energy Regulation. I am calling on Deputy Barry to use the tools available to him in the parliamentary committee to raise these questions.

North-South Interconnector

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The next question is in the name of Deputy Sean Fleming. I gather it has been assigned to Deputy Shane Cassells.

12. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources to support putting the North-South electricity interconnector underground using high-voltage direct current technology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16229/16]

Deputy Shane Cassells: Will the Minister support the undergrounding of the North-South interconnector using the technology now available? Will the Minister put a halt to the current plan? It would destroy the landscapes of Meath, Cavan and Monaghan if these monstrous pylons were to be constructed in these three counties.

Deputy Denis Naughten: In fairness, all Deputies in the region have contacted me at this stage on this issue. EirGrid is the designated transmission system operator. Its roles include the operation, maintenance and development of the electricity transmission network in Ireland. As detailed in the Government policy statement on the strategic importance of transmission and other energy infrastructure, the Government does not seek to direct EirGrid in the development of energy infrastructure to particular sites or routes or technologies.

EirGrid made a formal application for a North-South 400 kV interconnector project to An Bord Pleanála on 9 June 2015. This is the subject of a statutory independent planning process and is currently before An Bord Pleanála. Part of this process included an oral hearing that concluded last month. As the planning process is still ongoing, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I know the Minister is an altogether decent man. I am appealing to the Minister, on behalf of the people of these counties, to become involved because this is a major issue for the counties of Meath, Cavan and Monaghan. Not only would it destroy the landscapes of these counties, it would destroy people's homes. I have sat in the homes of people throughout County Meath. These monstrous pylons will be built beside their homes and will destroy their lives. It is amazing to think that in 2013 the EirGrid chairman, John O'Connor, sat before a Dáil committee and said he would not want to live beside one of these pylons. However, he seems to think it is good enough for the rest of the people in these counties.

The North East Pylon Pressure Campaign is led by Aimee Treacy and Pdraig O'Reilly. They have spearheaded a campaign to stop the project but they are being thwarted by the formidable legal people of EirGrid. I was at the High Court hearing some months ago when the project was challenged. The Minister's office, under the previous officeholder, and EirGrid used powerful legal teams to fight against the community groups. We need the Minister to stand up for the people rather than EirGrid. EirGrid is spending money relentlessly on public rela-

tions campaigns to try to curry public favour but it is destroying people's lives. I appeal to the Minister to get involved and arrange to put these pylons and cables underground. The people need the Minister to stand up for them.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I understand the frustration among people in this case, but the Government does not direct EirGrid on what mechanism it should use. We need an interconnector. People agree that we need an interconnector. The debate has been how that connection would be made.

The Government has not directed EirGrid in any way in this matter. This project is before An Bord Pleanála at the moment. An Bord Pleanála has weighed up the options and all the arguments on all sides. We are going to get a decision from An Bord Pleanála.

I have read some of the numerous reports into undergrounding. However, the reality is that the North-South transmission project is required to ensure security of supply of electricity to Northern Ireland. The existing 225 kV double circuit overhead transmission line between Louth and Armagh is simply insufficient to meet the needs.

Deputy Shane Cassells: The Minister referred to the An Bord Pleanála hearing. I was there and gave evidence at the hearing in Monaghan as well. Representatives from EirGrid came in on numerous occasions during the hearing and changed aspects of their application during the hearing. They came with images that bore no resemblance to the application. These people are ruthless in the pursuit of their aim and do not care about the people. This Chamber is here to care about the people. The Government can most certainly become involved. The previous two Ministers had no wish to hear from the people's side. Therefore, I am appealing to the Minister not to read out the material prepared by the Department but to listen to the voices. This can be stopped before the September ruling by An Bord Pleanála. We need to see an intervention by Government in this respect.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I have been listening to Members. I have listened to a number of Members from the areas concerned, all of whom have expressed their concerns on this matter. I have not yet come across one person who takes the view that we do not need the interconnector. It is needed because if the existing line were to go down, there simply would not be enough electricity reaching the north east of the island to keep the lights on.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I agree with the Minister.

Deputy Denis Naughten: We have a single electricity market and we need it. It is helping to drive down the cost of electricity for every person throughout the country.

Deputy Shane Cassells: The point is that it should be done underground.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I hear what Deputy Cassells is saying and I have heard and listened to what other colleagues in the House have said as well. I understand the frustration that exists but a statutory process is ongoing.

Deputy Shane Cassells: The frustrating thing is that Pat Rabbitte said the project would drive up prices.

Television Licence Fee

13. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if and when he will replace the television licence fee with an alternative funding mechanism; if he is satisfied with the performance of An Post in collecting the current licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16112/16]

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I wish the Minister well. He is in a complex and interesting Department. I hope he is here for a good while; I hope we are all here for a good while to tackle some of the issues. How does he think we should fund public service broadcasting?

Deputy Denis Naughten: I have no plans to replace the current television licence fee with an alternative funding mechanism.

I recognise the important part that the independent public service broadcasters play in our democratic society. The provision of stable and adequate funding is essential to ensuring the continued delivery of their role in this regard.

Part 10 of the Broadcasting Act 2009 outlines the statutory basis for the television licence and the associated collection mechanisms. Section 145 of the Act designates An Post as the issuing agent of the Minister with regard to television licences and tasks it with collecting the licence fees. I am satisfied that An Post is meeting its obligations as set out in the Broadcasting Act.

I am very much aware, however, of the challenges that face the existing television licence system, including the current, unacceptable levels of evasion. In that context, my Department has been working with An Post and RTE on an ongoing basis so that all steps are being taken to ensure the system is working as effectively as possible. My Department is also examining a number of additional actions that might be taken, including legislative measures, with the aim of further strengthening the system.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I know it is difficult in government at the moment, particularly with a minority government. Some people are critical and claim the Government will not be able to make a hard call. I have a slight fear that the Minister's answer gives a sense of just keeping things the same or seeing if we can tweak it. In the short run, it may avoid the Government getting into a difficult contentious issue. However, we need to be careful. Broadcasting is an important part of our democratic structures. I am not sure the funding mechanism is working. We may need to consider the wider funding issue in terms of the broadcasting fund for other broadcasters. We should look at the effect of the Internet on other Irish broadcasters. We also need to look at the effect of international broadcasters, including Sky and others which earn huge amounts of money in this country. We need to address the issue of how we protect and provide good-quality public service broadcasting delivered both by the independent sector and by RTE. I am not sure if just tweaking system will do it.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I take the Deputy's point. There was a proposal to introduce a public sector broadcasting charge that would apply across the board. When I came into the Department, I took the decision that efficiencies could be made regarding the television licence. There is a considerable level of evasion, far more than anywhere else where there is a television licence in place. We need to address that issue.

I take on board the Deputy's points about broadcasters. It is important that we have a strong

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and vibrant broadcasting sector in this country. However, to talk about introducing another domestic charge now and effectively get people to pay again for those who are not willing to pay for anything is unacceptable. There is a significant cohort of people who are not paying for anything. There are issues and anomalies with signing the certificate to confirm they do not have a television and we have to look at that. There are also issues with collection.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is not just the issue of evasion, although that is an issue. It is also the fact that technology is changing. I do not watch television on a television set too much; I watch it on my phone or my desktop computer. I can understand why the Minister might not want to make a change. However, he should still do the basic underlying research for other options, even if they are introduced in the next year or two. He should start to look at the options so that any future government does not need to go through the same process. Things change in this area very quickly. Leaving broadcasting as a kind of atrophy in a system that is no longer relevant because of technological changes does not do broadcasting a favour. The Minister should keep his mind open to it. Perhaps he could establish a commission, bring people in, bring the Opposition in and look at options. Even if we are not committing to do anything, looking at the options might be a good use of the time we have in the next two to three years.

Deputy Denis Naughten: There are a number of practical steps we can consider in the short term. One of those relates to collection, as I mentioned. There are also issues with the content on all the Irish broadcasters, RTE, TG4 and TV3, being used on other platforms. That is not only an issue for existing traditional providers but also for other technological uses of it. We are looking at many of these aspects. It is not just about the television licence. We will probably introduce legislation in this area, which in consultation with my colleagues in this House I hope can be supported. We are not closing the door on looking at all options. The reality is that there is significant evasion with the current model and I want to address that.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Topical Issue Debate

Broadband Service Provision

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome this opportunity to contribute to this debate. When I submitted this Topical Issue this morning, I was not aware that the Minister was taking questions today. I understand that similar questions have been posed by some of my party colleagues and other Members. That is a clear indication of how serious the lack of broadband provision in rural areas is. I know the Minister is coming fresh to the Department and I genuinely wish him well in his role.

The previous programme for Government promised to provide 95% of houses and businesses with broadband by 2015. The current programme for Government promises to have 750,000 additional homes and businesses provided with broadband by 2020. In his reply to a priority question earlier, the Minister alluded to aspiring to reach that target. I have a great fear that target will not be reached. The digital health index for Ireland was published today. A study found that one in four Irish SMEs has no digital presence. A quarter of the firms surveyed stated that inadequate broadband infrastructure was a reason for them being offline.

If we are serious about supporting our SMEs and job creation in the regions outside the capital, we must put in place the necessary infrastructure. A business such as Mr. Crumb in Castletown, Finea employs 100 people and has no proper broadband. When the owner of that business has to send big documents electronically he needs to go into the Mullingar Park Hotel to avail of its broadband.

Green Farm Foods in Rathowen is another business in my constituency employing in excess of 130 people. It has poor-quality broadband and it is paying through the nose. In my village, I have satellite broadband. When it rains, it does not work. When it rains, I cannot even send a WhatsApp message or a Telegram message because it does not work. Having a satellite broadband service that does not work when it rains is about as useful as an ashtray on a motorbike. Will this Government, unlike its predecessor, live up to its commitment in this area? Will it ensure adequate broadband services are rolled out throughout rural Ireland in the not too distant future? When my three constituency colleagues and I recently attended a meeting with the Longford business community at the Longford Arms Hotel, a Deputy who supports the Government allayed the fears of local business people by telling them not to worry and assuring them that they will have broadband within six months. While I hope he is right, I suspect on the basis of the reports emanating from the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources that he is not, given that the tender will not be issued to the preferred contractor until June 2017 at the earliest. Perhaps the Minister will give me a clear indication of what exactly he intends to do to ensure the people of Ireland do not have to wait a further four years for broadband services and the commitment in this regard to which he signed up in the programme for Government will be delivered. The commitment that was given in the last programme for Government was not delivered. It was reneged on.

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Denis Naughten): I thank Deputy Troy. We spent much of the afternoon dealing with this issue on Question Time. I have looked at the digital index. I read the figures in relation to small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs, this morning. Things are on an upward trajectory in that regard. The percentage of SMEs that are offline has decreased from 25% to 17%, or approximately one in six. The percentage of SMEs with a website has increased from 65% to 72%. The percentage of SMEs that can process sales online has increased from 8% to 19% and the percentage of them that can run analytics online has increased from 5% to 16%. The owners of 27% of the SMEs that do not have websites attribute that to not having a good Internet connection. We cannot ignore this problem. We are introducing the national broadband plan to deal with this and other issues.

Approximately 116,000 direct and indirect jobs are supported by the digital economy at present. Approximately 68,000 of them are directly linked to the digital economy. The digital economy in Ireland is worth approximately €21.4 billion. It is expected that it will account for 7.9% of GDP by 2020. Traditional industries, such as farming and the retail sector, are increasingly reliant on technology to compete nationally and globally. Broadband is essential to the delivery of traded services, including internationally traded services, and public services. The digital economy is growing. It is essential that its benefits are felt in every city, provincial town and rural area. In this context, the delivery of high-speed broadband to every premises in Ireland is a top priority for the Government. A Programme for a Partnership Government contains a commitment to deliver the national broadband plan as a matter of priority. This is being achieved through measures to incentivise and accelerate industry investment and an ambitious investment programme by the State in areas where industry will not invest.

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The commercial telecommunications sector has invested over €2 billion in upgrading and modernising networks which support the provision of high-speed broadband services. This investment is expected to continue as further services are rolled out over the coming years in the blue area of the high-speed broadband map, which is available on www.broadband.gov.ie. The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources is continuing to monitor this commercial deployment. The Department has a dedicated mailbox for queries about the blue areas of the map. I encourage people who are having difficulty getting broadband to make contact using the e-mail address in question, broadband@dcenr.gov.ie. The areas marked amber on the high-speed broadband map represent the target areas for State intervention. The profile of the area to be addressed by the State intervention strategy shows that it includes 601 business parks, 62,226 SMEs, 63,440 non-farm businesses and 80,266 farms, or approximately 95% of all farms.

The procurement process to build a State-funded network that is capable of delivering high-quality high-speed broadband with a download speed of at least 30 Mbps and an upload speed of at least 6 Mbps, to be available 99.95% of the time, is in train. Five responses were received from prospective bidders in the first stage of the competitive procurement process by the deadline of 31 March last. I expect that in the next month, the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources will move to the second stage of the process, involving the extension to qualifying bidders of an invitation to participate in dialogue. The third stage, which follows the dialogue process, will involve the issue of final tender documentation. Following the submission of final tenders, it is expected that we will award the contract by June 2017. The roll-out will start at that stage in conjunction with my colleague, the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister has cited figures in support of his contention that we are “on an upward trajectory”, but he did not talk about the ComReg figures which show that approximately half of all businesses and more than a quarter of all homes have broadband speeds of less than 10 Mbps. This is shocking given that the US Federal Communications Commission has declared that speeds of below 25 Mbps can no longer be referred to as broadband. I know the target of 30 Mbps we are setting is not the ceiling, but it is our target nonetheless. I accept that some people have broadband, but the serious issue here is that 25% of people do not have access to any broadband services. Many businesses that have access to broadband have a very poor and limited supply. More and more business is moving online as people change how they do business. If we want to support rural businesses, we need to ensure they have access to high-quality broadband.

I understand the process that is there. I have read the Department’s website. I have looked at the various stages. While I do not doubt the Minister’s personal commitment in this regard, I would like to know what is different now, compared to what was promised by the previous Government. How can we be assured that the figures and target dates that are being set now will be met? How can businesses that are waiting as they consider putting a capital investment in place be assured that the electronic infrastructure they need will be put in place within the timeframes outlined by the Minister? Every previous commitment that has been made in terms of timeframes has been broken. The Minister spoke earlier about 2022, but the commitment in the programme for Government relates to 2020. I would like to conclude by asking a question. A Deputy made a commitment in Longford three weeks ago that broadband will be in place within six months. Is that actually true or false?

Deputy Denis Naughten: I will explain the timelines in relation to this. The Department

of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources has employed experts to assess the roll-out of the national broadband plan across the amber areas. It has received feedback from all of the telecommunications companies. They have said it will take between three and five years to roll out the plan to every single home in Ireland. They have said approximately 60% of the homes and businesses will get broadband in the first two years. I cannot guarantee someone whose home is up on the side of a mountain that he or she will have broadband within six or eight months. That is the reality of it. Our intention under the national broadband plan is to bring high-speed broadband to every single premises in Ireland. No one will be left behind in this respect.

We are on an upward trajectory in relation to the digital economy, which represents approximately 6% of GDP in Ireland today. It is anticipated that the Irish digital economy will grow to approximately €21.4 billion, or 7.9% of GDP, by 2020. Deputy Troy was somewhat disingenuous in the statistics he presented to the House. According to the digital health index, those involved with 27% of the SMEs that do not have websites have said they do not have websites because they do not have good Internet connections. It is not the case that 27% of premises in this country do not have Internet connections.

6 o'clock

I am not happy with the quality of service many of them get and want to see it significantly improved. We are not saying businesses will get a minimum of 30 Mbps broadband. Under this competitive process, businesses will have to inform us as to what they believe is a basic adequate service, which would be significantly higher than 30 Mbps because we realise businesses require more.

The Deputy should encourage businesses not trading online to do so. There is a trading online voucher available through local enterprise offices, which is 50:50 funded for businesses of ten employees or fewer and up to a maximum of €2,500. On average for every business which has availed of this voucher, their sales have increased by one fifth, the number of staff they employ has increased by one third and two thirds are now trading internationally.

Waste Disposal

Deputy John Curran: I am pleased the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government is in the Chamber to deal with this matter. The issue of pay-by-weight for household waste has been raised in this Chamber on the Order of Business on two occasions. Quite frankly, the responses were not specific, detailed or satisfactory. While I recognise the measure was not introduced by the Minister, it now falls to him to deal with it. Back in January, the then Minister introduced the pay-by-weight regulations. The first obstacle was that there was to be a charge for green bins. Subsequently, that matter was dealt with.

I support the principles in terms of increasing recycling and the diversion of waste. When the previous Minister introduced the scheme, he was specific on it when he said:

Analysis using EPA, Environmental Protection Agency and CSO, Central Statistics Office, data will show that 87% of households will see a reduction in their waste bills, 8.5% will see no change and a small number of households may see a higher bill.

That is not happening and that is the crux of the problem. Increases that people are experiencing are significant, not 2% or 3%. One reason is the flat charge has gone up significantly. When the Taoiseach spoke in the Dáil on this matter, he indicated charges set were 11 cent for a black bin of residual waste and 6 cent for a brown bin of organic waste. These are minimum figures. The reality is that the charges vary. The black bin will be around 35 cent for most of the waste companies in my area and 23 cent for the brown bin. These charges are consistent across Dublin.

The Taoiseach indicated people could shop around and change but it is not as simple as that. Over the past several weeks notification of the new scheme has been sent out to individuals who have been able to calculate what this means for them. One person in my constituency, on a pay-by-weight scheme for several years, paid €360 last year. Next year, with the same company, the charge will be €469, a 30% increase for no change in service.

The Taoiseach indicated the Minister was monitoring the system and the Tánaiste indicated the Minister will have meetings with the providers next week. There is concern that these increases are significant and far larger and wide-ranging than had been anticipated. Will the Minister seriously consider suspending the 1 July deadline until this matter is resolved satisfactorily? The increases are way above anything anticipated. The only reasonable solution is for the Minister to negotiate with the providers to ensure there is fair competition and the structure meets the guidelines that were there in the first place. They do not at the moment and the increases are way beyond it.

Deputy Bríd Smith: In 2003, I went to prison along with former Deputy, Joe Higgins, Deputies Clare Daly and Mick Barry and 24 other people mainly from around Dublin. We were imprisoned because of a High Court injunction against protests which took place against the county councils for refusing to take bins. They were refusing to take bins because people had boycotted bin charges. The fundamental reason for not paying the charge, similar to the campaign not to pay water charges, was that if we started paying a charge on an essential service, it would be privatised. In turn, it would become the possession of greedy profiteers who would behave unscrupulously and push up charges as the sky is the limit. That is exactly what happened.

All these years later, I am sitting here, an older woman with the memories of that and all of those who went to prison, mainly women. There were 15 women in the Dóchas Centre alongside me. It is on the record that we were fighting to stop the privatisation of an essential service. That service was introduced in this and other cities in the late 1890s because of cholera, a highly infectious disease which spread across cities because there were no refuse services. The local authorities brought in rescue services, which they charged for through rates and through different forms of taxation later on.

This is where the real problem that we are facing today started. It is the legacy of neo-liberal government, mainly under Fianna Fáil because it was in power for most of the time, while the previous Fine Gael Government continued it. Somebody has to call a halt. Last week, I raised this issue on questions to the Taoiseach but he did not seem to know what was going on. Yesterday morning, when it was raised again, he still did not seem to understand what was going on. He does not seem to understand that, when one puts a 200% increase on an essential utility bill on ordinary households, one may as well crucify them because they find it so difficult to meet those demands.

I have sent dozens of e-mails I have received on this issue to the Taoiseach. While I receive the odd acknowledgement, I do not receive any reply from him saying he is shocked and did not realise what was going on. People are e-mailing me regularly with the actual breakdown of their charges. People calculate these charges because they are working on tight budgets and many of them cannot afford these increases. People are looking at charges going from €180 to €330, from €82 to €216, from €20 a month to €34 a month. These are unsustainable.

Anti-Austerity Alliance-People Before Profit will put down a Private Members' motion to be debated next Tuesday calling for the Minister to amend the statutory instrument he recently signed when pay-by-weight was introduced. The amendment should state the annual standing charge should be linked to the consumer price index only-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Bríd Smith: -----meaning the waste companies cannot increase it by 100% or 200%. The minimum the Minister puts on the pay-by-weight should be the maximum because the Minister knows how offensive that would be to people with disabilities and people with particular needs because of large families.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Thank you, Deputy. I am calling Deputy Ellis.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Will the Minister respond to this request?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: At present we have a major problem with illegal dumping throughout the country. We warned many years ago that privatisation would add to that problem. That is why we fought tooth and nail to retain services in the hands of local authorities. We now see a cartel fixing prices, putting the two fingers up to us all and the consumer. It is clear beyond any reasonable doubt that there will be substantial increases in waste collection fees from 1 July. This is in spite of repeated Government assurances that 87% of households will see a reduction in their waste bills, 8.5% will see no change while a small number of households may see a higher bill. With proper awareness and segregation, the potential is for everyone to see a reduced bill as promised by the previous Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly. In a statement, the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Coveney, said pay-by-weight would mean the majority of households will be charged in a new, fairer and more transparent way for the collection of the waste.

By any standard, all of these promises have been broken, even before the bills take effect on 1 July. Not only that, but the legislation contained mandatory minimum fees to be applied, namely, 11 cent per kg for black bin waste and 6 cent per kg for compost bin waste. This has been totally disregarded, with all waste management companies charging at least three times that amount.

From the very start, the bin companies have not engaged with the spirit of the legislation. Today, the Tánaiste said that the Government would take a dim view if it saw clear evidence of abuse and that if such abuse occurred, it would introduce regulations to ensure it was brought to an end. I think we are gone well beyond that point. If we have to chase and police these companies even before they begin, the only option is to start again and stop these charges, which are only having the effect of putting already hard-pressed families under increased duress and into further poverty.

Waste collection companies are charging fees that far exceed the existing standard charges.

In one instance, this amounted to a 130% increase made under the guise of the pay-by-weight legislation. Europe is encouraging us all to recycle - rightly so - but that can only be done through educating people. Pay-by-weight and service charges are the new trick to add substantially to the price we are already being charged. Large families, particularly those on low pay and on social welfare, will be hit badly, as will senior citizens on pensions, who are already struggling but who recycle and put out very little rubbish. This legislation does not seem of any benefit except to the cartel-like pricing system of the bin companies. It is time to reassess the privatisation agenda and put a stop to this blatant attempt to gouge ordinary people.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister's commitment to meet industry representatives and to deal effectively and firmly with the issues raised. The first significant issue is the question of profiteering. There is no doubt in my mind, on foot of the calls and e-mails I have received from people throughout the Louth constituency, that significant profiteering is ongoing. One family of four who, according to the information given to the Minister, should have a reduction in their waste charges, were told this morning their charge of €312 will rise to €608. This means they will be charged twice as much for the taking away of less waste than ever. That is both appalling and unacceptable. Some companies are clearly profiteering and are using and abusing the privilege of having a licence to collect waste.

Second, there is the question of fairness. There is no fairness in the current proposals. Notwithstanding the fact we are being told something in the region of 74,000 households will be the only ones to have an increase in their charges, I believe that is untrue. In the case of those who will experience an increase, particularly larger families, the statistics we have been given indicate that there will be no fairness or equity. This is unacceptable. The Minister should suspend the process until we have clarity, particularly in regard to poorer families and families with children under three years of age. A waste waiver scheme is needed whereby hardship will be dealt with and there will be fairness, equity and consistency. I know constituents who do not have the funds and will not be able to afford the €300 increase to €600, and they will have no choice but to dump illegally. I agree with my colleague opposite that there will be a significant increase in illegal dumping and fly-tipping, which is unacceptable.

There has been no consultation by the companies. The companies are telling people about this now, with just two weeks to go, which means consumers have no chance to look for alternative service providers and no time to test the new system. If and when this is ever reintroduced, there should be a proper lead-in time during which people can work out which is the most effective and cheapest solution for them. It has to be fair and there cannot be the profiteering of the type we are seeing in this instance. Most importantly, poorer and larger families with young children must be considered. If a family has two children under three years, there will be at least 80 nappies per week going into the bins, which will put a huge additional cost onto these families that they cannot afford to pay. There must be a fair and equitable waiver system.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I got home last night after dealing all day with people contacting me about the price gouging that is going on. I had received an innocuous letter from Thorntons which informed me that, from 1 July 2016, a weekly service fee of €2 would be charged to my Thorntons account in addition to any lift charges. It neglected to say that this is replacing a €50 annual charge, and amounts to more than a 100% increase. Perhaps I should count myself lucky that I am not with Greyhound, which is imposing a 200% increase. Tens of thousands of people are receiving letters like this. The Thorntons letter also includes the fairly ominous sentence that the company has decided not to apply a charge to the recycling bin "at this time".

This is simply a rip-off. That is the only possible way to describe it. What is happening has absolutely nothing to do with recycling. In fact, it is penalising people because they are engaging in recycling, a point made by many of those who contacted me. Why is this rip-off happening? It is happening because the companies can do it. It is happening because of the ministerial order signed by the then Minister, Deputy Kelly, which was a parting gift, it seems, to these companies. Despite the fact he said 87% of people would pay less, in reality, that number will simply pay more. It is happening because this is the bitter fruit of privatisation, because the law of the jungle, as the Greyhound workers experienced, operates in the waste collection industry, where the driving factor is profit.

It is clear the Government is on the run in respect of this issue because people are mobilising, contacting and pressurising. The question is what the Government is going to do about it. I note the Tánaiste promised that, effectively, there would be very stern talking to the companies, and I understand that is happening tomorrow. That is not good enough. The Minister is responsible. He is not just a consumer who will ring up Joe Duffy and have a moan about it or ring up the company to give out about it - he is responsible. The law of the jungle operates. It is not good enough to ask them not to do it; the Minister has to change the regulations and anything less than that will not be accepted. He has to change the regulations so the increases are frozen and no more increases above inflation can take place, at an absolute minimum.

We will be using our Private Members' time next week to try to get such a motion passed. In particular, I and many others are very anxious to see that Fianna Fáil would vote in favour of that motion in line with the words it has been issuing in recent days. Another point I would make very strongly is that what is happening clearly shows that privatisation has been a disaster for the environment, for households and for workers. It underlines the reason to continue to mobilise and protest against water charges, and to prevent charges and waste privatisation. It points to the need for the immediate reversal of the privatisation of our bin services and for them to go back into the ownership of the council.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Like other Deputies, my office has been inundated with e-mails and phone calls of protest at the introduction of these new pay-by-weight, rip-off charges being imposed from 1 July next. As leader of the Labour Party on Dublin City Council in the 1990s, I fiercely opposed the introduction of charges in the first instance because I feared it would lead to the kind of privatised, chaotic, non-competitive market that now exists.

Of course, it was the then Minister, Deputy Kelly, who inaugurated the crazy new pricing regime and Statutory Instrument No. 24 earlier this year. As broadcaster Pat Kenny noted this morning, it is beyond belief there are no maximum lift charges and flat charges in article 20 of the eighth schedule of that document. Deputy Kelly referred to an independent study that he used in order to come up with the figures of 11 cent and 6 cent. Will the Minister, Deputy Coveney, publish that study so we can see what kind of costing was involved? As the then Minister, Deputy Kelly, in his wisdom, also brought in a charge for the green bin, which I am glad the Minister, Deputy Coveney, has reversed.

The Greyhound company, which operates in much of the Dublin Bay North constituency, has informed households of astonishing so-called service charges of €3.25 a week and grossly inflated black bin charges of 35 cent per kilo and brown bin charges of 23 cent per kilo. As Deputy Bríd Smith said, constituents quickly worked out their new annual standing charges and were shocked to estimate that those charges would rise by 102% or, if paid weekly, by 141%, and black and brown bin lift charges would rise by 400%. The minimum charges set out in Stat-

utory Instrument No. 24 leave many thousands of households paying from 100% to 200% more for their waste collection. There is little comfort in switching to other service providers given the profound lack of competition, as my colleague, Deputy Joan Collins, said yesterday when she spoke about a cartel operating in the market. It was the famous former Minister, Deputy Kelly, who spoke only a few months ago about the last chance saloon for waste operators and that he was going to go in and sort them out but, of course, as usual he did nothing remotely to sort them out. Across the waste market, standing and lift charges have skyrocketed. I have had complaints from householders who use Thorntons, which is introducing price hikes of 200%. One family with four children estimates its bill with Thorntons will rise from €324 to €611. Another family which includes someone with disabilities will see its bill increase from €360 to more than €600. An exasperated customer of City Bin estimates his bill will rise by 242%. On the Fingal side of my constituency, Panda has abolished the very convenient tag system and will also introduce increased charges.

In a statement he made yesterday, the Minister spoke about collaboration on the development of waste policy, but this remains to be seen. How will he collaborate? The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission is supposed to be the regulator but there has been no regulation. There have been no studies. Even the Commission for Energy Regulation, which was referred to in questions earlier and which has a brutal record in invigilating energy prices, at least does some type of computation. I ask the Minister to suspend the statutory instrument immediately and leave the charges as they are and let the House and the Minister study what we will do next.

Deputy Barry Cowen: As other speakers have said, when the former Minister, Deputy Kelly, brought forward this statutory instrument in the form of a ministerial order in January he did so, supposedly he would say, with the best of good intentions claiming that 87% of bills would be reduced. Based on evidence supplied, which has been relayed here and to many Members of the House in recent days, this will not be the case and it will be quite the opposite. We have heard about various increases amounting to 100% and 200%. As usual, with regard to the same former Minister who accused others of environmental treason and the likes some weeks ago, what he did was ill-thought out, ill-conceived and poorly communicated and has left a loophole to allow the type of price gouging about which we have heard in recent days.

This morning, the Tánaiste stated in response to this issue being raised on Leaders' Questions that what is happening is not in the spirit of what was brought forward but, unfortunately, one cannot lodge spirit or pay bills with spirit. What the Minister can do in response to this issue being raised in the manner in which it has, and in response to the way in which the companies involved in waste collection have price gouged, is meet the companies. I am glad to hear other speakers state the Minister will meet the collectors tomorrow and I welcome this. It is important that he does so. He should also meet the local authorities which are the licensing authorities for waste collection with a view to informing them that the loophole which exists to allow this will be closed. Make no mistake about this, it has to be closed.

The Minister has to go back to the so-called spirit of the order passed by the former Minister, Deputy Kelly, in so far as there should be some reward for those who seek to reduce their waste and engage in recycling. We should have a system whereby what they get is what was promised and what was expected. Anything less than this will only mean the emergence of an Irish Water type saga such as we have seen in recent years, and I do not want to get into the rights and wrongs of this, the way in which it was handled and how ill-conceived, ill-thought out and ill-prepared it was.

There is a simple opportunity for the Minister who has responsibility in this area to meet with the companies immediately and seek to resolve the issue and come back to the House next week with a resolution which will meet with our approval and ultimately the approval of those we represent who, as I have said on numerous occasions, give us all the privilege of being here to represent them with no monopoly for anybody with regard to any constituent he or she represents.

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney): I thank the Deputies for raising the issue. This is clearly a very big issue which is evident by the number of people on the Government and Opposition sides who have what I regard as genuine concerns about what is being proposed in terms of charging from individual companies. When I became Minister this was an issue which had clearly received some attention by the previous Government and previous Minister.

In defence of the former Minister, Deputy Kelly, what he was doing in relation to requiring a pay-by-weight element to bills for refuse collection was the right approach. It was an approach based on the polluter pays principle, whereby people who manage their waste in a responsible manner should be rewarded and save money by doing so. The only difference of opinion I had with the previous approach was with regard to the so-called green bin element, whereby I did not think it was appropriate to have a pay-by-weight charge at all, even though the proposal was a very low charge for the green bin, because I did not want any disincentive in terms of recycling material, which is how it would have been perceived if there was any charge.

What has happened since the regulation was signed is that in recent days we have seen the new proposed charges from individual companies, and as householders are adding up what it will cost them on the back of those proposed charges many people are alarmed at the potential increases they may face. As far as I am concerned, this is not what was intended with this statutory instrument and it is my job to ensure what was intended by the statutory instrument is followed through. I will meet the companies tomorrow. I would meet them even earlier but I am in Belfast this evening and in Derry tomorrow. Early tomorrow evening, I will meet the companies concerned.

I agree with those Deputies who have said we should not rely on some type of voluntary adoption of the spirit of the statutory instrument. We need to assure people that the Government is acting in their interests and, at the same time, allow companies to operate in a commercial and sensible manner in the spirit of a new statutory instrument which is to change the way in which people are charged for waste. This will reward them for responsible management of waste and take compostable material out of a black or grey bin and put it into a brown bin and therefore pay less by weight, and to take plastics and paper out of a general waste bin and put it into a recycle bin and be rewarded for this in terms of the overall bill. This is the thinking behind this and this is what we need to ensure happens.

If this means looking at new regulations which we will introduce next week then so be it. If it means looking at interventions in terms of regulations on, or management of, charges for a time to ensure we adopt a new charging regime that households accept makes sense for the environment and for themselves in terms of bills, then that is what we will do. I am not saying this is straightforward and I do not want to prescribe today how it will be done. I want to talk to the industry about it and have a respectful conversation, but I can tell the Deputies the Government and I will insist we do not have 200%, 100% or 70% increases in bin charges for households producing similar amounts next year to what they have been producing for the past

12 months. This is not acceptable.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There were a lot of speakers.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I am governed by the rules.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Surely, I have an opportunity to be able to-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Minister will have a second bite of the cherry.

Deputy Simon Coveney: A number of complaints have been made to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and the Department is interacting with it to follow through on these complaints and ensure they are responded to appropriately. The core issue is that undoubtedly next week there will be a debate on this issue in the House. A number of parties will propose this and this is good. I understand there will also be a debate in the Seanad as Sinn Féin will use its Private Members' time there to discuss the topic next week. I hope by that point in time we will have clarity in terms of the Government's thinking as to the most appropriate way to respond in the interests of the environment and households, including the vulnerable households of the type Deputy O'Dowd raised concerns about, which may have many young children or may have a member of the family with a disability who may be incontinent or an elderly person. We do not want to punish any family which for genuine reasons must deposit waste in black or grey bins. We will therefore have that conversation tomorrow with the industry and I hope we will be able to find a way forward to which this House can agree next week.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Minister will have another opportunity to contribute.

Deputy John Curran: I thank the Minister for his contribution but it really did not answer the specific question I asked him. The concern we all have is that we have been getting notifications from the beginning of June indicating the new charging regime and nobody has been monitoring it until individuals came to various Deputies to highlight the issue. This scheme is due to kick in on 1 July and the specific request I have for the Minister is whether he will suspend the scheme until a new and acceptable charging regime is introduced. The scheme is hanging over people as we speak, and in two weeks' time they will be paying grossly different charges.

The Taoiseach spoke about competition and so forth. One of the companies mentioned here by name today is charging an additional €50 registration fee for new customers. That is not consumer-friendly at all. The entire charging scheme must be reviewed, but in the first instance my specific request to the Minister is whether he will suspend the scheme until we can reach agreement on an appropriate charging scheme that does what the Minister wants, namely, increase the amount of recycling and diversion from landfill.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I thank the Deputy for his conciseness.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I am absolutely delighted to hear what the Minister just said, namely, that he is talking about a statutory instrument that we will have in place rather than relying on the spirit of the existing statutory instrument. The sooner the Minister can do that the better, because it is absolutely vital.

We must also take control of what is referred to in the statutory instrument as the minimum cost of pay-by-weight waste disposal. Let us make no mistake. This is a vicious, competitive, mafia-type dominated industry. These companies will push up the price of pay-by-weight waste disposal to maximise their profits in the event of their losing out if we control the annual service charge. We should control the annual service charge at no more than consumer price index, CPI, levels. We must also then say that what was set in the statutory instrument as the minimum price per weight on each of the types of bins now must become the maximum price because if we do not, the companies will compensate themselves and their profit rates by increasing the amount. That is the next big danger.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Second, I am delighted that the Minister has mooted the idea of reintroducing a waiver for hard-pressed people with disabilities, large families, people experiencing poverty, etc. That is absolutely crucial and we should examine such an approach. Why in the name of God we let the service go-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Bríd Smith: -----into private hands in the first place is baffling. We should now start campaigning to take it back into municipal control and ownership.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I am glad the Minister is meeting the companies tomorrow but he needs to be very strong and hard with them because it is very clear that there is a cartel operating here. All the different companies are setting these prices between them because the prices are all very similar across the board. We are all opposed to cartels.

Our Sinn Féin Senators will submit a motion to the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad to annul this legislation next week, but I hope the Minister, his party, Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party and all the Independents will support our motion to annul the regulation and stop these increased prices. The Minister mentioned introducing a waiver. I remember in the past when all the waivers were introduced by Dublin City Council and it was a sop to get services privatised wholesale.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Correct.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It will not wash with us that at some stage the companies will try to get rid of the waiver. We need something more permanent, we need to deal with these companies and ideally we should be moving this service back to the local authorities.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: We need a regulator to examine the books in order that due diligence is done on the prices that are being quoted. I welcome very much what the Minister is saying. I believe his action will be firm and effective. I welcome his comments on a hardship or waiver scheme. I direct him to a report of the Ombudsman - I think it was in 2007 or 2006 - which recommended such a scheme at the time. The way forward is to look after particularly those who are least able to pay, and I ask the Minister to reconsider the statistics as to who will pay more which were presented to him as a *fait accompli* after he took office. If it is families of more than six, which is what we are being told, I do not believe that. The Minister really needs to do due diligence on this. It just does not make sense that those who are reducing more are paying more. We must deal with these guys once and for all and I believe the Minister is the person to do that.

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Deputy Paul Murphy: The way this issue has evolved is quite instructive about the weak position of the Government and the fact that it is in a minority in this House but also quite instructive about the fact the Government is dealing with a different set of ordinary and working-class people out there. It is dealing with a set of people who have just managed to force the previous Government and this Government back on a major issue for them, namely, the water charges, people who are feeling confident and who are not prepared to lie down. I urge the Minister to bear that in mind and to bear in mind that anything that allows the companies to continue to increase the charges in whatever way, be it through the standing charge or pay-by-weight charges, will not be acceptable to people.

The Minister will be met next week by a significant protest in Tallaght. I understand he is coming to South Dublin County Council. There will be a protest at 2 o'clock there on Monday-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: Is the Deputy organising that? Oh dear.

Deputy Paul Murphy: -----and a significant protest outside the Dáil on Tuesday at 7 p.m., demanding that the rip-off stops but also that the privatisation is reversed.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I hope the Minister's response means that there will be a suspension of Statutory Instrument No. 24 and that these pay-by-weight price increases, as they have been presented to us, will not proceed. Is it possible to make the study that the former Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, apparently did regarding this matter available to Dáil Éireann and to examine the issue of maximum charges in this regard? Could I ask the Minister again about the role of the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission? Will this commission be the regulator? There is no regulation, as the previous Minister said. It is the last chance saloon, a chaotic market situation. Will the Minister also consider legislation to restore tendering by district licences and therefore allow local authorities, if they wish, to come forward and compete for the licence and, in other words, get rid of privatisation and allow local authorities to get back into this critical utility?

Deputy Barry Cowen: I welcome, respect and appreciate the Minister's initial response to this issue and his confirmation that he will amend the order of the House, close the gap that allows this price gouging that we have seen, introduce waiver systems, and reward those who improve the recycling element and who participate in the way in which the proposal was intended. I welcome that that would be reciprocated, that they would be rewarded by having a bill that is less costly than what they had this time last year. I also welcome, as Deputy Curran has said, that in the event of the Minister not being able to provide the necessary amendments by next week, he will commit at that stage to inform the House that he will suspend the order until such time as he can present an alternative proposal that meets with the approval of the House.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I hope I will get the time to answer all those questions if I can. Deputy Curran's question, whether I will amend the scheme, is a fair one. It is too early to give him a straight answer to that today but early next week we need to have an answer to it. I want to be fair. Some companies have not even published their new charging systems yet so I want to have an opportunity to meet the companies involved and the representative body before I decide what needs to be done.

Regarding statements like "the whole scheme needs to be changed and be reviewed", that is exactly what has just happened. We have just reviewed the whole charging system for waste-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: And made a mess of it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----to introduce a pay-by-weight scheme, which every environmentalist in the country would accept is a good thing as long as it is managed properly and introduced in a way that balances a bill properly and as long as it is not abused and used as an opportunity to increase income or margins for companies. Setting the maximum and minimum as the same number, setting the pay-by-weight charge, does not make much sense. Some households will want a significant proportion of their bills as pay-by-weight with a small standing charge, while others will want a much higher standing charge and the bare minimum in pay by weight, depending on the type of household. We must maximise the incentive, where possible, to compost, recycle, reduce and reuse waste as much as possible. This is the purpose of it. We are not doing it for any reasons other than a genuine, progressive environmental reason.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: We do not know the economics of it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Pay-by-weight charges have been introduced all over Europe in different countries, regions and in Ireland.

Deputy Paul Murphy: For profits.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We have examined the impact of it on how people manage their waste and it has been positive from an environmental perspective.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The Minister has not-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): This is not a debate.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Very few people in the House had an issue with it until they saw the new charges that were being proposed.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The reason is-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Minister can see the dangers of going well beyond his time.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We cannot have a situation in which the Opposition Members all get their full time and ask me for answers which I do not have time to give.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I am just following the rules.

Deputy Bríd Smith: We need the answers.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Let the Minister answer.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Please, Deputy. Could the Minister conclude?

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Let the Minister speak.

Deputy Simon Coveney: My approach is about trying to ensure we have a new system of paying for waste that benefits the householder by rewarding good practice in conservation and good waste management while ensuring we do not allow any company to use the change in system, and the confusion that may come with it, to increase its margins or to unfairly increase charges. This will be the basis of the discussion I will have tomorrow. I look forward to returning to the House next week and having a detailed discussion on it. I hope to have proposals by

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then for people to think about and, hopefully, support.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd's comment about the need for a regulator needs serious consideration. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, is about ensuring there is competition in the market as opposed to managing what is appropriate by way of regulated pricing. It is a little different. I understand the points made by some people about being suspicious, sceptical and critical of privatisation. Privatisation can be a good thing. It can and should support competition, innovation, consumer choice and more efficiency. We must ensure it benefits householders in terms of waste management.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Waste management is a disaster.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We have years of experience.

Deputy Simon Coveney: My job in the next few days is to ensure the significant concern, stress and heat that has been created around the issue is dealt with by the Government and me. The conversation will begin tomorrow with the industry, and we will work through the weekend to come up with a sensible proposal. It is unfortunate that a large protest is being planned for Tallaght.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): We should conclude now.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is unusual for a Minister with responsibility for local government to choose to go and speak to councils and hear what they have to say. I have already done it with three councils.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Our councillors will engage with the Minister on the question of waste.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I look forward to doing the same in Tallaght.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I am calling a halt. Topical Issues are concluded. I thank the Minister.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.45 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 21 June 2016.