



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 18 Deireadh Fómhair 2016

Tuesday, 18 October 2016

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am sure the Taoiseach agrees that justice delayed is justice denied. It is a fundamental core function of the Government to ensure the appointment of judges to our courts in a timely and effective manner. It is quite extraordinary that there is still a backlog of up to 1,800 cases waiting to be heard by the Court of Appeal. That court, as the Taoiseach knows, came about as a result of a constitutional amendment and was established in 2014, with delays of up to four and a half years having been seen previously. A recent assessment by a law lecturer in Maynooth indicates that, despite the work under way, the rate of progress means it will take approximately 11 years for the backlog to be cleared. Chief Justice Denham and the President of the Court of Appeal, Mr. Justice Seán Ryan, have appealed to the Government to fill vacancies to the Court of Appeal. There are vacancies in the Supreme Court, the District Court and the Circuit Court that have not been filled.

It is said that the Independent Alliance has frozen the appointment of any new judges as a core principle pending the enactment of the judicial appointments Bill. That is unacceptable. The Taoiseach stated that this was not the case but a spokesperson subsequently indicated, after the Labour Party raised the matter, that there would be no appointments until a judicial appointments Bill passed through the House. This is a very serious issue as victims of crime deserve to have their cases heard and see justice achieved. The Government - through the paralysis caused by the Independent Alliance and the weakness of the other side of the Administration in facing up to it - is essentially traversing and interfering with the constitutional right of citizens to have justice achieved.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Hear, hear.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is a very basic matter in a democracy. Is it the case that there will be no judges appointed until the Government gets around to passing the necessary legislation? That is unacceptable. I put it to the Taoiseach that a Government incapable of appointing judges is dysfunctional. This must be rectified very quickly. Will the Taoiseach indicate that it is the Government's intention to appoint judges forthwith and that the opposition of the In-

dependent Alliance will not be allowed to hold sway until the Government's Bill is published?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is certainly correct when he says that justice delayed is justice denied. I make the point that when I was elected Taoiseach in the first instance, the delay in getting cases into the Supreme Court was over three years and there was a huge backlog right across the entire spectrum of the judicial courts. One of the issues that arose was that a court of appeal should be set up to deal with cases that the High Court would have dealt with but which should not go directly to the Supreme Court because of the delays there. Instead, those cases would be sent to a court of appeal for decision. It took some time to establish the Court of Appeal but when it was set up, it began to work very effectively.

As I understand it, although I do not have the figures in front of me, the number of judicial vacancies in all of the courts is very small at present. I may be wrong, however, and Deputy Martin may have different information. I do not engage with members of the Judiciary on a regular basis and for very good reason. As I understand it, the number of vacancies in the Judiciary is very small. The Deputy is aware of the appointment process that has been followed for many years.

The Tánaiste has set out her views in respect of putting together a judicial appointments commission. That has been responded to by the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel and, as I understand it, that response has been sent to the Department of Justice and Equality. The Deputy must understand that the Court of Appeal has requested that a further subsection of the court be set up and this would require the appointment of a number of judges. I am not sure how many would be needed but this is not what was intended. Far be it from me to say that the learned members of the Bench are not able to do their job - they are - but the intention in setting up the Court of Appeal was not to have so many cases lying for years before being dealt with by the Supreme Court.

It is not true to say that judges cannot or will not be appointed. The legislation is being proceeded with to drafting conclusion and will be brought before the House. Clearly, I am quite sure that if it was absolutely necessary to make a judicial appointment or appointments, then that would happen.

I understand that, as and from some weeks ago, the number of judicial vacancies is very small. There are none in the Court of Appeal, as far as I can recall, rather they relate to the District Court, the Circuit Court and elsewhere. I will check the figures and advise Deputy Martin on the situation. That is different to the request to set up a new subsection of the Court of Appeal dealing with X number of judges.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Court of Appeal backlog could take over a decade to clear. That is not my assessment but that of Mr. Seth Barrett Tillman, law lecturer at Maynooth University. I understand - perhaps the Taoiseach will confirm if this has happened - that the Chief Justice and the President of the High Court have approached the Government with a view to having more judges appointed to the Court of Appeal. Either that has happened or it has not.

The Taoiseach did not answer my question. Is it the case that the Independent Alliance has said that no more judges can be appointed until the judicial appointments commission is established? Yes or no. Is that the actual position as we speak? We are being told by the media week after week that the Independent Alliance has frozen any more judicial appointments.

Deputy O'Callaghan will be publishing the legislation that is required today. The Indepen-

dent Alliance knows all about it because Deputy O’Callaghan, who is quite a learned man in this domain, enlightened its members during the Government formation talks. I suspect that members of the alliance have taken many of Deputy O’Callaghan’s lessons on board. We did not think they would take them as enthusiastically on board as they are currently doing, namely, by freezing or paralysing the process relating to the appointment of judges. The legislation to which I refer can be adopted by the Government. I ask the Taoiseach to answer my question. Is the Independent Alliance saying, “No more new judges” and is the Government acquiescing to that? If that is the case, the situation is dysfunctional.

The Taoiseach: The answer to the question is “No”, the Independent Alliance has not attempted to put down its foot and say that no more judges should be appointed.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Fionnan Sheahan says it has.

The Taoiseach: When the most recent tranche of judges was appointed, the intention was that they might be the last appointed under the old system and that the new legislation would come through-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: So they are frozen.

The Taoiseach: That is not from the Independent Alliance.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach’s spokesman contradicted that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The spokesman said the opposite after the Taoiseach said the same thing to Deputy Howlin the last day.

The Taoiseach: No. If Deputy Martin’s information is as accurate as he is portraying it to me-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: You are the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----can he tell me how many vacancies there are in the Court of Appeal at present?

Deputy Micheál Martin: My understanding is that it is looking for five more judges.

The Taoiseach: Yes, but I understand it is not the case that there are five vacancies on the Court of Appeal.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: There is a clear ten-year backlog.

The Taoiseach: Those judges would hear different cases on a new subset of the Court of Appeal.

Deputy Micheál Martin: If there is an 11-year-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Deputy needs to get his facts right.

The Taoiseach: It is a different matter.

Deputy Micheál Martin: If it is going to take a decade to clear it, the Taoiseach needs to respond to what he is being told to do.

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Deputy Finian McGrath: The Deputy does not have his facts right.

The Taoiseach: The fact of the matter is that-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: The tail is too strong.

The Taoiseach: -----we inherited a system that was not working effectively. The Judiciary set out what needed to be done with the District Court, the Circuit Court, the High Court and the Supreme Court to clear this. We were told we needed to set up a Court of Appeal.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have vacancies.

The Taoiseach: That is what the previous Government did. It filled that with a very good president and all the numbers that were due. A backlog has now built up because of the number of cases that moved through the High Court and off to the Court of Appeal.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There are 187-----

The Taoiseach: The Judiciary will quite rightly say more judges are needed to deal with these cases.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This has been done with the District Court and the Circuit Court.

The Taoiseach: I will check the numbers that are vacant and I will advise Deputy Martin in that regard this afternoon.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Gerry Adams.

The Taoiseach: The insinuation made by Deputy Martin is not true.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is what they are saying.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Deputy Martin needs to get his facts right.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Minister of State might talk to the Minister, Deputy Ross.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Deputy needs to get his numbers right.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not here to conduct a conversation. Deputy Adams has the floor.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach will attend a meeting of the European Council later this week. It is the first EU summit since the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, announced to the Tory Party conference that she intends to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon treaty by the end of March 2017. As the Taoiseach knows, Brexit is already having serious effects on the Irish economy. The declining value of sterling is hurting Irish businesses that export to Britain. Five of this country's 60 mushroom farms have gone out of business since the referendum, including two last week alone. Brexit has serious implications for Border counties, including my own constituency of Louth, where there is real concern within the business community. Last week, we saw the prospect of price increases for consumers across the State. Has the Taoiseach considered the measures he might be able to put in place to deal with the currency crisis that Irish businesses are facing and will face in the coming period?

I suggest that the work of the all-island civic dialogue will be key to allaying our concerns.

I am glad the Taoiseach eventually agreed to put the dialogue in place. I have sent him Sinn Féin's proposals for the structure and work of the dialogue. In our view, the principal objective of the dialogue must be to secure the position of the island of Ireland within the EU, in line with the democratically expressed wishes of the people of the North. That needs to be the starting point. There should be no deviation whatsoever from that. The all-island civic dialogue must deliver an inclusive process of open policy debate that meaningfully informs the Government's political and policy responses to the British Government's Brexit plan. Beyond that, it should agree a policy framework that shapes the Government's strategic direction in respect of the EU-wide negotiations that will take place when Article 50 is triggered.

I am concerned that the Taoiseach has not been sufficiently strategic on this issue. Rather than waiting to see what the British Government will do, the Government should be proactive about setting out contingencies to protect and promote the national interests of the entire island of Ireland. It has yet to do this. Sinn Féin has proposed the establishment of a committee under the auspices of the North-South Ministerial Council to harmonise and maximise all-Ireland co-operation. We have also proposed the establishment of a Border economic development zone to harmonise trade and maximise returns for Border businesses alongside additional investment in the A5 and the Narrow Water Bridge, to be matched by the Northern Executive. I have commended these measures to the Taoiseach, but he has not yet responded to me. Will he tell the Dáil what plans are now in place in terms of participation in the dialogue? Will he give us an insight into its work programme? Will he provide us with the full details?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Adams for his question. I understand the invitations have gone out for the civic dialogue, which will take place on 2 November next. The opening session will provide an opportunity for those who attend to set out their views in an open forum, including their views on Brexit, the Border with Northern Ireland and so on. My priorities and those of the Government include our citizens, our economy, our trading links with the United Kingdom, the peace process, the common travel area, no return to a hard border, as well as our connections, interests and engagement with Northern Ireland.

The meeting will take place on Thursday and Friday in Brussels. In one way, it is a normal European Council, except that on this occasion one of the members attending, namely, the British Prime Minister, intends to trigger Article 50 to remove Britain from the European Union. She intends to move the article at the end of March 2017 or, indeed, beforehand, if that is her wish.

I want Deputy Adams to understand that this is not just about any one party; it is about our island and our people. I have addressed some of Deputy Adams's questions previously. However, I will say this much to him - when we get to the North-South Ministerial Council on 18 November, I need to know what it is that we are talking about in respect of the Executive of Northern Ireland, because we are not going to get any specific or particular circumstances right unless we know. If there is a division of opinion about what Northern Ireland wants, I cannot sort it out unless there is consensus and agreement on what the horizon or objective is on the part of the Executive in the North. Deputy Adams's party can help to realise that.

The issues that will be part of the discussion and negotiations are already framed in the contingency work that the Government and my Department have been involved in since before the Brexit vote. I outlined for Deputy Martin last week some of the measures contained in the budget and other measures to help small and medium-sized enterprises where currency fluctuations are causing difficulties and where confusion from the consequences of statements being

made leads to a certain degree of instability and lack of certainty.

In the same way, when Article 50 is triggered and we get to the North-South Ministerial Council, all Ministers will have had discussions with their counterparts. However, I need to know what it is that the Executive in Northern Ireland is actually seeking. If there is a division of opinion, it is not going to help anyone's case or help to make the case for the particular circumstances that apply, including the need for no return to a hard border, the continuation of the peace process and support for it from the European Union, as well as the opportunity for us to work with the citizens of Northern Ireland in the context of the development of the island economy that we know we can have in the time ahead.

Deputy Gerry Adams: That is a complete distraction. The Taoiseach says he needs to know the position of the Northern Executive. That is what the Taoiseach is saying. Is that correct?

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Did the Taoiseach talk to the First Minister? Did she not tell him that she is for Brexit and that she does not recognise the votes of the majority of the people in the North? The Taoiseach should recognise the majority vote of the people in the North. That is the crux of the matter. The Taoiseach says this is something our party can solve. It is the DUP that is taking this position, not Sinn Féin.

I stated previously the Taoiseach is not strategic enough and I am repeating that assertion. I note the remarks of the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Brokenshire. On 9 October he said there is a "high level of collaboration on a joint programme of work" between this State - that is to say, the Irish State - and Britain. He said, "We have put in place a range of measures to further combat illegal migration working closely with the Irish government". He also stated, "Our focus is to strengthen the external border of the common travel area [CTA], building on the strong collaboration with our Irish partners." In other words, the British Government is hoping to move the front line of immigration controls to Irish ports and airports to prevent illegal migration into the British state. This clearly is not feasible and I am not enamoured of the response of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to these claims. Are such measures in place? Will the Taoiseach make a statement on this and update the Dáil on the dialogue between his officials and British officials? He should tell the Dáil now what is going on between his officials and the senior British officials and if these measures are in place.

The Taoiseach: Not only that, but I will see to it that Deputy Adams is fully briefed as I will for every other leader as I have done twice already.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Tell the Dáil now.

The Taoiseach: Yes, and the point is that all the Secretaries General of all Departments were in London last week for two days talking to the permanent secretaries of the departments of the British Government, going through each and every detail as we understand them at the moment-----

Deputy Gerry Adams: Are these measures in place?

The Taoiseach: -----and what issues have to be dealt with or may have to be dealt with in the future. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is not, I understand, a member of the

committee dealing with Brexit on behalf of the British Government.

To go back to the Deputy's point, he says I need to know what the Executive's view in Northern Ireland is-----

Deputy Gerry Adams: My point is: are these measures in place?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy should hold on a second. This is far too serious for mere point scoring.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Taoiseach is answering a different question from the one he was asked.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I am not point scoring.

The Taoiseach: The citizens of Northern Ireland-----

Deputy Gerry Adams: Will the Ceann Comhairle ensure that the Taoiseach answers the question?

An Ceann Comhairle: I cannot. The Deputy must resume his seat.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The British Secretary of State has claimed that he is co-operating with the Irish Government. The Dáil deserves to know about this.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is being disorderly.

The Taoiseach: The citizens of Northern Ireland deserve-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This is not a multiple choice question.

The Taoiseach: They deserve to have their case heard, argued and negotiated. We want to help but the Executive is made up of different parties. There are a First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Deputy Gerry Adams: What about the Taoiseach's Government?

The Taoiseach: When we meet on 18 November at the North-South Ministerial Council, I would like to think that there is a consensus opinion as to the approach that the Executive and the Northern Ireland parties want us to take because we will have to argue that for them and on their behalf at the European Council in time to come. It is very important that despite political differences we at least have a common view as to where the parties in the Executive and Assembly want Northern Ireland to go so that we can help them and work with them and that is our intention.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Will the Ceann Comhairle ask the Taoiseach to answer the questions? He refused to answer the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should please resume his seat.

The House has made an order in respect of how Leader's Questions would be done. Included in that order was the provision of a specific time for questions and answers, which people are ignoring completely. We will be here till midnight tonight. Those of us who will still be here at midnight would like to think that we could at least be efficient in the use of the time made

available to us.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Taoiseach is avoiding the question.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The decision of the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, AGSI, to withdraw from working on four days during November means we are now facing a full Garda strike in all but name. The deployment of reservists who do not have the power of arrest will hardly reassure vulnerable people or communities about how public safety will be preserved during these days.

The decision of the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland, ASTI, to withdraw from supervision and substitution work also means that there may well be significant closure of secondary schools, and half-baked notions put forward by the Minister for Education and Skills about using parents to cover these duties have been quickly shot down by the National Parents Council. The overall response of the Government to date to these very serious matters has been to repeat *ad nauseam* that the Lansdowne Road Agreement is the only game in town. I negotiated that agreement, as the Taoiseach knows, and I believe it was the right start for delivering pay recovery for all public servants who have contributed so much to the economic recovery of the State.

I also believe that it needs to be accelerated, and I said that a long time ago. The Lansdowne Road agreement was negotiated before the end of the Haddington Road agreement and in fact was collapsed into that agreement because of the visible improvement in our public finances. Exactly the same is true now. In the alternative budget that the Labour Party produced before the budget was introduced in the House last week, we allocated a sum of money to allow for the acceleration of public sector pay as a signal that we needed to have provision for a new discussion with all the public sector unions. Sadly, the budget presented last week made no such provision. It called for a new forum on social dialogues that can involve public servants in discussions about investment in public service as well as investment in their pay. The key to getting success in the previous rounds was to be very honest with public servants about the options available to Government. The Taoiseach has resisted that idea also.

As the Taoiseach is aware, over recent years I have supported the granting of trade union rights to members of An Garda Síochána and conveyed those views to both the current and former Ministers for Justice and Equality. Today, we understand that the Taoiseach will establish a public sector pay commission but that this body will not report until next summer. That is hardly likely to be a timescale that would be of any assistance to the State in dealing with the current issues. The Taoiseach will not accept a proposal that the implementation of the Lansdowne Road agreement should be accelerated with a new discussion round with public servants. He will not accept a proposal relating to a new social dialogue, and the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality appears to be in no rush to grant rights to gardaí to avail of the machinery of trade unions. Does the Government intend to take any action that might prevent the further unravelling of the very hard won industrial peace in the public sector?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Howlin is correct when he says that he negotiated the Haddington Road and Lansdowne Road agreements, and he had a lot of support from the then Government. This is a very serious situation, and the Government takes it very seriously. Nobody wants to see a situation where Garda Síochána na hÉireann are not on public duty as the only link between criminal activity and the safety of citizens. I have always respected that in terms of the men and women of the Garda who have given of their time, and in some cases their lives, in the

line of public duty, sometimes when officially off-duty. The Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality takes a responsible and clear view of this matter, and she is to meet with the Garda Representative Association, GRA, later this week. She has extended an invitation to the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, AGSI. There is still an opportunity to deal with this matter before the dates mentioned by the gardaí.

I want to make it perfectly clear that there are constraints upon the public purse, and we are not in a position to meet claims being made outside the Lansdowne Road agreement. Evidence of that is the negotiated settlements agreed between the Minister for Health and nurses in respect of incremental scales, the achievements and agreements reached by the Minister for Education and Skills with the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, INTO, and the Teachers Union of Ireland, TUI, the substantial amounts of money put on the table to deal with payment rates for young teachers and so on. Those are evidence of the success, and the possible success, of the agreements drawn up by Deputy Howlin.

This morning, the Government approved the setting up of a public pay commission. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform will give details on that at 3 o'clock this afternoon. While claims were made that particular sectors should be represented in the body of the commission, that is not the Minister's intention. What he will do, however, in the terms of reference is that if the public pay commission wishes to have expertise provided with an analysis of sectoral payments, conditions or whatever in respect of any particular sector, is make that available.

With regard to the issue I saw referred to in some of the media, the review of An Garda Síochána currently under way under the chairmanship of John Horgan will be completed in December. It is not true to say that the findings of that review will not feed into the public pay commission. Of course they will.

Given the nature of the circumstances a Government found itself in a number of years ago, it has made significant progress in dealing with the many problems and frustrations gardaí experienced on the ground in terms of facilities, conditions, investment in reopening the training college, and the commitment now to increase the number to 15,800 to be trained, with 500 civilians going in as well.

This is far too serious a matter not to have the real focus of Government, and it has that focus. There are three groups involved - the GRA, whose representatives the Minister will meet this week, the AGSI, whose members voted 70% in favour of the agreement just a few weeks ago, and the ASTI. Many other public sector unions have negotiated and accepted these terms and they are moving on with the country as we come out of a very difficult period of recession. I invite the GRA and the AGSI to sit down with the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality and to work within the constraints that are upon us, taking into account announcements to be made by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform later. The same applies to the ASTI in respect of its dealings with the Minister for Education and Skills.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach will be aware that all public sector unions, not just those that are formally in dispute, are watching very closely what is happening here. Does the Taoiseach agree that what is now required is a whole of public service approach? Striking bilateral deals with any single union is not the way forward and there needs to be a clear pathway to full income recovery and the full unwinding of the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, in an orderly and affordable way. People do not see this happening,

though, and I have not heard anything from the Taoiseach to give me any comfort. The establishment of a pay commission, to report next summer, is not going to sort out the real pressures that are bound to mount, not diminish, in the coming weeks and months. Will the Taoiseach recognise that there is now a need to begin negotiations for a successor agreement to the Lansdowne Road agreement? Will his Government embark on that with all trade unions in order that every public servant will feel included in the pathway to full income recovery?

The Taoiseach: A number of trade unions had particular difficulties with the existing Lansdowne Road agreement, including the TUI, the INTO and some of the nursing fraternity. The agreements were reached and the progress which has been made is fairly significant but others still have difficulties. I accept that there has to be a successor to the Lansdowne Road agreement. One of the terms of reference of the public pay commission will involve inputs into how the unwinding of the financial emergency provisions Act should proceed. These matters are a genuine focus of Government and nobody wants a situation in which gardaí are not on the streets doing their public duty, as they have always done. I urge them to accept the invitation from the Tánaiste and take into account the decision of Cabinet this morning for a public pay commission. The Horgan report will also deal with the roadmap which is necessary for unions to be able to avail of the statutory machinery of the State, such as the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, and the Labour Court.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As was mentioned and as the whole country knows, teachers and gardaí have felt forced to embark on a significant campaign of industrial action over the next few weeks in pursuit of fairness in respect of pay. There will also be mass meetings of nurses over the coming couple of weeks to discuss pay issues. One of the several things at the heart of this looming industrial action is the anger and frustration felt by teachers, gardaí and, increasingly, by nurses over the issue of equality of pay. The call was clearly articulated last Thursday by the ASTI, in a demonstration in which I participated outside the gates of this House, when young and older teachers stood together demanding equal pay for equal work. It is a basic and simple principle. I was struck by the sight of newly qualified and new entrant teachers explaining how angry and frustrated they were after coming out of college, getting their qualifications, in some cases at very high levels, and getting paid €6,000, €7,000 or €8,000 less than a teacher with the same qualifications working in the same school just because they had entered service after 2011. Will the Taoiseach accept that such inequality in pay is unacceptable and that it breaches the most fundamental principle of treating people equally?

In the 1970s, we got equal pay for women, which did not exist previously, and nobody would dare to suggest we should have anything less than equal pay for men and women. We have equality legislation which outlaws discrimination against people on pretty much any basis. Is it not in line with the fundamental principle of equality that teachers, nurses and gardaí should get the same pay for doing the same work? Will the Taoiseach commit to re-establishing that equality and ending the pay apartheid which is one of the burning issues angering teachers, nurses and gardaí and which is forcing many young people who might go into those professions to leave this country because the Taoiseach continues to allow that discrimination against them?

The Taoiseach: The previous Government once removed made a decision not to pay young graduate nurses particular increments and it is only now that the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, has been able to deal with that and approve those.

Deputy Boyd Barrett makes the point about teachers. This is obviously a matter of serious concern for teachers. It was of such serious concern to and members of the TUI and the INTO

that they sat down with the Minister for Education and Skills under the existing arrangements, and a new deal for new entrant teachers was implemented for the INTO and for the TUI. That deal is on offer also to the ASTI. That means that the starting pay for new entrant members will increase by 15% between 31 August this year and 1 January 2018, that is, from €31,009 to €35,602. It also means that an individual member recruited since 1 September 2015 will see a 22% increase in his or her pay between 31 August 2016 and 1 January 2018, that is, from €31,009 to €37,723. That agreement will be implemented in two phases, in January 2017 and January 2018, respectively. It results in an increase of up to €2,000 per year for new teachers at the start of their careers and an overall earnings increase over the course of that career of approximately €135,000.

That agreement will apply to members of the teachers' unions which have signed up to the Lansdowne Road agreement, that is, the TUI and the INTO, and cannot apply to ASTI as matters stand but will if it decides to do business with the Minister.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Just because the Government chose not to.

The Taoiseach: Following the announcement, the Minister wrote to the ASTI to inform it that he is quite willing to conclude a similar agreement with it within the framework of the Lansdowne Road agreement. The ASTI, as Deputy Boyd Barrett will be aware, is now the only trade union within the education and training sector to have rejected the Lansdowne Road agreement.

These are very substantial figures on the table and agreed with two major unions, the INTO and the TUI. I again ask the ASTI to engage with the Minister, Deputy Bruton, who has been in the position to bring about an arrangement under the Lansdowne Road agreement for the two other major unions and which is now being implemented.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: What about the qualification allowance?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The only groups of workers who have balloted on this issue are the ASTI and the Garda representative unions. The Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland, ASTI, and the gardaí have democratically made a decision and, I suspect, if it was put to the rank and file of the Teachers Union of Ireland, TUI, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, INTO, and to the nurses, we might have a different response. The young teachers at that rally were not political or radical people. There were just young teachers and they have thought about this deeply. They do not want to be on strike but they are raging about the question of inequality. The Taoiseach referenced figures of increases, with which I am well familiar, but they are not equality. That is the point. It was clear from those young teachers that they want equality. I asked the Taoiseach if he accepted that this pay inequality, pay apartheid and discrimination against young people coming into this profession simply because they happen to come into it after 2011 is unacceptable and if he accepted that it must be done away with. That is what they believe. It is pay apartheid. The scale of it is such that even with the increases the Taoiseach's is proposing, teachers who came into the profession after 2011 will earn about €160,000 less over their lifetimes. That is a very significant chunk of what it would cost to put a roof over their heads over the course of their lifetimes, even with the Taoiseach's proposed changes. Will he commit to equality? That is the question. Will he acknowledge that the teachers, the gardaí and any other group who choose to fight for equality and, if necessary, take industrial action to achieve it are right to pursue the principle of equality?

18 October 2016

The Taoiseach: The INTO balloted to stay within the Lansdowne Road agreement. The figures I read out to the Deputy are very substantial. We have had debates here in the last period about the minimum wage, low paid workers, a reduction in the universal social charge and the abolition of income tax for those who are very low paid. These figures for young teachers starting off in their careers are quite substantial, up to €35,000 by 1 January 2018. These figures have been negotiated within the range of the Lansdowne Road agreement in respect of which the INTO balloted to stay. Obviously, if it has been successful for two major teacher unions and an agreement has been reached-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They were not balloted.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy will appreciate that the State does not have an endless pool of money for everybody and that is why the Haddington Road agreement-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am asking about equality. Just answer the question.

The Taoiseach: -----was introduced. That is why the Lansdowne Road agreement has been brought in as a successor and why we will have to have another successor after that. These are issues that can be dealt with by political decisions, but they require people to sit down and talk about the role and the strategy to bring that to fruition. Here is evidence of substantial numbers of teachers at primary and secondary level having agreed a timetable-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They were not balloted.

The Taoiseach: -----with the Minister for Education and Skills. I hope the same can apply in the case of An Garda Síochána, the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, AGSI, and the Garda Representative Association, GRA.

Deputy Bríd Smith: What about the ASTI?

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Leaders' Questions. We will move on to the Order of Business. I call Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh who will be acting as rapporteur of the Business Committee to announce the business for the week and to move the proposal regarding arrangements for the taking of business.

Order of Business

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Moving on to the gnóthaí na seachtaine, today's Government business shall be No. 9, motion re PQ rota change, without debate; No. 10, motion re Ireland's participation in two European Defence Agency projects - referral to committee, without debate; No. 3, Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2016 - Order for Second Stage and Second Stage; No. 15, Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2016 - Second Stage, resumed; and No. 16, Financial Motions by the Minister for Finance [2016], resumed. Item No. 11, motion re Future of Healthcare Committee, without debate, is not proceeding. Private Members' business shall be No. 77, motion re funding for education by the Labour Party.

Tomorrow's Government business shall be No. 17, Pre-European Council Statements; No. 18, National Tourism Development Authority (Amendment) Bill 2015 - Order for Report, Re-

port and Final Stages; No. 15, Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2016 - Second Stage, resumed, if not previously concluded; No. 1, Medical Practitioners (Amendment) Bill 2014 (Seanad) - Second Stage; and No. 16, Financial Motions by the Minister for Finance [2016], resumed. Private Members' business' shall be No. 78, motion re services and supports for people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease by Fianna Fáil.

Thursday's Government business shall be No. 16, financial motions by the Minister for Finance [2016] resumed. The Private Members' Bill on Thursday will not proceed as the Bill selected for debate has been withdrawn.

The proposed arrangements for the week's business are as follows, and I refer Members to the report of the business committee of 13 October 2016. In relation to today's business, there are two proposals. It is proposed that the Dáil shall sit later than 10 p.m. and shall adjourn at 12 midnight or on the adjournment of No. 16, financial motions by the Minister for Finance [2016] resumed, whichever is the earlier; and that No. 9, motion re parliamentary question rota change, and No. 10, motion re Ireland's participation in two European Defence Agency projects, shall be taken without debate. For all of this week, the proceedings on the resumed debate on No. 16, financial motions by the Minister for Finance [2016], shall adjourn when there is no further Member offering to contribute.

There are three proposals relating to tomorrow's business. It is proposed that the Dáil shall sit later than 10 p.m., business shall be interrupted at 10 p.m. to take No. 16, financial motions by the Minister for Finance [2016], resumed, and the Dáil shall adjourn at 12 midnight or on the adjournment of the financial motions, whichever is the earlier; No. 17, pre-European Council statements will commence immediately after Taoiseach's Questions, and shall be followed by questions to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and shall be brought to a conclusion after 85 minutes if not previously concluded. The speech of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for the parties or groups, or a member nominated in their stead, shall be ten minutes each and there will be a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time, and; the suspension of the sitting will take place after questions to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform; Topical Issues shall take place on the conclusion of the sos and Private Members' Business shall take place on the conclusion of Topical Issues for two hours.

There are two proposals relating to Thursday's business. It is proposed that No. 16, financial motions by the Minister for Finance [2016] resumed shall be taken on the conclusion of the weekly divisions and shall adjourn no later than 3.30 p.m. to be followed immediately by Question Time; and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of Topical Issues.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh. There are three questions to be put to the House today. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 1, today's business, agreed to?

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not agreed. I call Deputy Bríd Smith.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I have my hand up quite high.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I ask people to reconsider what was said at the Business Committee

because on the motions for rota change and Ireland's participation in the European defence projects, it is my clear memory that it was not agreed to take them without debate. Deputy Pringle and I both asked if the defence motion was to be taken with or without debate and the Chief Whip said we would have debate on it. I would argue that there should be debate on the motion. In view of the fact that Fianna Fáil's Central Bank and Financial Services Authority of Ireland (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2013, sponsored by Deputy Michael McGrath, has been withdrawn, I would also argue that we should pursue to the promise made by the Taoiseach in previous debates to discuss the question of Syria. In light of the seriousness of what is happening in Aleppo and beyond, we must schedule a debate on Syria as soon as possible. There is a window of opportunity and I advocate that we do it on Thursday.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I oppose the late sitting from 10 p.m. to midnight for the budget debate. We have argued this at the Business Committee. It seems ridiculous that the Dáil is starting at 2 p.m. today, 12 noon tomorrow and 12 noon on Thursday.

Deputy Joan Burton: There are no Friday sittings.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: What is wrong with the mornings?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The budget is a central piece of business for the year. That is how it is presented. Historically, Deputies got an opportunity to have their say in a budget debate during the general discussion on the financial resolutions. Our view is that it is not tenable to proceed on the basis that the Dáil can only have plenary sessions at 2 p.m. on Tuesdays and at 12 noon on Wednesdays and Thursdays and that if we are to have anything, we must forgo Private Members' business. That is not sustainable at all. It demeans the budget and the House to state that the budget can be discussed only in the graveyard slot between 10 p.m. and midnight. The last Dáil, for example, was able to convene at 9.30 a.m. to take Question Time or various other items-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: What is wrong with 8 o'clock?

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----that did not involve divisions.

Deputy Simon Coveney: This is the first time it has been raised. The Deputy should raise it with the Business Committee.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was raised.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: There is nothing wrong with starting at 8 o'clock.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Regina Doherty): It absolutely was not raised.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was raised consistently. Many Members have been raising this consistently and I have been saying it for a long time. It is just not sustainable. I agree with the suggestion that the attack on Aleppo be debated on Thursday afternoon.

An Ceann Comhairle: Let us be very clear before we get involved in a protracted debate on this. Deputy Martin has made his view on the sittings patently clear. However, the proposal for the current arrangements for sittings, which was adopted by the House, came from the all-party Sub-Committee on Dáil Reform, which was equally emphatic about the principle of dividing the week's work between plenary sessions and committee sessions. That was a

principled decision taken by the reform committee, of which the Deputy's party was a part. For that to change, and it can change-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It can change.

An Ceann Comhairle: It can, because nothing is written in stone, but it would be necessary for the Dáil reform committee to revisit the matter. That has been considered and a date will be fixed for that type of review to take place.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On a point of order, that Dáil reform committee is not formed under the d'Hondt system and its representation does not reflect the various strengths in the House. We have a situation-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not getting into that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: You opened this matter, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: Resume your seat.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Large parties in the House-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Wait now-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----do not get fairness in the allocation of speaking time. We will have a pre-Council debate tomorrow and a party with five Members will have the same amount of speaking time as a party with 44.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Martin, please resume your seat.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy is right about that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am resuming my seat. You raised the issue and I am responding to it with a point of order.

An Ceann Comhairle: I did raise the issue of Dáil reform.

Deputy Micheál Martin: What is happening at present is not satisfactory. I do not know how many times we have to communicate that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not wish to have an argument with you but the Dáil reform committee was established on the basis of an agreed motion in the House.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Yes, before everything else was agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Howlin.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I happen to be a member of the Sub-Committee on Dáil Reform. It might not be a d'Hondt system, although Fianna Fáil has three members on it, but I cannot recall any issue being decided by a majority vote. It always worked on the basis of consensus. There are issues in this Dáil with providing a proper time basis for the Opposition to have formal debates in the House, for the Government to have adequate time for formal debates and for the committees, which are very busy. There is another proposition before the reform committee tomorrow to increase the committee time allocation, because the 18 working committees of the House do not have sufficient time to do their work either. I believe there will be a good deal of

tweaking.

However, to return to the Business Committee report before the House, if there is a vacant time slot I strongly support the proposal to have a debate on Syria. It is a moral imperative for the House to debate that issue and if Thursday presents such an opportunity, I strongly support the principle of doing that. As a matter of commentary, it is neither a useful allocation of resources nor is it respectful to Members to expect people to make their contribution on the budget at midnight tonight. It is not a sensible proposal to allow the issues that they raise to be heard or for the budget to be given adequate focus.

Deputy Regina Doherty: I wish to respond to two issues that were mentioned. In response to Deputy Smith, I never said at the committee last week that there would be a debate in the House. I said that it would be referred to the committee for debate, which is exactly what the proposal is today. In response to Deputy Martin, his party's member of the committee did not raise the subject Deputy Martin has just raised.

Deputy Micheál Martin: He is adamant that he did.

Deputy Regina Doherty: Fianna Fáil did ask for extra time and we agreed on the extra time. The Deputy did not have to forego Private Members' time, and the committee did not make any decision to forego any party's Private Members' time, which is why we are discussing having the debate between 10 p.m. and midnight.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We were told-----

Deputy Regina Doherty: It would be nice if the Deputy would let me speak. I agree with the Deputy that the allocation of speaking time in the House is not reflective of the proportionate nature of Members' mandates. It is not democratic that political parties with two, five or seven members get exactly the same amount of time to speak as political parties with 23, 44, 50 or 57 members. Time must be allocated proportionately. To that end, the Deputy's party and I have a motion down for the Sub-Committee on Dáil Reform tomorrow to establish the new practice that time is allocated proportionately.

Deputy Joan Collins: I also agree that it is not productive to have people sitting in the Dáil until midnight. I appeal to the business committee to consider the option of an extra sitting on Fridays in order to allow people to come in if they need an extension of time. I also support the calls for a debate on Syria or, if necessary, CETA, which will be signed next week. They are two very important issues that should be debated in this Dáil.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Business Committee is a new method of trying to get agreement on the business of the week. I am one of those who proposed that we sit until midnight in preference to sitting on Fridays. This is the express wish of most backbench Deputies of all parties. Based on the time that has been allocated to plenary and committee sessions, they would prefer to sit later rather than come in on Fridays. I do not have a problem. I have argued - we can argue again at the Sub-Committee on Dáil Reform - that we need to make different arrangements. Within the time allocated, however, the best solution was for us to sit late - whatever about where each debate took place. That was the argument in which we were engaging.

In respect of the second proposal to have the motions relating to the European Defence Agency taken without debate, as on other occasions when motions relating to that agency have come before the House, I have asked that - given the continuous move towards the militarisa-

tion of Europe - we have a debate in the Chamber in the first instance rather than referring the motion to the relevant committee and then having it returned to us. Although, these motions seem to be laudable on their own merits, if one looks at them, one can see that they are contributing to the ongoing moves that have been made to ensure that the Irish Defence Forces become more dependent on and more integrated into an EU military structure. This debate needs to be held here, as was promised in the past when there was a debate on Irish neutrality, which was that a debate should be held here based on the triple lock. That does not seem to be happening.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can Members accept that the proposal to refer to committee is a staging post and that we can refer to committee and agree that today? This would mean that after it has been considered by the committee and if Members feel that the latter has given it inadequate consideration, the Business Committee can agree to have a further debate in the House after the committee discussions. Can we let it be referred to committee today? Are Members in agreement with that?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: My preference is that it would not be referred because-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: Deputy Ó Snodaigh just said he was totally happy-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We can all hear him.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I present the report from the committee. That does not necessarily mean I agree with it. I was asked to be a rapporteur.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Deputy Ó Snodaigh makes a proposal and argues against it.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: If we raise questions at the committee, try to get consensus and there is no consensus, it is my prerogative or that of any other Deputy in this House to raise questions, which is what I did. I was facilitating the Dáil, not myself, by reading out the report of the Business Committee.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: In future-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point. Time is elapsing.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: -----Opposition Deputies will not take up the role of rapporteur and read out the report if they are not allowed to raise issues relating to it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I would defend to the last the Deputy's right to raise issues. He has been raising the issue but we do, at some stage, have to move the process on. I am simply saying to him at this juncture that we can allow the referral if Members wish and they do not have to allow it if they do not wish to. It can go to committee to be considered by it and we can have the debate here afterwards if that is required.

Deputy Bríd Smith: It is not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Okay, it is not agreed.

3 o'clock

Deputy Micheál Martin: On a point of order-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, we are going to vote now.

Question, “That the proposal for dealing with today’s business be agreed to”, put and declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can the Government facilitate two hours on Thursday to be given for a debate on Aleppo?

The Taoiseach: Yes. Although I have to attend a European Council meeting, the Chief Whip will consent to it, if necessary.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have a motion to put down.

An Ceann Comhairle: So Members can be facilitated with a debate on Aleppo.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: On an all-party motion.

An Ceann Comhairle: We can have an all-party motion.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Could it coincide with our demonstration?

An Ceann Comhairle: The two-hour slot that was otherwise going to be the Fianna Fáil-

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy could take some time off demonstrating.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday’s business agreed to?

Deputy Micheál Martin: On a point of order, do Standing Orders exclude the possibility of an early sitting of the House on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays?

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Surely, a motion could be put to the House notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders.

An Ceann Comhairle: Tomorrow, we will have a Dáil reform committee meeting. If the Dáil reform committee does a complete about-face and decides the principle of dividing plenary from committee sitting should be abandoned, it is the committee’s prerogative, and it can happen tomorrow.

Deputy Micheál Martin: So it is only a principle that has come from the Dáil reform committee and Standing Orders do not preclude it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is written into Standing Orders.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is written into Standing Orders. Standing Orders give effect to the principle.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have many motions before us every week that say “notwith-

standing anything in Standing Orders". Nobody can comprehend staying from 10 p.m. until midnight to discuss something instead of doing so from 10 a.m. until noon.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is a difference between what the Deputy is saying here and what his representatives might say at the Dáil reform committee.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not true. Deputy John Lahart spoke to people about it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Lahart is not a member of the Dáil reform committee.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I did not say he was. He is on the Business Committee.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: There is more dissent among Fianna Fáil members than there is between Fianna Fáil and the Government.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: At least we have enough Members to have an Opposition.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We argued for an early sitting this week.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we please proceed? Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business, as amended for the debate on Aleppo, agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Bríd Smith: It is a debate on Syria.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes, it is on Syria.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Micheál Martin: You do not want to condemn Russia in Aleppo. That is your problem.

An Ceann Comhairle: On promised legislation, Deputy Micheál Martin.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We pushed for the debate as well.

Deputy Micheál Martin: You would never condemn Russia.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I presume the Deputy will be out at our protest tomorrow.

Deputy Micheál Martin: You guys are incapable of condemning Russia.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The French are also bombing Syria.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Absolutely. Always dilute the Russian contribution to the slaughter and genocide in Aleppo.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we focus on promised legislation?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am glad I have excited some bloody activity on it at some stage.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Deputy is quite excited himself.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is one-sided humanitarianism.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There you go again.

An Ceann Comhairle: Do not be provoked.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am doing my best not to be provoked by the pro-Russia alliance on my right, extending right across to Sinn Féin, which has been a consistent theme of this Dáil.

Deputy Gino Kenny: The Deputy should withdraw that remark.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I will not withdraw it. There is a commitment in the programme for Government on mental health and on the confidence and supply agreement. Many people in the mental health community want the Government to be very clear on the investment of €35 million annually in terms of the implementation of the recommendations of A Vision for Change. In recent times, the €35 million has been announced annually but never fully spent. Only €15 million will have been spent in 2016. Up to €12 million was withheld. Back then, there was a big furore and outcry about it and the money was reinstated. People want to ensure the full implementation of the commitment to the programme for Government and in the budget that there will be proper subheads and budgeting of the extra €35 million, that it will be allocated to objectives and specific expenditure items that will be realised over the next 12 months and that it is not the case of €35 million being allocated, not being spent and being withdrawn at the end of next year. People are looking for precision and a clear enunciation of the allocation of €35 million in the HSE service plan when it is produced later in the year.

The Taoiseach: I will certainly take that up with the Minister for Health directly. The intention was always to have €35 million ring-fenced. I think that the previous Government was the first after many years of talking about it to attempt to ring-fence money for mental health. As the Deputy is only too well aware, over the years the entire mental health area was always the Cinderella of any health budget and only tokenism was afforded it. It is a much more serious issue now. I will discuss it with the Minister for Health and the Minister of State dealing with this matter, Deputy McEntee. It is only right and proper that, if there is a commitment for €35 million, the expenditure strategy should be outlined in order that people will know what it is committed to and how it is being spent.

Deputy Gerry Adams: A former Minister of State, Senator Ó Ríordáin, told the Traveller community 20 months ago that Traveller ethnicity would be recognised within six months. One and a half years later, I wish to ask the Taoiseach about when the Government will honour that commitment. Mr. John Connors's excellent RTE documentary on Travellers underlined the unique ethnicity of that very valued part of our nation and the failure of successive Governments to recognise it formally.

Last week, the European Commission stated that it might initiate proceedings against the State for discriminating against Travellers. Specifically, it referenced the ten deaths in the horrific fire at Carrickmines this time last year and the appalling decision to evict 23 families from the Woodland Park halting site in Dundalk in January. Will the State co-operate fully with the Commission? Will the Taoiseach ensure any response by the Government to the Commission is published? Will the Government stop prevaricating on this issue and formally recognise the ethnicity of the Traveller community?

The Taoiseach: It is not that simple. The Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, is working on this and the Deputy can have a conversation with him at any time about the work that he is doing following on from the work that was begun by Senator Ó Ríordáin. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has increased the Traveller housing allocation by 64%. There has been a full review

of all of the accommodation of Travellers following the Carrickmines tragedy and social housing will now become the norm as well for Travellers. There has been an improvement arising out of those situations. I will have the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, contact Deputy Adams. I cannot see it being dealt with inside six months, but the Minister of State is working on it.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I could not hear an answer.

The Taoiseach: I said that I could not see ethnicity being approved inside six months.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Why not?

The Taoiseach: The Minister of State is working on it and I will advise him to speak to the Deputy and outline-----

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach will have to revert to the House and make a statement.

The Taoiseach: No, the Deputy has got to the point now of wanting everything done yesterday.

Deputy Gerry Adams: No. Proper communication for a long time-----

The Taoiseach: These are not issues that can be dealt with overnight, as Deputy Adams is well aware.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have a debate on this.

The Taoiseach: The Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, is dealing with this and he will advise Deputy Adams of the stage in the process that he is at currently.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: In the published legislative programme, the Government indicates that it will introduce a cybercrime Bill, but that is very much long fingered. According to the legislative programme, it is at the early stages of drafting. Will the Taoiseach give additional priority to this legislation that would not only transpose the EU directive but also expand it to deal with the issue of cyberbullying, which is increasingly a major issue, in particular among young people, and one that the House should recognise?

The Taoiseach: This is a modern, phenomenal challenge and I often wonder just how secure any material is, be it the State's or not, when one sees what is happening around the world. All that I can say to Deputy Howlin is that preparatory work has begun on the cybercrime Bill. This was an issue that was raised back when the former Minister, Mr. Pat Rabbitte, was dealing with communications, as Deputy Howlin will recall, and he pointed out that the shortage in skills needed to be able to develop a concept to deal with this was very much in evidence at that time. I am sorry, but I will have to advise Deputy Howlin as to what work, if any, has been done on this. The point that Deputy Howlin raises is absolutely valid.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I wish to ask the Minister for Health why the HSE is advising elderly people to access the fair deal scheme and enter nursing homes instead of giving them funding for a few more hours of home help. It appears there is no funding for home-help services and the advice being given is that people should access nursing homes. I am asking the Minister and the Taoiseach to allow the HSE discretion in dealing with elderly people, the fair

deal scheme and home-help services. There should be discretion in having the funding for the fair deal scheme used for extra home-help hours rather than insisting that elderly people go into nursing homes. Flexibility should be given to the HSE to use the money as it sees fit for home help as well as the fair deal scheme.

The Taoiseach: It is a valid point that is raised by Deputy Healy-Rae and the Minister is well aware of it. There was €40 million in extra funding for a winter initiative, including €10 million for home-help hours and home-care packages. Deputy Healy-Rae is quite correct as often the last person to be asked where he or she would like to be is the senior citizen or elderly person in question. Of course, these people have every right to be in their own homes, beds and corners of their own rooms if that is at all possible. That flexibility is there. The decision is whether a home care package will provide the comfort and assistance that the person needs in his or her own home until that might not be possible and he or she has to go to an institution. The flexibility is there but I will remind the Minister of the Deputy's comment.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has committed to reviewing the position with regard to the nitrates regulations being weather dependent in light of last weekend's deadline. I know it is a matter of direct responsibility for the Minister, Deputy Coveney, who is seated beside the Taoiseach. As a result of the unusual weather conditions this year, many farmers have still not been able to spread slurry and there is much confusion as to whether flexibility will be provided so they can do it. Flexibility has been given by the Minister's counterpart in Northern Ireland where farmers can demonstrate that they have not been able to have the work carried out. I ask the Taoiseach for an update and whether similar flexibility will be shown here.

The Taoiseach: We have had this on a number of occasions in the past. I advise farmers to make direct contact with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. They will be treated on a case-by-case basis, as has always been the way. The Deputy knows the weather could be worse in Donegal than in other locations or *vice versa*.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Yet another budget has passed, although it is not needed as the mechanism to address my issue. People with disabilities and real difficulties are still asking where is the replacement for the mobility allowance and the motorised transport grant. There is nothing there and it is one of the critical areas this budget has failed to address. What can the Taoiseach tell the Dáil in respect of this matter?

The Taoiseach: I know I have answered this question before for the Deputy and, in fairness, he has raised it on many occasions. To be honest, I am not sure as to what is the particular problem. I am informed that the heads will be presented this session, in the next couple of weeks. Perhaps I should take a more personal interest in this in order to discover whether we can we identify what the problem has been.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: On behalf of all of those affected, I urge the Taoiseach to do so.

The Taoiseach: The issue has been there for a number of years. Let me take an interest in it and see if I can genuinely move it forward. I will advise the Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: I apologise to the other Deputies who are offering but time is up.

Judicial Appointments Commission Bill 2016: First Stage

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the establishment of an independent judicial appointments commission with responsibility for recommending persons for appointment to judicial office based solely on merit and to provide for related matters.

This Bill provides for the establishment of an independent judicial appointments commission that would recommend persons for appointment to judicial office based solely on merit. Its purpose is to overhaul and modernise the system of judicial appointments that operates in this country. In May 2012, the European Network of Councils for the Judiciary signed a declaration in Dublin that called for a clearly defined and published set of selection competencies against which candidates for appointment to judicial office should be assessed. This Bill would seek to implement that. It sets out competencies against which candidates should be assessed prior to the nomination for appointment to judicial office. It is important to point out that a merit-based system of appointment would enhance the principle of judicial independence. We are lucky that we have an independent Judiciary in this country, although that is really despite rather than because of the judicial appointments process that exists.

Under the Bill, a judicial appointments commission will be established. It will recommend and rank three individuals for each judicial vacancy and should the Government fail to nominate one of the persons recommended by the commission, the Government would be required to publish in *Iris Oifigiúil* and the website of the Minister for Justice and Equality - rather than the Minister responsible for transport - a reason for its decision not to nominate one of the persons recommended by the commission.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

The Taoiseach: No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 6th May, 2016, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, or in the Order of the Dáil of 6th October, 2016, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

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Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 6th May, 2016, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Question put and agreed to.

European Defence Agency Proposal: Referral to Select Committee

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

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves Ireland's participation in two European Defence Agency Projects - (1) MARSUR Networking - Adaptive Phase (MARSUR II) and (2) Cooperation on Cyber Ranges in the European Union pursuant to section 2 of the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, be referred to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, in accordance with Standing Order 84A(3)(b), which, not later than 8th November, 2016, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 90, and Standing Order 89(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Council of Europe: Appointment of Representatives

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Regina Doherty): I wish to inform the House that the following persons have been selected and nominated as representatives and alternatives from Ireland to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe until the end of 2016.

Representatives: Senator Joe O'Reilly, leader of the delegation; Senator Maura Hopkins and Deputies Barry Cowen and Seán Crowe. Alternates: Deputy Colm Brophy and Senators Terry Leyden, Alice-Mary Higgins and Rónán Mullen.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committee Meetings

1. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if the Cabinet committee on arts, Irish and the Gaeltacht has been established and met. [28623/16]

2. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet sub-committee on arts, heritage and Gaeltacht affairs last met. [30614/16]

The Taoiseach: I proposed to take Questions Nos. 1 and 2 together. The Cabinet committee on arts, Irish, the Gaeltacht and the islands was established on 8 June this year and its first

meeting took place last week, on 13 October.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach stated that the arts committee was established on 8 June.

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Its first meeting was on 30 October.

The Taoiseach: It was 13 October. An triú lá déag.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I had thought he said 30 October. We are not there yet, how could that be?

The Taoiseach: I am not that bad.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is the early influenza. Need I say more?

This is an appalling indictment of the Government's commitment to arts policy that its first meeting was this week and it has not met since June. There are enormous issues to be covered by the arts committee. We had an earlier debate about the sense of marginalisation of the arts community in the reconstruction and reconfiguration of the Department dealing with arts, rural and Gaeltacht affairs. It was not the centrepiece of that and there is a sense that the arts is not central to Government policy in any shape or form. The artistic community felt marginalised. The idea that the Cabinet committee has only met once in that period - and that was in the past week - is a shocking indictment of the Government's commitment to the arts, the Irish language and the Gaeltacht. That is probably reflective of the fact that at the Cabinet table we do not have a strong philosophy or focus on the arts in general.

In addition, it is arguable that if the committee had met earlier, it might have had a better influence on the budgetary position of the arts. I know the Department had significant expenditure in the subhead resulting from the investment in 2016 and the commemoration of the 1916 Rising, and this represented a major opportunity for the Department and the Government to maintain that base of funding and apply much of it to the artistic organisations across the country and artistic endeavour generally. There has been a 16% reduction in the Department's allocation. The Arts Council got some additional funding this year but we felt it should have got more. We think that multi-annual funding for some of the key arts organisations is essential.

The Taoiseach will also know that Culture 2025 in its existing draft form is currently being revised by the Oireachtas committee. An explanation is required in terms of the purpose and the modalities of an implementation body relating to cultural policy, something that has yet to be finalised. Furthermore, in terms of Culture Ireland and the legacy programme coming out of 2016, will the Taoiseach indicate whether the Cabinet committee has confirmed separate mechanisms for arts funding in terms of legacy funding? Will that conclude in 2017 or what is the intention of Government in that regard? Did the Cabinet committee give any consideration to maintaining the existing expenditure base in the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs for the arts in particular? This is the funding that would have gone to a lot of the events pertaining to the 1916 Commemoration. Did the committee look at the idea of using that money for funding the arts and for the various arts organisations, including the Arts Council, the Heritage Council, the Film Board and Culture Ireland, to give them a substantial allocation which would have maintained the same base of expenditure in the Department but

with the moneys going to the arts world and the arts community?

Will the Taoiseach explain why the committee has only met once since 8 June and then only last week? Why did it not meet from the time of its establishment on 8 June until 13 October?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On a similar theme, it is quite extraordinary that the committee dealing with the arts should only have met after the budget. That says it all in terms of the commitment of the Government to the arts, in that there was no discussion whatsoever prior to the budget about properly resourcing and funding the arts. This was after we had a major discussion in this House in which Members on all sides pledged their verbal and rhetorical commitment to the arts. When it came to allocating money that would make a difference, however, and turning words into reality, the committee did not even meet until after the event. Is it any wonder that we had the pretty shocking decision of the Government to cut the arts, culture and film budget by 16% and to cut the Irish language budget by 9%? We had a €30 million cut in the case of arts, film and culture and €5 million in the case of the Irish language.

I have heard the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs since saying that there was an extra €50 million provided for the Centenary which was a once-off allocation, thus justifying the 16% cut. Surely the Taoiseach knew and if the Cabinet committee had met it would have acknowledged the fact the National Campaign for the Arts had very specifically asked in its pre-budget submission that the entire €50 million that had been allocated to the arts for the Centenary would be retained. That was a very modest ask because, as the Taoiseach knows - I do not know why he finds this particularly amusing - the debate in this House and the argument put forward by the National Campaign for the Arts was that we should move from the miserable 0.1% of GDP that is spent on the arts in this country in the direction, at least, of 0.6% which is the average spend on the arts in Europe. There was no move at all, despite all the rhetorical commitments. There was no actual move. Members of the Government are happy to jump in front of the cameras when there is a photo opportunity for the Centenary or some other arts event but when it comes to listening to the artists and giving resources, there is no meeting and an actual cut in the budget. I do not see how the Taoiseach can possibly justify this. The National Campaign for the Arts is asking the Government to reconsider and I ask the same. Will the Taoiseach reconsider? Will this committee meet and take seriously arts, culture and heritage which is one of the greatest assets of this country but which has been treated as a very poor second cousin when it comes to the allocation of resources?

Deputy Gerry Adams: I, too, would ask the Taoiseach to reconsider the disgraceful decision to cut €30 million from the programme for arts, culture and film. We should not be surprised that the Cabinet sub-committee has only met once. That reflects the Government's historical attitude to the areas of arts, heritage, the Irish language, Gaeltacht affairs and so on. The capital would have been a good investment in our museums, libraries, galleries and institutions, our artists could have been offered security of tenure in urban centres, we could have helped the growth in animation and the Irish film industry and also, particularly, the Irish language.

For all of the jumping up and down by Fianna Fáil, it supported and endorsed this budget. With their budgetary choices, especially in relation to the language, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have rejected the investment plan put forward by 80 Irish language and Gaeltacht groups which could have created 1,175 jobs and which would have enhanced the used of the language and improved access for Irish speakers. I appeal to the Taoiseach to reconsider the Government decision in this matter and to treat the arts, our language and culture with the respect and the investment they deserve. This also makes very good economic sense. There will be a return,

not just in terms of art for the sake of art but also in terms of jobs and meaningful employment for the people involved.

The Taoiseach: I go to a lot of meetings. If I had attended six or eight meetings of this committee, people might wonder what I was at as well. The committee met just once. We discussed the téarmaí tagartha of the coiste. We discussed the beartais oideachais Gaeltachta 2017-2022. We discussed Bille na dteangacha oifigiúla and we discussed Culture 2025 - Éire Ildánach. I imagine I am not supposed to say those things, but that was the work of the committee. We set out the terms of reference which were to support the advancement of action in the arts, culture and heritage sectors in line with the vision and priorities that are set out in the framework policy Culture 2025 - Éire Ildánach to support the implementation of the 20 year strategy for the Irish language, particularly in the context of facilitating the delivery of the objectives that require cross-departmental action; and to maintain oversight of policy areas such as education and broadcasting that have the potential to impact significantly on the arts and Irish language sectors.

Obviously a specific €50 million was made available last year for very important work this year involving the improvement of infrastructural facilities in Dublin at the GPO, on Moore Street, Kilmainham Courthouse, Cathal Brugha Barracks, the restoration of tenement buildings, Richmond Hospital and so on. These are lasting legacies that will stand the test of time over the next 50 or 100 years, in their own right.

It was also very evident that the relatively small amount of money that was given to local authorities resulted in an enormous explosion of interest throughout the country, where communities showed real leadership in artistic endeavour and creative work in so many ways. For that reason, the Government has allocated a further €5 million this year for that sort of development through Creative Ireland which will continue throughout the next five years. That is in addition to the extra moneys being given to the Arts Council and a number of other facilities, including the Film Board and the cultural institutions, to assist in the delivery of Éire Ildánach. The full-scale programme that has been worked out in this area under five pillars will enable the unlocking of the creative potential of every child in every school and community in the country. We are enabling creativity in every community by investing in our creative infrastructure. This will, for example, make Ireland a centre of excellence in media production. As a consequence, we will be able to unify our global reputation. This is being done for a very good reason. We want to harness the enormous range and capacity of the artistic and cultural creativity that exists in our communities. The Minister will bring a memorandum to the Government shortly to spell out the details of this approach. We are recognising the way communities responded in a leadership fashion to the 1916 centenary commemorative events that were conducted this year.

The policy on Gaeltacht education is another important issue that was discussed at the committee. There has been a great deal of consultation on and analysis of the policy, which has been developed over some time in the Department of Education and Skills. If we are to be serious about this, we need to do something serious about it. Clearly, the situation that applies with regard to the language in Gaeltacht schools varies widely from place to place. There is a whole new process to be put in place here. Schools will be able to register as being recognised as Gaeltacht schools with features including involvement in all subjects through Irish and immersion in the language. The facilities that will be provided as a consequence will demonstrate that the State is serious about the teaching of the language. We need to discuss this issue here and in a broader context around the country. There are many schools in Gaeltacht areas where there has been a decline in the language because of the population change or whatever else. At

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the same time, there is great flúirseacht in Gaelscoileanna in cities and urban areas where the language is being spoken in great quantities. We need to deal with that. I have mentioned some of the matters that were discussed by the committee.

Cabinet Committee Meetings

3. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health last met. [28719/16]

4. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health last met. [30553/16]

5. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet sub-committee on health last met. [30616/16]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 3 to 5, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on health last met on 22 September 2016.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I know the Taoiseach is limited in what he can say on these matters. I wonder what consideration has been given to the crisis in health and the ongoing issues in that regard. Approximately €14.7 billion in real terms is being put into health. This clearly cannot sustain the hospitals or the clinics.

I would like to look at the issue of mental health, in particular. It has been the Cinderella of the health services for a long time. Will it suffer again when we are told at the end of the year that the health budget has been spent? What will happen if the EU says the Government cannot bail it out? Will mental health services be targeted again? I know the Taoiseach cannot talk about the detail of what is discussed at the Cabinet committee, but I suggest that this issue be brought to the committee for its consideration.

Last week, I visited the Ladywell mental health centre in Dundalk, which provides services for much of north Louth. The staff are very dedicated, as we would expect, but the conditions in which they are forced to treat patients are absolutely unsuitable. The building is over 70 years old and is inappropriate for staff and patients. Additional members of staff were allocated to the centre some time ago, which was very welcome, but there were no facilities in Ladywell to accommodate them. Instead, they are working out of St. Brigid's Hospital in Ardee. Patients have to travel from as far away as Carlingford for appointments there.

Is the need for strategic investment in the development and enhancement of mental health services the type of issue the Cabinet committee looks at? The Government loudly announced its decision to set up 14 new primary care centres, and the European Investment Bank cleared a loan of €70 million to that end, but none of the centres are in the north-east region. If one omits the Dublin region, including the constituency of the former Minister for Health, there will be no centres at all in the north east. I would like to know why this is the case. Do citizens and mental health staff in the region not have an entitlement to first-class modern mental health services?

I will conclude by mentioning that there are 444 hospital patients on hospital trolleys today. That is a huge number. Despite the significant efforts of the staff at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, the hospital has one of the highest numbers of patients on trolleys. This is the

responsibility of the Government. How does the Government expect to cope or deal with such problems if it is not budgeting properly in the health sector? The persistent under-resourcing of primary and community care, which results from Government failures, means that more and more people who do not need to end up in hospital are ending up in hospital. Will the Taoiseach give the House a commitment that the need to tackle primary and community health care, and particularly the issue of mental health facilities, will be raised at the next meeting of the Cabinet committee on health?

The Taoiseach: Of course the Cabinet committee on health can deal with a particular issue. Deputy Martin asked a question earlier on about the allocation of money to the mental health area. I support his specific suggestion that there should be a subhead dealing with how it is proposed to spend this money and the effectiveness of such expenditure. We have had ring-fenced allocations for mental health for some years, but I do not think it has ever been possible to spend the amount that was allocated. When money is in the budget, there is a need to identify and monitor the outcome and the output of the spend. I am answering the Deputy's question by confirming that the issues he raised are relevant to the general work of the Cabinet committee on health. We can talk about these particular areas at our meetings.

An increase of nearly €500 million was announced in the Estimates for 2017. This will bring the total spend to €14.6 billion. The Minister for Health has pointed out that this is the largest allocation ever made to the health area, taking into account that various Departments were associated with health and children over the years. An additional €1 billion is being provided for health spending compared to the budget for 2016. This represents an increase of 7.4%. Investment priorities include the development of the national children's hospital and the national plan for radiation oncology. The new national forensic mental health service facility is being built in Portrane. The Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, is responsible for this project. An additional €3 million is being provided to support drugs and social inclusion measures. Some €5 million is being provided for the establishment of the Healthy Ireland fund. This fund, for which the Minister of State, Deputy Corcoran Kennedy, is responsible, is important for the well-being and outlook of our people. It will lead to enormous savings over a five-year or ten-year period. The €35 million that is being provided for new mental health services in 2017 is in addition to the €35 million that was provided in 2016. In the absence of the Minister for Health, who is now present, we were talking about a specific subhead to identify the spend and output. That is an issue of which most people would be supportive. This will enable improvements and better outcomes for the mental health services across a number of age groups and specialties and it will assist the continuing development of an integrated approach to youth mental health and suicide reduction initiatives. As Deputy Adams knows, these are particularly tragic and common, unfortunately. This is the reason the money was put in by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform following discussions with the Minister for Health and this is why we have a specific Minister of State post to deal with the mental health area.

I hope those responsible get the message out. It is important to talk to young people in colleges and secondary schools and to get the message out that those who have difficulties from time to time should not be afraid to talk, ask or tell people about it. There has never been more help available. Yet people, given the world we live in, have never felt more lonely, isolated or vulnerable. It is a case of facing up to a tragic phenomenon and encouraging all young people to work with those in their age groups and to highlight that if something is wrong, help is available. That is why there is a specific allocation in the health budget for mental health. That is why there is a specifically appointed Minister of State to work with all of the organisations,

including voluntary and NGO organisations as well as statutory agencies to deal with this in the best way possible. If only one life is saved as a result, is that not a benefit?

I always try to say to students in secondary schools in particular that if one in four is to be affected by mental health challenges at some stage during their lives, then it is only right and proper that the State should put facilities in place to encourage these young people and let them know and understand that they can use these facilities and opportunities without fear, anxiety or concern. That is what they are there for. Moreover, just as people get physically sick, so too can they have mental challenges. Young people should understand that. There is nothing new in this. However, it should be understood that we want to help them in so many ways and there are so people who can do that. It is a case of not being afraid to say it, tell it or ask for it. In that sense we are keen to continue to work with them at all times.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are some supplementary questions.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: My question is not a supplementary question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is a question. Do you want to ask a question?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not a supplementary question. It is a question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is a question - my apologies.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am keen for some clarity on the health budget and the allocations. Can the Taoiseach repeat the date the sub-committee last met? Did he say it was 23 September?

The Taoiseach: No.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What was the date for the meeting of the sub-committee?

The Taoiseach: It was 22 September.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Excellent, that is clarity, at least, although I doubt if I will get clarity in response to the rest of my question.

Today the Taoiseach repeated something the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform said on the day of the budget. It was the assertion that this budget includes the biggest health allocation in the history of the State. That was challenged within minutes of the claim being made during the budget by Susan Mitchell, a journalist with the *Sunday Business Post*. She also stripped out - I heard the Taoiseach make reference to this - the reduction in the budget that would have resulted from taking out the allocation for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. She pointed out that the total and absolute budget was bigger in 2008 than it was this year. It is important that we have clarity on who is correct and to have clear figures, comparisons and explanations that stand up in respect of what was taken out of the Department of Health. There was considerable messing around with figures last year on the health budget. I put it to the Taoiseach that we need clarity on this. We deserve that and the public deserves clarity on the health budget. We should also have the honest admission - again this has been asserted by many - that the allocation, if it is an increase, is almost certainly not an increase in real terms when we strip out Lansdowne Road arrangements, the inclusion of the €500 million cost over-run from last year as well as the demographic pressures that would have required extra budget resources in any event. The question is about what service delivery is going to be like.

In other words, do we now have additional resources that will lead to additional and improved quality of services? The doctors came out today and criticised the €15 million to deal with the crisis in accident and emergency departments. One group called the allocation pathetic and said it would not deal with the crisis at all.

I would like clarity on mental health. I have just heard a reference to €35 million which the Taoiseach said has been allocated. However, in the Budget Statement reference to additional funding for health, there is no reference to mental health whatsoever. Instead, there is reference to the level of mental health services being delivered within the available funding. Is it the same? That is what I want to know. Have we given additional funding to mental health? The commitment of the Government and of the House is to the full implementation of A Vision for Change to deal with the fact that our mental health teams are at 48% of the staffing levels they should have and that we need 24/7 emergency mental health services.

My next question is on home care packages. I have asked this question several times, including during the budget debate and in respect of specific people. There was crowing about the fact that there will be 950 extra home care packages, but this is still 6,000 home care packages south or less than it was before the cuts started in 2008. I want a simple answer from the Minister for Health, who is sitting near the Taoiseach. It relates to the cases that I have on my desk - I suspect others have them as well - involving people whose need for home care packages is acknowledged. Are they going to continue to be told that the budget is not there? That is what I want to know.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, if you want an answer you will have to give way. I am trying to be helpful. If you want a response, the Taoiseach has 30 seconds.

The Taoiseach: I have 30 seconds. Is that correct?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You have 30 seconds.

The Taoiseach: God almighty.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Time is expired.

The Taoiseach: The first thing I will say is that Deputy Boyd Barrett should wait until these questions are finished because the Minister for Health is in the House to answer questions presently. He will provide Deputy Boyd Barrett with the detail of all these things, including a detailed statement on the website of the Department of Health which deals specifically with the question from Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Unfortunately, I do not have speaking time during Priority Questions.

The Taoiseach: Once all the appropriate adjustments are made on a like-for-like comparison, for 2017 the allocation is €14.607 billion.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was €15 billion in 2008.

The Taoiseach: That is €566 million greater than the 2008 allocation, which was the previous highest year. If Deputy Boyd Barrett checks that, he will find out it is the case.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have checked it.

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An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I want to move on because time is expired.

The Taoiseach: I could give Deputy Boyd Barrett more details if he wishes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You will have to do it in another way.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What about my question on mental health?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You will have to find another way, Taoiseach.

Brexit Issues

6. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken to or conversed with the British Prime Minister or other members of the United Kingdom Government since the announcement by the British Prime Minister of the timescale for Brexit and the commitment by the UK Government to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to withdraw from the European Union by the end of March 2017. [29299/16]

7. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if he has had discussions with the Northern Ireland First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Scottish First Minister and Welsh First Minister concerning the announcement by the UK Prime Minister Teresa May of a timetable for Brexit and the commitment by the UK Government to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to withdraw from the European Union by the end of March 2017. [29300/16]

8. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach the way he and his Government plan to make Northern Ireland a special case in the context of Brexit; if he has discussed or written to Prime Minister May in relation to the plan; and if discussions have taken place with the Secretary of State in Northern Ireland. [30528/16]

9. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach the detail of any formal contacts he has had with the First Minister of Northern Ireland, Ms Arlene Foster, regarding the Government's proposed all-island civic forum on Brexit. [30751/16]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 to 9, inclusive, together.

I noted the comments of the UK Prime Minister, Ms May, on Article 50 on 2 November and I welcomed her clarification on the timing of Article 50.

Since then, the Government has reviewed action to date and has intensified its preparations. There is ongoing close political and official engagement, including with the British Government, Northern Ireland and the EU member states and institutions as well as through broadening dialogue with civic society. The week following Prime Minister May's announcement, the annual summit of Secretaries General with UK Permanent Secretaries took place in London. This well established forum served as a valuable vehicle for discussion and exploration of Brexit implications, impacts and options, in addition to providing for consideration of the broad areas of co-operation under the joint work programme.

The Government also continues to work closely with the Northern Ireland Executive and the First and deputy First Minister through the North-South Ministerial Council. At the plenary meeting of the council in July, a set of ten specific actions was agreed to optimise North-South joint planning for Brexit, including a full audit of key North-South work programmes. I will

meet with First Minister Arlene Foster and deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness at the November meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council when we will progress these actions. I will meet with Prime Minister May later this week in Brussels, at what will be her first European Council meeting. She is expected to provide an update on the timing of the UK's triggering of Article 50 at that meeting. I understand that Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, is planning to visit Dublin soon and I hope to meet with her when that visit takes place. I will also meet with the Scottish First Minister and the Welsh First Minister again at the British-Irish Council meeting next month where we will continue our work on the implications of Brexit for all member administrations.

The invitations to the all island civic dialogue on 2 November are being issued today. This event will give a voice to the many organisations and individuals across the island of Ireland who are outside the political establishment and who wish to be heard on Brexit. To ensure the widest representation possible, invitations will be extended to a broad range of civic society groups, trade unions, business groups and non-governmental organisations. In addition to this, representatives from political parties on the island will be invited to attend, including the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP. It will primarily be a listening exercise to hear the voices of those who will be most affected by Brexit. Views expressed will be used to help inform the Government position on issues arising from the UK decision to leave the EU and the overall negotiation process. The Government will seek to ensure that future EU-UK and Ireland-UK negotiations give priority attention to the Northern Ireland dimension, including issues relating to the Border and EU funding. It is vital that the benefits of the peace process are safeguarded and built upon for future generations, in whatever arrangements are negotiated.

The continued stability of Northern Ireland remains a priority for this Government. It has been raised in bilateral discussions with Secretary of State Brokenshire at the British-Irish Association and, indeed, with our counterparts in other EU member states by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Flanagan, and the Minister of State at that Department, Deputy Dara Murphy, and myself. The importance of protecting the peace process, and of Europe's contribution to peace in Ireland, resonates strongly with those with whom we have spoken. We will continue to work through the North-South planning for Brexit through the work of the North-South Ministerial Council as I have outlined, and will continue to work with the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive as co-guarantors of the peace process. The civic society discussion which will take place on 2 November is one of a series that will take place in the ensuing months. It is not a one off, one day affair.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is not in Standing Orders but in view of the fact that there are eight and a half minutes left in this slot, is it acceptable to the Taoiseach that he answer further questions? Is that acceptable to both Deputies? Agreed.

Deputy Joan Burton: Does the Taoiseach agree that Brexit is the biggest challenge to face Ireland since the collapse of the banks and the collapse of employment in the country? If he agrees, does he also see that we need to intensify and deepen our preparations? Some weeks ago the Taoiseach, here in the Dáil Chamber, told me with some excitement in his voice that a senior member would be appointed to the cabinet of Michel Barnier, one of the key negotiators dealing with Brexit. I have been quite surprised not to have seen any mention of who is the senior appointee. I presume the person will be one of several people at cabinet level in the Commission, a former senior official of the Commission or a senior diplomat. Does the Taoiseach appreciate that, notwithstanding that all of the senior people in Brussels understand that Ireland is very much an independent and separate country, nonetheless, psychologically and culturally,

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they see us as being tied into the UK? In fact, many of them have difficulty understanding exactly how complex and difficult the Brexit situation is for us with the multiple dimensions of its impact on the Republic, particularly the issue of sterling. I read in the newspaper yesterday about somebody having a wedding in Donegal and already the cost of the wedding has risen from €20,000 to €23,000 owing to the fall in sterling.

In respect of Northern Ireland and the civic forum, has the Government determined that it will argue for the North to be a special case? We hear a lot of conversation about the North but we are not seeing any roadmap of how the Government proposes to deal with the North, particularly in the context of Mrs. May advocating on some days a hard Brexit and on other days, in respect of passporting financial services, indicating that she is open to a soft Brexit for the City of London as a region. These are critical issues on which we need to hear the Government's view. Where is this member of Mr. Barnier's team and who is that person? Mr. Verhofstadt has a very senior position as well. Are we going to have a senior Irish person? While I know this is fraught with difficulties, there should also be a senior person from the North of Ireland and from Scotland but that is the matter for the Scottish executive. In terms of the island of Ireland, we need the maximum input in order to allay the greatest threat to the Irish economy since the collapse of the banks and of the construction industry in 2007 and 2008.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I concur with the Deputy that this is without question the most significant challenge to face the country in many a day because the impact will not be transient but long term. I hear from the Taoiseach's reply that there is a close relationship with the British Government but I have to question to what degree there is close engagement between the two Governments because of what is emanating from the British Prime Minister.

I welcome the civic forum. I suggested it at our meetings and think it is a very good idea to listen to civic dialogue on an all island basis. Nonetheless, Prime Minister May's decision to exclude Northern Ireland from permanent membership of the cabinet group overseeing Brexit should cause real concern and raise immediate warning signals. The group has 12 permanent members, including the Tory party chairman, but the Northern Ireland Secretary of State is simply to be called in from time to time. It is clearly more important for the Tories to manage their internal affairs than to follow up on the commitment to give top priority to the huge impact of Brexit on the island of Ireland.

What specific steps have been taken to follow up on the promise of close co-operation with us in the Brexit negotiations? As we speak, the cabinet sub-committee is considering the idea of work permits for non-British citizens. That raises the prospect that anyone going from Ireland to Britain to work in the foreseeable future will have to go through a work permit regime. Scotland is looking for a halfway house between membership of the European Union and of the UK. That may very well trigger a Scottish independence referendum if the choice is a hard Brexit versus a soft one. That is a very real concern. It is also being suggested that Britain may try to have a deal with Europe on a sectoral or geographic region basis. The Mayor of London has been very clear about asking whether it is possible for London to have a separate arrangement with the European Union.

4 o'clock

Much of that is fantasy. What is of major concern is the statements made by Ministers and the Prime Minister at the Tory party conference because that all speaks to a hard Brexit and a World Trade Organization, WTO, type trade deal, which would mean tariffs on Irish beef and

many other products going into Britain, and would be the worst possible scenario that could unfold.

I put it to the Taoiseach that all the language we are hearing is of the wishful kind such as “We all want a soft Brexit” or “We do not want any hard borders between the North and the Republic”. Obviously, we do not want the latter but saying it is not enough. We are saying that things will work out on the night but, increasingly, we are getting the wrong story in the sense of what is coming out of Britain. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is now being cornered and identified by the Brexiteers as someone who is asking too many awkward questions, that he is not pro-Brexit, etc.

We need to up our game in terms of our relationship with the British Government and I put it to the Taoiseach that he needs to seek a formal summit meeting with the British Prime Minister to lay on the line our perspective on it and to try to ascertain the real story in terms of the island of Ireland and Brexit, and what the British Government intends to do in terms of the European Union.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has 30 seconds, and 30 seconds only.

The Taoiseach: The Leas-Cheann Comhairle gives me these impossible tasks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is Standing Orders.

The Taoiseach: How am I to respond to the Brexit argument in 30 seconds? There is no question that this issue, and not just the banking collapse, is one of the major political questions of the past 50 years-----

Deputy Joan Burton: The economic war in the 1930s.

The Taoiseach: -----and it has implications not just for Ireland but globally. Mr. Barnier was appointed on 1 October. He has not appointed his team yet. I met him here last week. I have known him for quite a number of years from the political parties we represent and from his service both as a Commissioner and as French Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries. He was very helpful to Ireland. He has agreed to work very closely with us. I will chair these meetings in the sense of being able to call in any of our Ministers at Cabinet level, Ministers of State or whomever to give that the status it deserves. I made the point to Mr. Barnier that Ireland needs a representative on his task force. My understanding from the Commission is that these will not all be high-level people. Mr. Barnier will conduct the proceedings himself in the main way and will report directly to the European Council. Deputy Burton should know that he made the point that he will not do anything unless it has the full support of the European Council because that is where the political imprimatur lies. That was on my suggestion at the European Council. The Heads of Government will make the political decisions here.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am sorry. The time has been exceeded but the questions coming up are important.

The Taoiseach: Ah, go on. Gabh mo leithscéal. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle might give me another 30 seconds. With regard to the North-South civic forum-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am too generous.

The Taoiseach: -----we need clarity, as Deputies Martin, Adams and Burton pointed out.

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Secretary of State Davis, Secretary of State Fox and Secretary of State Johnson have made different comments and have had to be slapped down, reined in or had their remarks commented upon in respect of what the Prime Minister has said. We know that politics are politics, and the Conservative Party had to hear the Prime Minister make her case, but we need clarity as to what we want, which is why I said to Deputy Adams earlier that we will not have any particular circumstances made available to Northern Ireland unless we know our objective. If that objective is moving from day to day, either from a Northern Ireland or a British point of view, we may get further clarification on Thursday in Brussels-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: -----and I hope we do.

Finally, in respect of Deputy Martin's question, it is true that we have had comments about hard borders, soft borders and sector areas to be cherry-picked out of Brussels. These are all moving targets and until such time as the British Government has drilled down through all the arguments and made its case as to what it is seeking, it is very difficult for us to negotiate with certainty on what we want in terms of our citizens, our economy, our relations with Northern Ireland, no return to a hard border, and the protection of the common travel area. On the last two points, the Prime Minister was clear. We do not want and will not tolerate a return to a hard border and we do not want any diminution of the common travel area, which has been in place since 1922.

Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputies John Brassil and Michael Healy-Rae - family concerns over plans to accommodate residents following the report Time to Move on from Congregated Settings: A Strategy for Community Inclusion; (2) Deputy Thomas P. Broughan - supports needed for St. Joseph's national school, Marino, Dublin 3, on its application for DEIS 1 status; (3) Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe - allegations of inappropriate behaviour at University College Cork; (4) Deputy James Lawless - the reason volumes of waste from the greater Dublin area are being deposited at Drehid landfill site, north-west Kildare, and related issues; (5) Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin - concerns in the Irish mushroom industry as a consequence of Brexit; (6) Deputy Carol Nolan - the plans in place along the River Shannon to prevent flooding this winter; (7) Deputy Alan Farrell - the need to support community sporting initiatives such as Lusk 2020; (8) Deputy Imelda Munster - the cuts in primary care staff and service provision and the loss of clerical and administrative posts in Louth and Meath; (9) Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - the status of the Lantern Lodge facility, Killarney, pending provision of similar services at the new facility in Killarney; (10) Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan - the impact of puppy farms and the need for stricter enforcement; (11) Deputy Niamh Smyth - the need to address the issue of substance abuse following a recent case at Cavan general hospital accident and emergency department; (12) Deputy Marc MacSharry - to review the targets imposed on Sligo County Council within its financial plan, which was agreed in August 2015; (13) Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin - reduction of services at the Alzheimer's day care unit in south Kildare; (14) Deputies Clare Daly and

Mick Wallace - to discuss the terms of reference of the O'Neill inquiry; (15) Deputy Mick Barry - reports of contamination at Mercy University Hospital, Cork; (16) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - the ongoing incarceration and reports of mistreatment of an Irish citizen in Egypt; (17) Deputy Bríd Smith - the issue of teachers' pay equality; (18) Deputy Gino Kenny - the waiting times for needs assessments for children accessing primary care services; (19) Deputy Anne Rabbitte - the closure of the waiting list for free eye tests for children; (20) Deputy Barry Cowen - the relocation of ambulance services from Edenderry to Tullamore; (21) Deputy Lisa Chambers - the Minister's views on the report on the well-being of members of the Permanent Defence Forces; (22) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - differences in social housing income limits in neighbouring areas; (23) Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony - the concerns regarding bed closures in Clonakilty district hospital; (24) Deputy Thomas Byrne - the industrial relations dispute with the ASTI union; and (25) Deputy Martin Ferris - the health and safety issues at Kilmoyley graveyard, County Kerry.

The matters raised by Deputies John Brassil and Michael Healy-Rae, Margaret Murphy O'Mahony, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin and Carol Nolan have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Priority Questions

Mental Health Services Funding

15. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the additional €35 million for mental health services will be spent in 2017; if, with regard to the commitment in the confidence and supply arrangement and in order to provide clarity, he will commit to a multi-annual plan for the period 2017 to 2021, setting out the way the services and measures required for the full and complete implementation of A Vision for Change will be put in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30969/16]

Deputy James Browne: I ask the Minister of State the way in which the additional €35 million for mental health services announced in this year's budget will be spent in 2017. Having regard to the commitment in the confidence and supply agreement and in order to provide clarity, will she commit to a multi-annual plan for 2017 to 2021, setting out the way the services and measures required for the full and complete implementation of A Vision for Change will be put in place, and will she make a statement on the matter?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy for his question. I am pleased to confirm that the allocation for new developments within mental health services will be even greater than the significant resources made available in recent years. This arises as a result of a combination of increased revenue funding and a major capital allocation which has been secured for mental health services.

In line with my commitment to achieve a full-year allocation of €35 million in additional funding for mental health, I am initiating €35 million in new services for 2017. Key mental health priorities to be addressed in the Health Service Executive, HSE, 2017 service plan in-

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clude youth mental health, including the improvement of child and adolescent mental health services; improvement in adult services and those relating to older people, improvement in services for those with eating disorders, and the enhancement of out of hours response for those in urgent need of services. As has been widely acknowledged, and as I acknowledged last week, recognising the time lag in new staff taking up posts and the completion of other preparations for the introduction of these services it is estimated that the revenue spend in the calendar year 2017 associated with this increased allocation will be some €15 million. However, €35 million in service developments will be initiated in the course of the coming year. I look forward to briefing the Deputy on these developments once the details have been finalised and the national service plan approved. In addition, there will be further increases in mental health current spending associated with increased pay rates, and this will be subject to separate funding of approximately €9.7 million.

A priority for me for 2017 was to secure additional capital spending for mental health. This was urgently required to allow the construction contract for the National Forensic Mental Health Campus at Portrane to be awarded. This project has been subject to a significant increase in costs arising from price inflation in the construction sector, some additions to the project, and the need to spend additional money in meeting planning conditions. Completion of the tender process meant funding of these increasing costs needed to be secured before the contract for the project could be awarded, and I am delighted that I obtained the support of my Government colleagues to proceed with this landmark project. It is estimated that approximately €50 million in capital funding will be spent on the project next year, with further spending in completing the project from 2018 onwards.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The Central Mental Hospital was established in 1850. The project to develop a new service to replace the hospital was first initiated in 2000. In 2009, the Portrane site was selected. The award of the construction contract, which my Department has approved, means there will be no further delay in the long overdue replacement of the Central Mental Hospital with a modern, purpose-built facility at Portrane.

With regard to the continuing implementation of A Vision for Change, the Department of Health is currently leading the review of this policy with a view to the development of a successor document which will complete the process of modernising mental health services and effectively promoting mental health. I envisage this successor policy including detailed implementation arrangements, underpinned by a multi-annual investment plan, will inform the allocation of resources in future years.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Minister of State. I need clarity on this issue. Appendix 1 of the confidence-and-supply arrangement commits to fully implementing A Vision for Change. The confidence-and-supply arrangement votes are dependent on the full implementation of the policies attached to that document. We agreed to facilitate budgets consistent with the agreed policy principles attached to the document, which runs over the full term of Government or five years. In response to a parliamentary question I tabled during the summer, the Minister stated that the required amount needed to fully implement A Vision for Change is €35.4 million per annum. Will the Minister of State confirm that the full €35 million will be spent in 2017 and that there will not be a repeat of what occurred earlier this year when money was withheld?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will agree with the Deputy on that. In order to implement A Vision for Change, we need to continue to increase our funding. That is a commitment this Government has given and, for me, it is a commitment it has honoured. However, we know that is not possible over one budget but that it will be implemented over the course of the next three to five years. The Deputy will agree that it includes not just spending on revenue but also capital spending. If we are to bring ourselves in line with A Vision for Change, we need to improve our services and facilities, and where we provide those services. The central mental hospital was built in 1850 as a lunatic asylum but we still house people there. In order to bring ourselves into line with A Vision for Change, we need to begin the construction of the new forensic hospital and the €50 million will allow that to happen next year. We will increase spending next year with €35 million of new developments to be initiated. The focus will be on capital and ensuring that the new forensic hospital is started.

Deputy James Browne: The €50 million in capital expenditure is very welcome but the Government needs to understand that the commitment to increase investment by €35 million annually is just that - a commitment to increase investment by €35 million annually, to meet the requirements under A Vision for Change. In 2016 the Government announced €35 million and then withheld €12 million in a U-turn into which it was forced in June. Fine Gael pledged increased funding of €175 million for mental health on page 135 of its programme so I hope that, having announced €35 million in the budget this year, it is not going to perform another embarrassing climbdown. I emphasise that €35 million means €35 million.

Deputy Helen McEntee: As announced last week, we will be initiating €35 million of new developments. As the Deputy points out we have not spent all of our funding, nor have we been able to spend it. In anticipating that we would not be able to spend it all in one year, we have decided that we will initiate €15 million of the €35 million to begin the development. All €35 million will be in the base next year but the focus this year is on the €50 million to further develop services at Portrane. It will take five years to commit fully to the pledge we gave but there is no sugar-coating here. We are initiating €35 million of developments and, overall, we will be spending €74.7 million more on mental health next year than we are spending this year.

Ambulance Service Provision

16. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if he is satisfied that expenditure of over €19 million in the years 2012-15, inclusive, on private ambulance services represents value for money; if an investigation has happened on the reason some hospitals are outliers in terms of their use and spend on private ambulance services; the action he will take to divert public moneys spent on private ambulance services into resourcing and equipping the national ambulance service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30724/16]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Does the Minister think we are getting good value for money by spending €19 million on private ambulance services, €6.3 million of which was spent in 2015? Does he have any insight into why there is such disparity across the country, with certain hospitals relying very heavily on privatised services while others hardly use them at all?

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The main role of the national ambulance service is to respond to emergency 999 or 112 calls. It also provides an interhospital transfer service through the intermediate care service.

There is a significant requirement for transfers of non-urgent patients for various clinical reasons, including transfers between hospitals, between residential and acute settings and transfers for diagnostic tests at other hospitals. In the context of the continued increase in demand for emergency ambulance services in recent years, there is a need to avail of private ambulance services to secure additional capacity for such patient transfers where required.

To this end, the HSE has put in place arrangements under a framework agreement, which provide for the utilisation of private ambulance providers. Public patient interhospital transports are carried out under this agreement.

Hospitals are permitted to seek patient transport services from other providers recognised by the pre-hospital emergency care council, where those included in the agreement are not in a position to provide the service required.

I am aware that acute hospitals have provided resources to the national ambulance service to facilitate the development of intermediate care services, and I welcome this. However, the reality is that there is an ongoing need for hospitals to have the flexibility to access private ambulance services where necessary and appropriate. The Deputy may wish to note that the HSE is reviewing public and private ambulance service provision. The review is expected to be completed by December 2016 and will answer the Deputy's question on value for money, as well as the question of consistency in deployment and policy around the country.

Since my appointment as Minister for Health I have met with the national ambulance service, NAS, and engaged with it on a broad range of issues including the various reviews of ambulance services which have been undertaken in recent years. I am therefore fully conscious of the need for a multi-annual programme of phased investment in ambulance manpower, vehicles and technology. In that regard, the Deputy can be assured that increased funding will be available to the national ambulance service for 2017. The detail of the improvements to be funded will be provided in the HSE's 2017 national service plan. Over the coming weeks my Department will work closely with its counterparts in the HSE and the national ambulance service to agree priorities in relation to the 2017 allocation.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I asked the Minister specifically whether he thought this represented good value for money and maybe I will get the answer in the next minute. Investing money in private companies will never improve our public health system. The Minister will be aware that national ambulance service personnel balloted for industrial action and that this was only averted on the promise of additional staff being recruited, specifically 461 paramedics. What is the plan for this and what is the budget allocation to ensure it is achieved? The Minister met with members of the Dublin fire brigade, whose members also provide a paramedic and ambulance service. Why do they not use a privatised service? There is no commitment on the Minister's part to the ring-fenced funding they have sought.

Deputy Simon Harris: The HSE is carrying out a policy review and it will be able to advise me on whether these services represent value for money. It is about more than value for money. At the moment the service is essential. We need our public ambulances, our national ambulance service and Dublin fire brigade ambulances to pick up emergency cases and answer the 999 or 112 calls. In 2015, there were 308,000 calls to 999 and 112 numbers so there is a hugely increased demand. The ability of the national ambulance service to meet non-urgent patient care demands varies geographically. We try to make sure ambulances are used in urgent cases so that for non-urgent cases, such as transferring a patient from an acute setting to a residential

setting, we will look at the use of private operators.

The Deputy is right that we need significant investment. An additional sum of €3.5 million will be allocated to the national ambulance service in 2017, the details of which will be set out in the service plan. I have had some very useful meetings with SIPTU on the Dublin fire brigade and the national ambulance service.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I have questioned the Minister a few times and my views on privatisation are well known. For those who do not want to listen, I repeat that we cannot improve the public health service by investing in private companies. It is very disappointing that the Minister says that we can. He also said the intention was to use more of these services, with €6.3 million in 2015 going to private providers outside our public health system to provide services national ambulance service personnel and Dublin fire brigade want to provide. These providers can give value for the money that is spent. The €6.3 million in 2015 shows that the amount going to private companies is going up, when it should be going down.

Deputy Simon Harris: It might upset the Deputy to know that I agree with her on this.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It does not upset me. I just want to see the Minister do something about it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I want to see investment in the public ambulance service and a reduction in reliance on private ambulance services. The Lightfoot report on capacity states that, even if we put in place all the extra ambulances and all the extra paramedics, we will still not have adequate provision in this country because of the geographic dispersal of our population. We need to invest in the national ambulance service and to provide it with more funding. This is why we are investing an extra €3 million in 2017, the details of which will be set out in the HSE service plan, but there are issues involved in supporting this service. Using private ambulances for non-urgent cases has a role to play and I want to keep our national ambulance service on the road to answer the urgent 999 and 112 calls.

The Dublin fire brigade brought up an important matter regarding how it is funded and I am due to receive a report on it, probably at the end of this year. I will have conversations with the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in this regard as Dublin City Council currently funds it.

Health Services Staff

17. **Deputy John Brassil** asked the Minister for Health if he will be implementing in full the decision taken by his immediate predecessor to protect the two titles of physiotherapist and physical therapist in one register; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30970/16]

Deputy John Brassil: I wish to ask the Minister if he will implement, in full, the decision taken by his predecessor, Deputy Varadkar, to protect the two titles of physiotherapist and physical therapist in one register and if he will honour the commitments made by the then Minister in this regard.

Deputy Simon Harris: I appreciate Deputy Brassil asking this question because it provides me with an opportunity to provide once-and-for-all clarity on the misinformation that is being spread by some on this. Not only will I be implementing in full the decisions taken earlier by

my predecessor, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Varadkar, I will be implementing them to the last letter, the last full stop and the last cross on the t. There has been no policy change in this. I intend to go ahead with implementing in full the decision taken by my predecessor that the titles of physiotherapist and physical therapist would be protected under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 and that there would be only one register for the profession.

Last month, the Physiotherapists Registration Board established its register under the Act with effect from 30 September 2016. This ensures the specified title of physiotherapist will be protected for the exclusive use of registrants when the register's two-year transitional period ends in September 2018.

Earlier this year, my predecessor, having consulted relevant parties, concluded that protecting the title of physical therapist under the Act as a variant of the title of physiotherapist would be the best way to eliminate the ongoing risk of title confusion and the consequent risks to public safety. He also decided to allow particular existing users of the title of physical therapist, who are not physiotherapists but who hold qualifications of a certain standard, to continue to use this title. New grandparenting provisions will allow such practitioners to apply, on a once-off basis and for a limited period, to register in the physiotherapists register, confining their practice to musculoskeletal therapies.

Preparation of the necessary legislation to give effect to these decisions is now at an advanced stage. The legislation will involve the making of regulations under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 in tandem with the enactment of necessary amendments to that Act to allow existing qualified title users to continue to use the title. I intend to seek Government approval shortly to include these amendments to the Act in a health (miscellaneous provisions) Bill that is being drafted by the Parliamentary Counsel to the Government.

I want to be clear, there has been no policy change in this regard.

Deputy John Brassil: I welcome the clarification. To be thoroughly clear on the issue, the decision of the previous Minister, Deputy Varadkar, stated that qualifications would be equivalent to an existing user of the title physical therapist in the State holding specific qualifications from the Institute of Physical Therapy and Science, IPTS. This is the position that the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists supported.

This confusion seems to have come from a letter the Minister, Deputy Harris, sent on 29 September where he stated that it is envisaged there may also be a requirement to set an assessment of professional competence to be set by the board for applicants who can demonstrate existing use of the title but who do not have IPTS qualification. That is where the confusion has arisen. If the Minister can clarify that such is not the case, I will be satisfied with his response. We have a reputable and highly qualified group of people from the best universities in this country and they should receive the clarification and respect they deserve.

Deputy Simon Harris: I could not agree more. As Deputy Brassil will be aware, in the rest of the English speaking world the title of physical therapist and physiotherapist are interchangeable and their users are qualified physiotherapists. We have excellent physiotherapists in this country and I want to protect their title.

In Ireland, however, the title is also used by a number of practitioners who are not physiotherapists but who have been providing musculoskeletal therapies in the private sector for

many years. Physiotherapists are trained to provide musculoskeletal, cardiorespiratory and neurological therapies, working in both the public and the private sector.

In January of this year, my predecessor, Deputy Varadkar, announced what I outlined in my previous answer. The Department is preparing the necessary legislation to give effect to these decisions.

The Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists issued a press release on 25 January 2016 which stated that it “today welcomed the decision made by the Minister for Health Leo Varadkar to also protect the title Physical Therapist under section 95(3) of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 which will eliminate the ongoing risk of title confusion between Physiotherapist and Physical Therapist and the consequent risks to public safety”. Presuming that it welcomed it then and given that I am assuring it today on the floor of the Dáil that such policy has not changed, I am sure it will still welcome my policy.

Deputy John Brassil: I am quite sure it will. It is good to have the opportunity to clarify any misconceptions there are. There are myriad courses of varying duration and it would be important to ensure there is a separation and a clear definition of physiotherapist and physical therapist and that they can get on. There is a public safety issue. The public needs to know exactly who is administering treatment and what they are capable of treating.

I very much welcome the Minister’s clarification. I am sure its members are watching but I will let the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists know of his reassurance. I thank the Minister for his response.

Deputy Simon Harris: I sincerely thank Deputy Brassil. This is an important issue for many professionals working throughout the country. It is an issue of public safety, and patient safety as well. We as a country have done a lot of work in recent years in terms of patient safety, the establishment of CORU and ensuring patients know exactly what they are accessing in terms of qualifications when they use a health care professional.

I am due to meet the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists on 27 October and I look forward to providing the society at that meeting with face-to-face clarification, as I have done today in the Dáil. I have also repeated to it in my recent correspondence that my officials continue to remain available to clarify the details of the ongoing implementation of the decisions.

I note that there is a period now of almost two years of transition until September 2018 for practitioners to join the register. I note the concerns of physiotherapists. I would ask them to join the register. They should join the register. To be clear, the legislation will be in place long before that September 2018 date expires.

There has been no policy change. I want to move on and protect this title and I look forward to meeting the society.

Accident and Emergency Departments

18. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that private investor-owned, profit-oriented hospitals, details supplied, are advertising for patients on the radio while poorer, less well-off patients are spending days on trolleys in overcrowded emergency departments; his views on whether the capacity of these private hospital

emergency departments should be used by the State temporarily; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30922/16]

Deputy Alan Kelly: If we have a bad flu epidemic this winter, we will face hell in our emergency departments. Listening to the radio most mornings, it galls me to hear private hospitals advertising - almost rolling out the red carpet - that they are available for anyone who has an emergency while down the road patients are waiting for hours or days on trolleys. Will the Minister consider renting, or in some way finding access for public patients to, these hospitals because in this day and age it is completely unacceptable to have this disparity?

Deputy Simon Harris: The short answer is “Yes”. The Deputy raises an important issue in terms of trying to ensure we have parity of access to our health services for all patients. We have seen in other waiting list areas where we have, through State expenditure, supported our patients accessing health services. My commitment is to beef up the public health service, but we must also acknowledge where there is capacity in other parts.

As the Deputy will be aware, I have no role at present in regulating the activities of private hospitals, although there are a number of issues in the suggestion that I would like to tease out with him. Emergency departments in public hospitals provide comprehensive 24-7 emergency care to all patients regardless of health insurance status. Currently, no emergency department in a private hospital offers a 24-hour service and only a minority provide services at weekends.

My Department is engaging with private hospitals on their potential to contribute to meeting the demand for acute services right across a range of services. There is already significant experience in using the services of such hospitals to assist in addressing lengthy waiting times for scheduled care. An example of such collaboration is that this year €20 million is being allocated to the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, rising to €55 million in 2018. I envisage the NTPF utilising both the public and the private hospitals to reduce waiting lists. I recently met the Private Hospitals Association to review both this experience and the further scope for private hospitals to contribute to urgent health priorities. Our patients waiting for care do not want a big ideological debate. They want to know that we are expending taxpayers’ money to get the access to our health service.

To date this year, the HSE has reported an increase of approximately 5% in emergency department attendances. Despite increased demand, there has been a decrease of almost 5% in numbers of patients waiting on trolleys. That is no comfort to someone waiting on a trolley but we have seen increased demand yet fewer patients on trolleys. In addition, patient experience times have been improving, with 82% of all patients completing their emergency department episode of care within nine hours.

My Department, working with the HSE, has been driving a range of measures to alleviate overcrowding and reduce patient experience times in emergency departments. In September, the HSE published the Winter Initiative Plan 2016–2017, which provides €40 million of additional funding to manage increased demand for health care during the winter. Indeed, I will be visiting Deputy Kelly’s county with him shortly on this matter.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I thank the Minister. He started off the answer fairly well but he went downhill after that. There was no meat in the detail except to agree with my hypothesis that it is wrong that a 90 year old woman who goes into an emergency department such as the Mater hospital could be on a trolley for two to three days while 100 yards down the road an executive

can go into another emergency department and be treated immediately. In the Beacon Hospital, as Mr. Brian Fitzgerald has said, 95% of the time patients will be seen almost immediately by a consultant. The Blackrock Clinic states its highly valuable facility is there for those who “prefer to receive this treatment without delay”. This is not acceptable. We will have an epidemic this winter if a crisis develops because of influenza. We need quick answers, quick decisions and quick engagement with private hospitals to use their capacity immediately. I am aware they do not provide all the services, as the Minister rightly outlined, but they do provide services and they have capacity because they continue to tell us that through advertisements on the radio.

Deputy Simon Harris: That is the closest I will ever get to a compliment from Deputy Kelly. It started off well but I wanted to start off well because I did not want to dismiss the Deputy’s idea. There is merit in scoping out this issue. Discussions would be needed on the type of procedures, how it would work, how we would make sure we do not divert resources from public hospitals, and how we make sure that we get on with solving the pressures in our accident and emergency departments. It is not that we are sitting on our hands doing nothing for this winter, as the Deputy knows. While my Department will have further meetings with the Private Hospitals Association and while we have already begun a dialogue as to how it can contribute more services, taxpayers provide funding and we are already putting in place €40 million for the winter initiative. That involves some of the things the Deputy is talking about regarding an influenza epidemic. It involves more people getting the influenza vaccine, and we should all take this opportunity to remind people to get it. It involves 13 community intervention teams, which can reduce our hospital bed requirements by approximately 73. It involves opening our primary care centres and expanding out-of-hour GP services. It involves, as we have done in Cork, opening acute medical assessment units, AMAUs, at the weekends. The unit in Cork is the first one in the country that is open seven days a week. It involves more home care packages, so it is multifaceted. The private hospitals have a role to play and I am happy to examine that aspect.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Minister should make them play their role. He said it is not an ideological debate but I beg to differ. It is an ideological debate. When we had to provide emergency measures to socialise the debts of banks a number of years ago, we did so. I disagreed with it and voted against it, unlike others in this Chamber.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: It is a good job the Deputy lost that one.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We have an issue here because we have to socialise the dearth of infrastructure when it comes to emergency departments and we need to do it immediately because people are going to die on trolleys if this is not done. Despite all the Minister’s measures, we will not have the immediate capacity that we need in emergency departments if he does not take this proposed measure. There is an issue over what is more appropriate and what is a priority - the common good versus private property interests. The Minister should make a name for himself and gain access to the private hospitals immediately in order to alleviate the terrible situation we could be facing into this winter.

Deputy Simon Harris: Of course the Deputy knows it is more complicated than just making that decision. We have to look at what we would like to do in the private hospitals rather than what would be done.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We could do it in 48 hours a few years ago.

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Deputy Simon Harris: I do not think he is suggesting that we would replicate the way decisions were made about banking debt in regard to health policy.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I agree with the Minister on that.

Deputy Simon Harris: We can all learn collective lessons in that regard. When we are talking about this winter and any winter, we should not only talk about the hospital solution. I will examine the Deputy's idea. There is merit in what he said. We also need to examine why people are turning up in our hospitals given that such patients would not turn up in hospitals in other countries. That is down to a considerable lack of an out-of-hours general practitioner, GP, service. It is also down to AMAUs and having more home care packages.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It will not be solved this winter.

Deputy Simon Harris: We have put €40 million behind it. It is my job to make sure that taxpayers and patients see benefits from that. We cannot just say to the HSE, "here is €40 million", and not expect to see an improvement. I want to drive that improvement but I will engage with the Deputy further on this because he raised an important point.

HSE National Service Plan

19. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health when the 2017 HSE service plan will be published; when the programme for Government commitment on a five-year service plan will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30971/16]

Deputy Billy Kelleher: When will the HSE service plan for 2017 be published? There is a commitment in the confidence and supply arrangement to publish a five-year plan. When will that commitment be honoured? It is important there is a strategic timeframe in place for HSE service plans to be planned not only on an annualised basis, but over a five-year period, which would allow it to assess the demands in terms of demographics, the care to be provided, manpower hours, training and all that goes with that. Can the Minister give a commitment on when that will be published?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for his question. As provided for under the Health Act 2004, as amended, my Department must write to the Health Service Executive to notify it of its allocation for 2017 not later than 21 days after the publication by the Government of the Estimates for Public Services. The legislation further provides that, on receipt of the letter of determination, the HSE has 21 days to prepare and submit its service plan for 2017 for my approval. The Health Act allows me to extend the period provided to the HSE to prepare, adopt and submit its service plan, if required. I understand that preparatory work is already under way within the HSE on the 2017 national service plan. I expect that the letter of determination will issue from my Department within the next week and that the HSE will submit its draft plan for my consideration and approval within the timeframe that I have outlined as set down in the legislation.

Following the submission of the draft national service plan, the legislation provides 21 days for me to examine the proposed plan and where necessary to seek amendment to, or approve, the plan. The national service plan must be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas within 21 days of its approval. Once the service plan is laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas, the HSE

will ensure it is published at the earliest possible time.

The programme for a partnership Government sets out our intention to work with the Oireachtas to sustain annual increases in the health budget. Expenditure will be based on multi-year budgeting supported by a five-year health service plan based on realistic and verifiable projections. The funding increase of €959 million provided to the HSE since this Government came into office, and the enhanced performance and accountability framework introduced by the HSE, provide an important basis for planning multi-annual health expenditure and the operation of the health services within the limits determined by the Oireachtas, which will be key to the sustainability of this approach.

As the Deputy will be aware, the recently established all-party Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Healthcare, in which the Deputy is involved, is undertaking significant work aimed at developing a cross-party consensus on a ten-year vision for the health service with an emphasis on quality of patient care, supported by strong managerial and organisational accountability. It is my view that the HSE should take account of the work of the committee when developing its five-year plan. It is vital that any recommendations are considered in the context of multi-year budgeting and extended service plan timeframes. The Deputy will also be aware that the committee is required to present a final report to the Dáil by 23 January 2017. Five year budgeting is the way we need to go, and a five year service plan is certainly the way we need to go, but I wanted it to be informed by that committee's work.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Minister has acknowledged the Dáil committee is engaged in its deliberations and will publish a detailed analysis of what type of health system we hope we can deliver in the years ahead. In the meantime, he has statistics and figures available to him in terms of demographics, the requirements and needs that will exist in the years ahead not only in the ageing profile, but in the chronic illness profile, and in the care areas of obesity, diabetes, arthritis, asthma and other areas, that require long-term planning to ensure we have the necessary professional competence. This is an issue that consistently causes the health service huge problems. For example, we are now trying to recruit nurses and attract those abroad to return home. We never seem to be able to plan so far ahead that we will know the number of graduates, and the numbers in the types of specialties and sub-specialties, that will be coming out of our colleges. Not knowing the budget on a multi-annual basis is a clear impediment to the hospital services, and the broader HSE services, in trying to deliver care.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree largely with what the Deputy has said, but I must acknowledge a few points. The confidence and supply agreement is not a document that is meant to be introduced in one budget, and I know the Deputy's party recognises that point. It is something for a period of three budgets and is then to be reviewed, so obviously it cannot all be delivered in budget one. There also needs to be an acknowledgement of the timeframe within which the Government came to office and the gap between that and the Estimates period. The challenge was to get one budget in place for the health service, which happens to be the largest health budget ever on a like-by-like basis. That was the priority for this year. I would be rightly criticised if we asked an all-party Oireachtas committee to come up with a consensus for ten years and then I drove on and said here is the plan for the next five years anyway. I genuinely agree with the Deputy, and we see this in other countries, regarding having at least a service plan, if not a line-by-line budget, in terms of where we want to go. It allows our health services to plan and it also gives certainly to patients. It is something towards which I want to work with this House, but I see it very much happening in the context of the publication of the report in January.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: We know of the overcrowding in our emergency departments, to which Deputy Kelly referred. We know there are capacity issues in the public health system. We also know that to do deal with them, we need to invest in community care, primary care, home care packages, home helps and supporting people in the broader community. We do not need an Oireachtas committee strategy to tell us that is the way to go because there is consensus across the House and among service providers, public and private, that this is a requirement. We need to plan on a multi-annual basis in the key areas of the health services to ensure that we are not, on a continual basis in August or September, trying to winter proof our hospitals without having sufficient capacity in terms of home help hours, home care packages and high dependency packages, and equally the professionals to underpin those services. That is something that should be done very quickly by the HSE. It could complement the work of the Oireachtas committee because it could feed into our deliberations if we had access to some of the information and some of the HSE's thinking in terms of manpower requirements and strategic planning in the time ahead.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy would acknowledge that both the HSE and my Department have provided and will provide any and all information needed to the committee. We are very eager to do that, but I would not want him to think that we are in any way bored or waiting for this report. We are driving on with trying to make a number of improvements in the health service. The Deputy will see funding to take on another 1,000 nurses in the budget allocation, which was already announced in the House. He will not only see that but also the rectification of a pay inequality issue relating to the increment for a graduate nurse between 2011 and 2015, which graduate nurses tell me will help with recruitment and retention.

At my first Question Time in this House, Deputy Kelleher said to me that people have been talking about primary care since Rory O'Hanlon was Minister for Health. What will we do? Work is already under way in my Department and the HSE for a new GP contract. Those talks commence this year. The Deputy will see the first ever plan for the national obesity strategy, which is a ticking time bomb for our health service. There is also the work of the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, in terms of implementing A Vision For Change and the youth mental health task force. A new national drugs strategy will be published in January. There is a new accountability framework to hold HSE managers to account and we will bring the HSE budget in on budget for the first time in several years. We are certainly not sitting around waiting but we should align a five-year health service plan with the work of the Committee on the Future of Healthcare.

Other Questions

Home Care Packages Funding

20. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health the funding made available for County Galway and south Mayo for home help packages in 2016; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that as a result of going over budget early in the year to relieve the pressure on the hospital, the service has now been severely curtailed with the result that there are both delayed discharges and delayed admissions to the hospital; the steps that have or will be taken to make sufficient funds available to rectify the situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30393/16]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Has the Minister of State's attention been drawn to the crisis in home care packages in Galway and the fact that the budget was overspent? There is now a severe crisis with delayed discharges and admissions in the hospital. Will the Minister of State address whether her attention has been brought to that and, if so, what she will do about it?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It has been brought to my attention. The original allocation for home care packages and home help hours in 2016 for counties Galway and Mayo is in the region of €27.3 million.

Home care services across the country are being stretched by demands from more people and for more hours in the evenings and at weekends, all of which cost more. Activity in the first quarter of 2016 was ahead of the same period in 2015 as efforts continue to alleviate pressure on the acute hospital system. Without additional funding, this could not have been sustained and the allocations for the rest of the year would have been reduced. The Government has been able to respond to this situation by providing an extra €40 million for home care in 2016, of which community health care organisation area 2, which includes Galway and Mayo received almost €5.5 million.

According to the HSE delayed discharges report, as of 27 September 2016 there were 30 delayed discharges in Galway University Hospital. Of these, five people had submitted applications for home care. On 11 October 2016, the HSE reported that this had reduced to 21 cases with two applications being processed for home care.

As part of the winter initiative €1.8 million funding has been made available to provide six new home care packages each week from October to February at Galway University Hospital. This will provide for 114 new home care packages over the winter period. The hospital is also being provided with an average of 16 transitional care bed approvals per week throughout the course of the year.

I am pleased to say that overall funding for services for older people has increased to €765 million in 2017, which is an increase of €82 million. In a situation where demand continues to grow, as the Deputy rightly pointed out, challenges remain in managing home care budgets. However, the increased resources provide additional flexibility to managers who are responsible for meeting these challenges in the different geographic areas within the resources available.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I did not catch whether the matter has been drawn to the attention of the Minister of State. Has she spoken with the hospital in Galway and with Galway Primary Care? That is a specific question.

As a result of the cutbacks in Galway city, there are patients in the hospital who cannot be discharged and, as a result, patients cannot get in. I refer to one particular case where the patient had to stay in bed and breakfast accommodation. Meetings are taking place on a weekly basis and the role of the public health nurse has been extended in order to reduce the number of home care packages and home help hours patients are getting. I have an urgent message on my phone about a patient in the hospital. I will not go into it because we are in the Dáil Chamber. The patient's recommended package is 21 hours, which gives an indication of the seriousness of the medical condition. The public health nurse's role is to reduce that number. They are now at eight hours and they are negotiating in a situation where 21 hours is recommended.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy again. It is something that has been brought to my attention. I have not been at the hospital yet but I hope to be in Galway in the coming

weeks. It is something I can address at that stage. I am aware there have been exceptionally high patient numbers recorded, particularly in Galway - 224 on 27 September and 233 on 10 October were recorded. Similarly there has been a high number of patients who have required acute admissions. There are about 40 emergency department admissions each day. Many of the patients are elderly and have a variety of conditions, some of which the Deputy has outlined.

I reiterate that €1.8 million has been allocated to Galway University Hospital in the winter initiative to provide the six new home care packages and 114 home care packages over the winter period. In last year's allocation, we spent approximately €330 million, including €20 million in time related savings which accounted for 15,450 home care packages and 10.4 million home help hours. I cannot tell how many hours and home help packages the additional funding for this year will result in. When the service plan is drawn up, each area, including the CHO we are discussing, will receive additional home care packages and home help.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It is difficult to digest the figures the Minister of State has given. Presumably I will get a copy of all those figures. I will bring those figures down to a personal level. I do not like bringing stories into the Dáil Chamber but I have to do it to illustrate. The Minister of State is talking in general figures and increases. Currently in Galway there is a patient who is not unique - I will not say whether the person is male or female - who cannot be discharged because the recommended number of hours cannot be given. How can the Minister of State stand over that, given the cost of keeping someone in hospital, at a conservative estimate, is €1,300 and in a nursing home is €800 to €1,200? Home care is the cheapest, most effective and best way on a human level. How can the Minister of State stand over a situation where somebody cannot be discharged and the public health nurse has been given the terrible role of reducing the number of hours? Is the Minister of State standing over that type of system?

Deputy Helen McEntee: This is a situation we have all found ourselves in throughout the year. The number of people seeking home help hours and care packages at the beginning of this year reached an unprecedented high and without the €40 million in additional funding this year we would possibly see even more cuts than we see across the board now. We will be spending €68.4 million more on home care packages and home help next year than we are this year. I do not like to put it into figures because we are talking about somebody's mother, grandmother, brother or sister. Without that additional funding, we will not be able to provide the additional support. I cannot give the Deputy the exact figures of how much will go to CHO area 2, which covers the hospital the Deputy has asked about. It will be decided in the coming weeks. I will provide the Deputy with the figures I have discussed here on the increases this year and next year.

Ambulance Service Provision

21. **Deputy Eugene Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he envisages significant improvements in ambulance service provision in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30683/16]

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I want to ask the Minister for Health if we will see significant improvements in ambulance service provision in 2017. I am particularly interested in my constituency of Roscommon-Galway. Rural Ireland has to be looked at in a different way in terms of ambulance cover. There is a problem with response times. It is not acceptable. The delivery

of unrealistic timelines for ambulance response in rural areas has not been tackled and patients are being left waiting.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. It is one he has raised with me before. The national ambulance service has undergone a programme of modernisation in recent years and a number of significant service innovations and developments have taken place. These include the establishment of the National Emergency Operations Centre, a state of the art facility, from where all call-taking and ambulance dispatch is now undertaken. The centre also houses the ambulance training college.

We have had substantial investment in new technology and fleet to help improve ambulance service provision. The intermediate care service has been introduced to provide inter-hospital transfers for some lower acuity patients, as we have already discussed, and this is freeing up more emergency ambulances for more urgent calls.

We have also established the emergency aeromedical support service to provide rapid access to appropriate treatment for very high acuity patients in remote rural areas where access by land ambulance may be difficult or take too long.

I am fully conscious of the need for a multi-annual programme of phased investment in ambulance manpower, vehicles and technology. In that regard, I assure Deputy Murphy that increased funding will be available to the national ambulance service for 2017. The detail of the improvements to be funded will be provided in the HSE's 2017 national service plan. Over the coming weeks my Department will work closely with its counterparts in the HSE and the national ambulance service to agree priorities for the 2017 allocation. I will reflect the Deputy's concerns in that regard.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: The Minister addressed this with a deputation he met from Roscommon University Hospital. I thank him for that occasion because there was a great expression of views. The Lightfoot Solutions report, commissioned by the HSE and published in May, stated that the national ambulance service required 750 more staff and 250 more ambulances to ensure delivery of a safe and swift service. Only one in 15 ambulances are reaching patients in need of emergency care within the eight minute target in rural Ireland. That is not acceptable, considering that 60% of patients in rural Ireland live another 45 minutes or more from an accident and emergency department. That is the reality if one lives in central Roscommon and one is trying to get to Galway. The least we can do is ensure that emergencies are dealt with in a timely fashion by the ambulance. Our accident and emergency service has been cut and other accident and emergency services in rural areas have been closed. The one thing we must have, and which we were promised, is a proper ambulance service. That is what is required in the constituency of Roscommon-Galway.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will make two points about the Lightfoot Solutions capacity report. I am familiar with the report as it was the first thing to land on my desk when I was appointed Minister for Health. First, it requires a multi-annual funding plan. Nobody in this House or working in the national ambulance service believes we can implement all of the recommendations in the Lightfoot Solutions report in one year, but what we can and must do is show progress year on year. Recently, I met the unions representing the ambulance personnel and I visited the national ambulance service co-ordination centre to discuss this. In 2017 more funding will be spent on the national ambulance service than in the current year, and this year we spent more on it than we did last year.

There is another point, and the Deputy mentioned it with regard to ambulance response times. The Lightfoot Solutions report is an external report by a UK firm, the first such report on our ambulance service. It stated that even if it were possible to put in place all of the required ambulance personnel and the extra ambulances, and they are not all available even if we had the funding, there would still be an issue in rural Ireland due to how our population is dispersed compared with the UK. According to Lightfoot Solutions, that involves examining the role of community first responders and the role of the air ambulance. We must be honest with each other on these issues. Even when we make the improvements to the ambulance service, these target times will require new ways of being examined.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I was surprised, but delighted, to hear the Minister say there will be increased funding for the national ambulance service. Why has a review of the role of advanced paramedics as part of the national ambulance service in the mid-west been announced? This has been confirmed by the ambulance service. There have also been meetings about it, including one in Tipperary. I presume that this review will mean there will be more advanced paramedics, given the closure by the Fianna Fáil and Green Party Government of the accident and emergency departments in Nenagh and Ennis. The advanced paramedics were in place to deal with the fact that there is a large geographical area which ambulances will not reach in time. I presume there will be more paramedics as a result of this review, rather than fewer. I know what I am talking about here. My parliamentary assistant would have died were it not for the fact that one of these advanced paramedics reached her in time.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising this. I will have to revert to him about the specifics relating to the mid-west, but I thank him for making me aware of the details about the advanced paramedics. I envisage an important role for advanced paramedics. I am providing more funding to the national ambulance service for the coming year than was provided for this year, and more funding was provided this year than was provided last year. However, I will revert directly to the Deputy on the issue.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Deputy Alan Kelly is a woeful man at getting in the back door, even when it is locked. I tabled the question and I should get my two minutes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy is as familiar as I am with the Standing Orders.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I accept that. I learned from being in the Chair that Deputy Alan Kelly is good at this.

I wish to make another point to the Minister. A great deal of money is wasted when a number of ambulances attend accidents on the roads where one ambulance would suffice. I know what happens. An accident occurs and all of the ambulances are sent in the same direction, whether a garda, doctor or nurse arrives at the scene. Twice recently I was the first person to arrive at the scene of an accident. One person was injured and thankfully nobody was killed. One ambulance and one fire service vehicle would have been sufficient. A great deal of time is wasted and many ambulances are taken out of service for a period of time when that happens. My suggestion is that a person in authority could ring the centre to let it know that only one ambulance is needed.

Deputy Simon Harris: The issue the Deputy raises should no longer occur because we have a national emergency control centre. It is a single control centre over two sites, Tallaght

and Ballyshannon. We have nine regional call centres which have been merged into the national centre, to ensure there is greater visibility and that the resources are deployed as effectively as possible. All emergency calls to the national ambulance service are now received and dispatched from the national emergency control centre. We also have the use of technology, such as digital radio, computer aided dispatch and mobile data terminals, to allow the NAS to use resources more effectively on a national basis, rather than in small geographical areas, using a single computer aided dispatch platform. I visited the centre recently to see how the service now has sight of all of the ambulances. If the Deputies are interested in seeing more of this or meeting with the NAS or visiting the centre, I will be happy to arrange it.

Hospital Waiting Lists

22. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which he and his Department have precisely identified the most common causes for long waiting lists in respect of various elective procedures; when he expects these issues to be resolved with the objective of bringing waiting times to the minimum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30613/16]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This is the old chestnut of trying to identify the long waiting lists for various elective procedures, the causes of them, the most common delays experienced and whether it might be possible to put in place remedial measures to deal with them.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising this timely and important question. A key challenge for our health system is to ensure that patients have timely access to health services, in light of significantly increased demand. The overall demand for hospital treatment is increasing year on year in line with a growing and ageing population and the expanded range of treatments thankfully made possible by new technology. The Central Statistics Office, CSO, estimated an increase of almost 1% in the total population between April 2015 and April 2016, with the number of people in older age groups increasing at a faster rate. For example, the number of people over 85 years of age is currently increasing by 3.3% per annum. Thank God for that, but it puts extra pressure on our health service.

Every year there are over 3 million outpatient attendances at our hospitals and in the first half of 2016 there was an increase of over 4% in the number of outpatient attendances compared with the same period last year.

My Department works closely with the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, to implement measures to try to improve waiting times. At my request in August, the HSE developed an action plan to reduce, by year end, the number of patients currently waiting 18 months or more for an inpatient-day case procedure. I expect it to deliver on that plan.

In addition, within current resources, the NTPF is currently implementing an endoscopy initiative which aims to ensure that by year end no patient will be waiting 12 months or more for an endoscopy procedure. We all know the importance of driving down that waiting time, and it has reduced in the last two months in a row.

Furthermore, €7 million of the winter initiative funding is to be utilised to fund a targeted waiting list programme - the Deputy is correct that targeting particular areas is important - to provide treatment for patients waiting for orthopaedic, spinal and scoliosis procedures.

Finally, budget 2017 provides for the treatment of our longest waiting patients. A sum of €20 million is being allocated to the NTPF. It is the first ring-fenced allocation to drive down waiting lists for a number of years. That will increase to €55 million in 2018. That is a total of €75 million for 2017 and 2018 specifically to use all the resources across the health service, public and private, to drive down waiting lists. Planning of this initiative is at an advanced stage by the NTPF, my Department and the HSE. I expect to receive proposals on this shortly, but the target will be those waiting the longest and areas of acuity where there is particular difficulty.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: To what extent have individual and precise areas been examined with a view to identifying what might be done in the short term to alleviate some of the delay problems? For example, delays in waiting to see a consultant is a common cause put forward by patients. Subsequently, the next delay occurs when waiting for the procedure. What are the contributory factors in that regard? Is it due to a shortage of bed space, a shortage of theatre space, a shortage of theatre staff or a combination of all of them? To what extent can they be addressed and dealt with in the short term? These issues have arisen repeatedly for years. Bearing in mind the increase in population, the increasingly ageing population and the increased demand, is it not time to take an initiative that will have a telling, lasting and beneficial effect from the point of view of patients?

Deputy Simon Harris: It is probably all of the above; it is a range of factors. It also comes after a very difficult period for the health service. Thankfully, we are now seeing re-investment in health again. However, there are some interesting points. We have a do-not-attend rate for hospital appointments of approximately 15%, which is much higher than it should be. I am not blaming the patients for this. Perhaps patients are waiting too long and by the time the operation can be carried out it is not needed or circumstances have changed. We must ensure we are reminding patients to turn up for their hospital appointments as well. People are given a scheduled appointment and they might forget to attend, but that costs the health service a great deal. It also wastes a large number of hospital appointments. We must drive that down. A do-not-attend rate of 15% works out at approximately 60,000 missed attendances at our hospitals every year.

5 o'clock

That is an awful lot of hospital appointments and wasted time for doctors. In the circumstances, I plan to introduce a reminder system involving SMS messaging very shortly. That system will be important. We also need clinical verification. We need to ensure that people on waiting lists still need to be there and that they have not been referred to more than one doctor for procedures. We also need to see more procedures being performed in the community, which is the big win. We need to see GPs obtaining access to diagnostics. Many GPs tell me that it is a bugbear for them to be obliged to refer someone to an outpatient appointment to access a test they know they could provide themselves. I will revert with a suggestion I have in a moment.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I will not shock the Minister because I have asked him about this matter on a number of occasions. We have proposed an integrated system of waiting lists. It is a very good system. In fact, the Minister is on record as saying that it has some merits. I have contacted the Minister's office several times and he has said publicly that he would like to meet us to discuss the matter. I am happy to meet him for that purpose. I have contacted his office a few times but, as yet, no arrangement has been made. We need an integrated waiting list system that will address a large number of the issues referred to in Deputy Durkan's question. Could

we have some time allocated to address that and could we know in advance how much of the budget the Minister has allocated to an integrated waiting list system or a similar system? It works in Portugal and could work very well here.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: To what extent have we made comparisons with other jurisdictions that have similar population age profiles with a view to identifying what the obvious causes were? To what extent have any comparisons been made in respect of the primary care centres and their impact on the kind of thing to which the Minister has just referred? This relates to whether primary care centres are intercepting patients requiring procedures that can be performed at such centres, having particular regard to the very sophisticated nature, scale and size of the centres that are now being provided.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am always happy to talk to Deputy Louise O'Reilly. While we have not had a specific meeting on this, we did have a good exchange at the Joint Committee on Health and I believe there is merit in her suggestion. However, there is a missing piece, although it is not the Deputy's fault. It concerns knowing what is on the waiting list. The fact that we do not have a unique health identifier means we do not know how many times a person could appear on a waiting list. The key to unlocking the potential in the Deputy's suggestion is the unique health identifier. I have asked the e-health people in the HSE to look at the Deputy's suggestion in that context. The next step in any reform of waiting lists is putting in place the unique health identifier so we can establish exactly how many times people appear on waiting lists. At present, nobody knows if a patient is on a waiting list multiple times for multiple doctors because the health service lacks the ability to identify individual patients. The unique health identifier is due in 2017 and is a really important element. I will keep in touch with the Deputy about this matter.

In response to Deputy Durkan, the primary care centres are very important but not if we just consider success to be bricks and mortar. It is what happens within the primary care centre that matters, which is why we need a new GP contract. Access to diagnostics is a huge piece. I want to work with the Department of Finance to fulfil a commitment in the programme for Government to see how we deliver diagnostic equipment in the community.

Question No. 23 replied to with Written Answers.

Home Care Packages Funding

24. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health the extra provision that is being put in place for home-care packages and home helps in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30643/16]

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Could the Minister of State make a statement about the extra provision for home-care packages and home-help hours in 2017? In view of the supplementary budget earlier in the year and the additional €491 million allocated for health in budget 2017, we are back to where we were in terms of peak spending on health in 2007. It is important that a clear outline is given to ensure that the money provided to the HSE actually goes where it is supposed to go in terms of home-care packages and home-help hours, as identified by the executive itself in 2015.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank Deputy Kelleher for raising this question. To return to

what Deputy Connolly said, we are not just talking about figures but people's parents, brothers and sisters. I am pleased to say that overall funding for services for older people has increased to €765 million in 2017, which is an increase of €82 million since the HSE's 2016 service plan. As Deputy Kelleher rightly pointed out, the 2016 service plan included €40 million in additional funding, €10 million of which is under the winter initiative and €30 million of which was allocated to home-help hours. This has focused on additional funding for home care in particular and is aimed at allowing people to continue to live in their own homes and at facilitating discharge of older people from acute hospitals.

Since the Government took office, it has significantly increased the funding available for home care. An additional €40 million, which included €10 million as part of the forthcoming winter initiative, already provided in 2016 represented an increase of over 13% in the total funding available and means that the number of home-care packages provided this year will increase from 15,450 to 15,800 and home-help hours from 10.4 million to 10.57 million.

The winter initiative will also provide another €1.4 million for home care this year, which will result in the provision of a further 650 packages by year's end. These will be targeted at ten specific hospitals to allow people to be discharged home quickly. During 2016, the number of home-care packages being provided will have increased by 1,000. As stated previously, we will not know the amount of home-care packages and home-help hours until we finalise the sign off of the service plan this year.

In 2017, €14.6 million of the winter initiative will be to fund home care. There will be another €3.8 million to maintain existing levels of service and €10 million for new developments. Details of the services to be provided with these funds will be set out in the coming weeks.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. We talk about the winter initiative. The winter initiative should be over, above and beyond home-care packages and home-help hours. That should be systemic in terms of delivery of care. We already know that large numbers of people are presenting in the accident and emergency departments of our acute hospitals day in and day out, particularly during the winter period, because people do not have access to community services, out-of-hours GP services, proper home-care packages or sufficient home-help hours. With all of that, we consistently seem to be of the view that when there is a shortage in budgets, we fund the acute side and diminish the capacity of the primary care and community care services, which is why we continually have difficulties in our hospitals. I am concerned that we use the winter initiative to dolly up announcements towards the tail end of the year when there should be systemic investment in this area as part of planning for the future in terms of demographic changes, the changing population and associated challenges.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree with the Deputy. The winter initiative is only one part of this. If we look at the figures and the experts, the number of people over 65 will double in the next 30 years and the number of people in their 80s will quadruple. That does not just happen in winter and we need to be able to provide the resources throughout the year. This is the reason that we have increased and will increase funding by €68.4 million this year alone. It shows that we are committed to increasing on a year-on-year basis. In particular, the focus next year needs to be reducing the community waiting lists because we know that providing a limited or smaller amount of home help or home care for somebody before they fall or end up in hospital and need to be discharged with a more intensive home-care package will save us in the long run and will save that person the trauma of having gone to hospital. The focus next year must be on reducing the community waiting lists, which we have not really been able to tackle in the past few years.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I urge that a strong emphasis be put on that in the context of requesting the HSE service plan. It is stated in the budget in terms of the commitments that are to be made with regard to older people, home-care packages, home-help hours and all the ancillary supports that are required. It is important that when assessing the reply from the HSE in terms of the plan and the analysis carried out by the Department in advance of its publication, strong emphasis should be put on that to at least underpin and put us on a sound footing with regard to the delivery of community care and home care. As we all know, this is the preferred option for the vast majority of people. Otherwise, we are back in here calling for more money for the fair deal scheme and criticising the fact that we have prolonged waits on trolleys in our accident and emergency departments.

Deputy Helen McEntee: As Minister of State with responsibility for older people, my focus this year, particularly in this budget, has been on increasing the number of home-help hours and home-care packages with increased funding. Obviously, the nursing homes support scheme and maintaining that funding have been priorities but I am acutely aware that keeping people in their homes and maintaining people within the community requires an across-the-board approach. The national positive ageing strategy - of which my Department is in charge - will progress into the next stages, which I hope will involve support from all Departments, including the Departments of Finance, Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government and Transport, Tourism and Sport, in respect of a range of areas that will make every environment more suitable for older people to remain within their communities, not just within their homes. As home help comes under my Department, it needs to remain a priority and we must continue to increase investment in those areas. As I said, community will be our main priority.

National Treatment Purchase Fund

25. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Health the funding allocated to the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, in each of the years since its inception; the way the money was spent; the number of surgeries and services that were purchased in each of the years since its inception; the way the funding allocated in budget 2017 to the NTPF will be administered; the surgeries to be prioritised under the NTPF; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30510/16]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This question relates to the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF. I seek a breakdown of the manner in which the money was spent, the specific services and procedures that were procured and how priorities will be decided for the future NTPF, particularly in light of the fact that we have just had a discussion on the manner in which waiting lists operate and the fact it is difficult to have sight of what is needed.

Deputy Simon Harris: The NTPF was established on a statutory basis in 2004. Since its establishment, the NTPF has carried out a range of functions, including arranging the provision of hospital treatment, maintaining and validating waiting list data, and making arrangements in respect of the price for long-term residential care services under the nursing homes support scheme. The NTPF's annual funding allocation was at its highest between 2004 and 2012 when it was involved in arranging the direct provision of hospital treatment to patients.

Since 2012, the NTPF's role has focused on the maintenance, audit and quality assurance of waiting lists, pricing under the nursing homes support scheme, and supporting the HSE in the delivery of a number of waiting list initiatives, most commonly initiatives regarding endoscopy.

During this time, the NTPF has also directly delivered a number of smaller waiting list initiatives such as the endoscopy initiative in 2016. Its annual budget allocation has been aligned with these functions.

I propose to circulate with the Official Report a tabular statement setting out details of the annual budget of the NTPF and the number of patients treated per annum.

The Deputy asked for information on the procedures. I do not have that in my file but I will get the Deputy a detailed note of what was done in each of the years.

The 2017 budget provides for the treatment of the longest waiting patients. The budget allocates €20 million to the NTPF for 2017, rising to €55 million in 2018, giving a total of approximately €77 million for dedicated waiting list initiatives between 2017 and 2018. Planning of this initiative is at an advanced stage by the NTPF, my Department and the HSE. I expect to receive proposals from them very shortly. I will focus on the longest waiters. While the NTPF was very effective in getting treatments done, it did not always focus on the longest waiters. There cannot be self-selection. We must focus on those waiting the longest. We must also focus on particular specialties where there are specific delays, such as orthopaedics and scoliosis which were identified in the winter initiative. We also have waiting problems in ear, nose and throat, ENT, and some general surgery. I have asked for the longest waiting, the areas of acuity and the areas in which we have particular difficulty and I will have plans for it very shortly.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Tabular statement setting out details of the annual budget of the NTPF

Year	Total Patient Numbers	NTPF Care Expenditure (€m)	Revenue Grant from Department of Health (€m)
2016 (Forecast)	3,000	2.0	5.1
2015	1,092	1.0	5.1
2014	1,002	0.5	5.1
2013	1,950	4.8	17.4
2012	2,012	41.9	40.6
2011	19,217	57	85.6
2010	33,639	84	90.1
2009	28,758	90	90.4
2008	36,269	94	104.6
2007	32,638	95	91.7
2006	24,411	75	78.6
2005	18,994	60	64.0
2004	13,627	42	44.0

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister outlined that the NTPF performs a range of functions. It might, but not one of those addresses in any meaningful or long-term way our hospital waiting lists. I would not ask the Minister to take my word for it. Dr. Sara Burke confirmed it to the Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Healthcare when she addressed us. It is counter-intuitive to suggest pumping money into the private sector will magically have an impact on the public sector in any long-term or meaningful way. The Minister said he would target the longest waits and specific procedures. I struggle to understand how it will be done, given the conversation we have just had on the number of unknown individuals on our waiting list and

the fact that we do not necessarily have clear sight of who is waiting for what procedures. If the Minister could give us some details on it, I would appreciate it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I tend to agree that if a waiting list initiative is a flash in the pan or a one year thing it does not have a major impact. It just drives down some waiting lists for some time, after which they pop back up. This is why, in my budget discussions with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, my Department and I were very eager to get continuity of funding for the NTPF. This is why we are announcing not only an allocation for this year but also for next year, which allows the NTPF to gear back up. It also provides a degree of certainty for people working in the system and, most important, for patients. While we can have this ideological debate about people waiting, people are waiting too long and there is some spare capacity in parts of the public hospitals and private hospitals which we must use to try to drive down waiting lists. The Deputy is correct that we do not know everything about waiting lists. There is much we do not know, and we need more data. However, through the HSE liaising with our acute hospitals, we know there are particular difficulties. As a public representative, the Deputy knows it through her clinics that there are difficulties in orthopaedics, scoliosis and ENT cases. We will go with what we know, but we could do with better data.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: We do not know enough for the Minister to say with any confidence that the NTPF will have anything other than a very short-term effect of temporarily massaging the figures. I do not think it will have any real impact. I do not think the Minister does either. Regarding the follow-up that goes with the NTPF and the purchase of private health care, we are having an ideological debate here and I am not shy about saying it. The Minister is wedded to the notion of privatising our health service and I have been elected to try to stop it. When a person is treated in the private sector under the NTPF, the Department pays for the treatment, after which the patient is discharged and goes home. If the patient needs any follow-up care, such as physiotherapy - there is precious little of that and the patient may go onto another waiting list for it, God help them - how is it done? There is no joined-up thinking between the outsourcing and the public service. Will the Minister address it?

Deputy Simon Harris: I have no doubt we are having an ideological debate. I am just saying patients would not thank us for having one, given that they just want to know when they will get their operations. I, too, despite the Deputy's best efforts to paint it otherwise, am a major supporter of the public health service. This is why I have just delivered the largest ever budget it has received in the history of the State. However, I am not shy about saying that when there is capacity in other areas to try to help patients who are waiting too long, we will use the capacity. Follow-up care is part of the discussions between the NTPF, the HSE and my Department. We are discussing exactly what happens after a patient has a procedure and whether it will be in the private hospital or in a public hospital and who does what. It is not all about outsourcing. Some of it is about insourcing. There is spare capacity in parts of our public hospitals. I have seen it as I have visited hospitals. This will be detailed when we publish the NTPF plan shortly.

I believe it will make a difference. However, it must make an appropriate difference and it cannot be used to cherry-pick people. It must be used for acuity and certain specialties where we have a shortage in the public health service, which we will address but cannot address overnight. It must also be used to target those waiting the longest time. There must be a fairness about it.

Hospital Waiting Lists

26. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Health the reason that University Hospital Waterford has experienced an increase of 159% in inpatient and day case waiting lists since May 2013 when it became part of the South-South West Hospitals Group and that it now accounts for more than 40% of the group waiting list compared with 23% in 2013. [30687/16]

Deputy Bobby Aylward: I want to ask the Minister the reason University Hospital Waterford has experienced a 159% increase in inpatient and day case waiting lists since May 2013, when it became part of the South-South West Hospitals Group, to the point where it now accounts for more than 40% of the group waiting list compared with 23% in 2013. This is of major concern. The figures are alarming. Why is it happening and what can be done about it?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for the question. As he probably knows, I am due to visit Waterford hospital shortly and I look forward to discussing the issues with health care professionals in the hospital.

A key challenge for our health system is to ensure patients have timely access to health services in light of increasing demand. This is why we have to put a sustained focus on improving waiting times, especially for those waiting the longest, as I just discussed with Deputy O'Reilly.

The key issue is how long they wait. People appear on waiting lists, but it is when they are on waiting lists for too long that we have a problem. According to the September waiting list data published by the NTPF, 85% of patients on the inpatient or day case waiting list for University Hospital Waterford are waiting less than 15 months. I am not saying it is good enough.

Over the period 2013 to 2015, inpatient activity increased by over 11%, from 20,042 to 22,315. This is a contributing factor. The July HSE management data report points to a 4% increase in inpatient discharges and a 10% increase in day cases compared with the same period in 2015.

My Department works closely with the HSE and the NTPF to implement measures to reduce waiting times. At my request, in August, the HSE developed an action plan to reduce, by year end, the number of patients currently waiting 18 months or more, and then we go on proceeding with the NTPF, trying to drive down waiting lists throughout 2017. The endoscopy waiting list initiative started this year, and the NTPF will work with public hospitals, including University Hospital Waterford, to ensure the hospitals validate their waiting lists, identify patients who will be continue to be treated by the public hospital, and identify those patients who will be offered outsourcing of their procedure to a private hospital.

I should also mention that €7 million of the winter initiative funding is to be utilised to fund a targeted waiting list programme for patients waiting for orthopaedic, spinal and scoliosis procedures.

As part of the winter initiative, an additional five home care packages per week will be funded to support timely discharge from University Hospital Waterford. The hospital will also provide 15 additional surge capacity beds, and two complex delayed discharge cases will be transferred from the hospital by the end of the winter initiative reporting period. I accept the issue and will have it examined by the HSE.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The 2017 budget provides for the treatment of our longest waiting patients and allocates €20 million to the NTPF, rising to €55 million in 2018. Planning of this initiative is at an advanced stage by the NTPF, my Department and the HSE.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: Waterford joined the South-South West Hospitals Group in May 2013 and the waiting list for inpatient day cases since then makes for interesting reading. My statistics do not compare with the Minister's. I will cite mine. Overall, the group's list is up 48% since May 2013, well below the national average of 62%, but Waterford has increased by 159% whereas Cork University Hospital, CUH, has decreased by 27%. In May 2013, Waterford accounted for 23% of the group's waiting list. Now, it accounts for 41%. Waterford also accounts for 60% of those waiting 12 months plus when no one there was waiting for that long in May 2013. Some 4,123 people were waiting on the inpatient day lists in August, an increase of 2,542 or 160.8%, on the 1,581 who were waiting in May 2013. While 1,120 people have been waiting longer than a year for treatment, none was waiting for more than a year in May 2013, and 168 people have been waiting for longer than 18 months. These statistics contradict the Minister's.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for bringing those to my attention. I will have my officials examine them with the HSE. In light of more home care packages, surge capacity beds and the activation of the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, for the Waterford area with dedicated funding to try to drive down waiting lists, though, we should see improvements.

I have been informed by the hospital that there have been significant increases in respect of ophthalmology, gastroenterology and general surgery. As to ophthalmology, we have seen an increase in the age profile, including the frail elderly, who require additional levels of care. The hospital is working with the HSE and the NTPF to source additional capacity for those waiting the longest. The hospital has only one gastroenterologist and is awaiting the appointment of a second consultant in early 2017, which will assist in the management of the endoscopy waiting list. The Deputy will be glad to know that this post is funded and has been submitted to the consultant application advisory committee for approval. University Hospital Waterford, UHW, is working with the NTPF to refer patients to private facilities in an effort to reduce waiting times and the number waiting.

The general surgery waiting list is affected by available theatre and bed capacity due to an overall increase in emergency referrals. The hospital is working with the hospitals group to determine where to find other elective capacity within the group.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: The Minister stated that he was due to visit the hospital shortly. Will he put these figures to its management? Will he ask management to explain such a hike in the numbers? There are 30,992 people awaiting outpatient consultations, an increase of 16% since last December. Why is that? It would be remiss of me not to ask the Minister whether he will meet the consultants in Waterford and the rest of the south east and whether he will take issue with the finding of the Herity report on the second catherization laboratory, a finding that is debated in our part of the country. Even the Minister of State is having problems with it. That catherization laboratory is needed, given the concerns about the provision of a 24-7 service with the current laboratory. This is my priority. Will the Minister undertake to meet these people? There were problems with the risk assessment. The Herity report cited a risk rating of 16 out of 25 whereas the consultants and clinicians referred to a score of 20. The south east's catchment area has a population of approximately 500,000 people, but the Herity report claimed that it was only 220,000. There are contradictions. Will the Minister meet the consultants about this issue

when visiting the hospital?

Deputy Simon Harris: It is not the first time that I have been asked that question.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: It is the first time by me, though.

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes. I stand by the Herity report in full. That is why I published it in full. The report was carried out by an eminent external consultant cardiologist who examined all of these issues and arrived at his conclusions. The Herity report does not suggest that everything is rosy. It certainly suggests that there are areas that need improvement at UHW. It refers to the need for increased resources, staffing and equipment levels. I want to get on with delivering on the three issues outlined in the report in terms of improving the service before examining the situation next year to see what impact those additional resources, staff and equipment have had on the volume of patients using the hospital. This is a sensible approach. I will stand by the clinical advice provided to me by the Herity report, but I am happy to have the matter examined next year.

When I visit hospitals, as I will in Waterford in the coming weeks, of course I talk to health care professionals. I look forward to that opportunity. The Deputy might even come with me on that occasion.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: What about the 24-7 service?

Deputy Simon Harris: I stand by the Herity report and will make the improvements that it suggests.

Occupational Therapy

27. **Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Health the action that is being taken to improve waiting times for occupational therapy, especially for children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30649/16]

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue. As those opposite know, the waiting list is getting larger rather than smaller.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I thank Deputy Murphy O'Mahony for raising this important matter. She has pushed this issue as well as that of speech therapy previously.

The programme for a partnership Government commits to a decisive shift within the health service towards primary care in order to deliver better care close to home in communities across the country. Community-based occupational therapy is a key component of a multidisciplinary primary care service and can play a considerable part in supporting people to remain in their own homes and communities.

Significant additional resources have been invested in primary care and disability services in recent years with a view to enhancing therapy service provision. In particular, additional funding of €20 million was provided in 2013 to strengthen primary care services and to support the recruitment of prioritised front-line posts. As part of this initiative, the HSE recruited more than 260 additional posts for primary care teams, which included 52 occupational therapists.

The HSE has established a national therapy service review group to address therapy waiting times, including those for occupational therapies. This joint primary care and social care project will include a detailed analysis of waiting times and resource deployment across the country. The group's objective is to complete its work by March 2017. It will seek to make the services more responsive to people's needs and to put in place a standardised approach to the delivery of occupational therapy services.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: With respect, the Government could be doing more. Currently, 4,370 people have been waiting for more than a year for their first occupational therapy assessments. This time last year, it was 3,081. Last year's figures were awful, so the increase is worrying. Some 3,500 people aged under 18 years have been waiting for longer than a year. Cork and Kerry combined account for one quarter of the waiting list. Is there a specific reason for this and will the Minister comment on the issue?

Occupational therapy is fundamental in assisting people who have disabilities or had accidents and need help dealing with injuries and is important for their quality of life. Will the Minister of State please do more to reduce the waiting lists for such essential services?

Deputy Finian McGrath: I take the Deputy's points. As of May, there were 1,148 occupational therapist posts across mental health primary care and social care, representing an increase of 53 posts since May 2015 and 81 posts since May 2014. The recruitment of additional occupational therapist posts is ongoing. These figures do not cover section 38 bodies. Additional therapy supports, including speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, are being put in place this year. These will be further augmented by increased funding for the continued implementation of the progressing disability services programme for children and young people with disabilities.

I have prioritised this issue and am sitting down with the HSE to draw up a service plan. Occupational therapy and speech and language therapy are on the list.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. As he draws up those plans with the HSE, I will be watching him. I hope that he sticks to his word.

The Minister of State will agree that so many young people waiting this long for an assessment is worrying. Occupational therapy is vital for children with conditions such as cerebral palsy, dyspraxia, spina bifida, etc. We really are at a crisis point with these waiting lists so I ask the Minister of State to do his best to reduce them.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I reassure the Deputy on these issues. I accept that in the past, particularly in recent years, there has been a lack of investment in these services so we need to build and develop them to ensure that all children receive proper occupational therapy. It is a very important part of developing a forward-looking health service that includes everybody in society.

Speech and Language Therapy Provision

28. **Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Health the action being taken to improve waiting times for speech and language therapy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30648/16]

18 October 2016

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: This question also relates to waiting lists. It is not a coincidence that this second question is again about people who have been waiting for treatment for long periods. What action is being taken to improve waiting times for speech and language therapy and will the Minister of State make a statement on the matter?

An Ceann Comhairle: He is a fast-moving Minister of State.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Quick Draw McGrath.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: He is like a hare.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I am not finished yet. There are a few more coming down the line as well.

The Government recognises that waiting times for speech and language therapy have posed significant difficulties for families and their children.

In 2016, €4 million was provided under the HSE's national service plan to focus specifically on speech and language therapy waiting lists in primary and social care for children up to 18 years of age. This investment represents a long-term increase in speech and language capacity that will be maintained into 2017.

The HSE has also introduced a number of initiatives specifically in the area of speech and language therapy services that are aimed at improving access to these services. I refer to therapists increasing clinic-based work and, whenever possible, providing family-centred interventions in a group.

The additional €4 million in 2016 is enabling the HSE to fill 83 new full-time and recurring posts in primary care to address waiting lists, prioritising the longest-waiting children. To ensure that best use is made of the available funding while recruitment is under way, the HSE is implementing interim measures in 2016 that include temporary appointments and use of agency staff.

The HSE has established a national therapy service review group to address therapy waiting lists, including the speech and language therapies raised by the Deputy. The group will agree a revised national model of speech and language therapy provision that will be standardised across all community health care organisations as regards referral criteria, assessment and treatment arrangements, models of care and standardisation of a prioritisation system for speech and language therapy. It is anticipated that the group will have completed its work by the end of March 2017.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I thank the Minister of State for outlining the future plans but, with respect, more could be done. The numbers waiting for first assessments have increased from 14,047 to 15,545. After the first assessment, people must wait for treatment to kick in. In that regard, we have gone from 8,326 to 8,974. Of the latter, 117 people have been waiting for over two years, which is really not acceptable. Does the Minister of State find it acceptable? Two years is an awful long time in the life of a child. We speak about early intervention, which deals with children between birth and six years, so two years from that is a big fraction of a child's life. Early intervention is very important.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The number of speech and language therapists appointed by the national recruitment service from 1 June 2016 to 5 August 2016 is 92. The appointments

in 2016 to date have resulted in an increase of 86 whole-time speech and language therapists, based on the 2015 HSE employment census. Of the 92 whole-time equivalent speech and language therapists appointed this year, 43 were for social care, 33 were for primary care, seven were for acute services, eight were for mental health services and one was listed as being recruited for another service.

I take the Deputy's point on speech and language therapists and this is a very important issue. One must get in early with speech and language therapy and I accept the Deputy's argument, particularly with regard to young children. This will ensure that young children will develop right through into their teenage years. I am focusing much of my service plan on this but there are other issues relating to residential, day care and respite places. Within that top five, I tell people that speech and language is very important for me. During my Estimates meeting with the Minister, Deputy Harris, I received great support for this issue. I have also received support from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe. We accept the argument that we must do something radical and invest in speech and language therapists. That process has begun and I hope we will continue that work.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Topical Issue Debate

Services for People with Disabilities

Deputy John Brassil: I very much welcome the opportunity to speak to this issue. Since being elected in February, this is probably the single most important issue that has come to my desk. I have a fist full of correspondence from families and residents in St. Mary of the Angels, all of whom are extremely concerned about the future of the facility and the people within it. I have spoken to numbers of patients and some residents and I preface my remarks by saying it is the needs of the residents that are most important here. Within that, their families are very well placed to articulate their needs.

Communication around here has been poor if not very poor. Much of the problem and the issues now coming to the fore are as a result of poor communication. Elected members, including Deputy Michael Healy-Rae and a number of other Deputies and councillors, met representatives of the HSE yesterday, and they accepted that communication was poor. There is a need for clarity and to reassure each and every resident and their families that they will not be moved from this facility without their consent. If the Minister of State can give that assurance to me today, we will go a long way towards taking the heat from this issue and dealing with it in a calm manner that will bring about the best possible results. I accept there is a policy and a move away from congregated settings. I accept it is good for certain people to go into the community. In St. Mary of the Angels we have what I would consider a jewel in the crown and we cannot allow a one size fits all policy to be the cause of closure for it.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Ceann Comhairle and his excellent officials for allowing this debate to be revisited this evening as it is very important. I warmly thank the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, for his support to date on this very important issue. I want the Minister of State to understand exactly what has happened. I appreciate his personal

views on what we will call depopulation of centres like this. Equally, in Kerry we must hear the Minister of State on this. The Minister of State must understand and appreciate that there are certain cases where people are not suitable for integration in the way that others may be. That is a very important point. Yesterday at our very important meeting involving 18 politicians from Kerry and the management of St. Mary of the Angels, we discussed this point. It was clear that there are some people who it may suit and who may be able to be taken out of that setting and put somewhere else but not everybody is suited to that. I want to compliment the management and staff at St. Mary of the Angels for the loving care and kindness they have shown over generations to those who have been resident in the community. Remember, this was a family farm originally. The mother and father had one daughter who became a nun. They kindly gave the beautiful farm free of charge so that St. Mary of the Angels could be developed. Local people in County Kerry, relatives of the residents, fund raised and made the centre into what it is today. It is a centre of excellence.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to conclude.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I was cut short on my time. I lost a minute -----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy lost half a minute.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I just want to make the point that three or four years ago the centre stopped accepting new people. The worry I have now is that if a young couple in County Kerry have a child with special needs who needs assistance, there is no acceptance into St. Mary of the Angels for that child. Is it true to say that it is closing?

An Ceann Comhairle: Let us get the answer from the Minister of State. The Deputy got his half a minute back.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Obviously, it is going to change. I appreciate the Minister of State's support and his genuine interest. I know that he has an interest in St. Mary of the Angels.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I thank Deputies John Brassil and Michael Healy-Rae, who have a particular interest in this issue. I have already spoken to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae about this and I recognise that both Deputies are prioritising people with disabilities in their constituency.

I will now go into some detail on the matter and answer the questions posed by the Deputies. In June 2011, a report entitled Time to Move on from Congregated Settings was published by the HSE. That report identified that in 2008 approximately 4,000 individuals with disabilities lived in congregated type settings. These are places where ten or more people reside in a single living unit or are campus based. The report found that notwithstanding the commitment and initiative of dedicated staff and management, there were a significant number of people still experiencing institutional living conditions where they lacked basic privacy and dignity and lived their lives apart from any community and family.

Currently, 2,725 people live in congregated settings and our objective is to reduce this figure by one third by 2021 and ultimately to eliminate all congregated settings. At a national level, work has been ongoing to support the implementation of this policy. I am pleased to note that a significant amount of progress has been made to date, including the establishment of a multi-stakeholder working group chaired by Inclusion Ireland. A toolkit for transitional plans has been developed to support service providers in the development of project transition plans for

individuals moving to more socially inclusive settings. Project action plans for priority sites have been developed to guide and support these sites to develop their action plans for transitioning individuals from congregated settings. A communication framework has been developed and disseminated which includes a key messages document and a stakeholder mapping tool to support providers to engage all stakeholders in a targeted manner and ensure communications are timely and appropriate. However, from what I have heard today, that has not happened. All of these communication documents, action plan templates, toolkits and an information bulletin can be viewed on the HSE's website. I would encourage the Deputies to review these documents as they give a comprehensive overview of the level of preparation that goes into moving people out of congregated settings.

The St. John of God service in Kerry has been identified as one of the priority sites for decongregation. The HSE is committed to working with St. John of God Services to transition 17 residents who are in ward style accommodation from their current unsuitable accommodation on campus to more appropriate settings in the local community. The comprehensive transition plans I have described will ensure that there is extensive engagement with the people themselves, their families, carers and advocates, as well as the service provider, to ensure successful and sustainable transitions into the community.

In total, 78 people currently residing on the Beaufort campus will ultimately be supported over a number of years to move to more suitable accommodation in the community, depending on available funding and the ability to source suitable houses in the community. HSE representatives met public representatives from Kerry yesterday and were clear in stating that St. Mary of the Angels will close over time. I believe that was said at the meeting. I would particularly like to assure any concerned residents, family members and my colleagues in the House that the process of moving a person with disabilities out of a congregated setting is not something that happens overnight. The process of moving people to more suitable accommodation in the community will take place over a number of years and will be done in full consultation with all residents, advocates and their families.

Deputy John Brassil: Obviously the Minister of State's reply greatly concerns me. What he is saying is that St. Mary of the Angels will close and that the process for moving people into suitable accommodation will take place over a number of years and will be done in full consultation with residents, advocates and their families. What about the residents, advocates and their families who do not want to move? What about those people who are happy and have been so as long as they have been living there, in this idyllic setting and who have a wonderful life in a wonderful community? What about those people? They have been lobbying us. They are in existence; they are real people but we are now saying to them that their future is uncertain. That is not the right position to take. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work in these particular circumstances.

I ask the Minister of State to ensure that a detailed, individual future care plan for each of the 78 residents be drawn up, in consultation with the individuals and their families. Once that is done, I ask the Minister of State to revert to us and let us know exactly when and how the future of these people will be cared for. There is a future for St. Mary of the Angels, Beaufort. The Minister of State must believe me that there is a future for that centre.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The trouble with the Minister of State's response is that it makes no allowance whatsoever for the resident who is unable to relocate. I am pleading with the Minister of State on behalf of parents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters of the people who

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are resident in this wonderful location. One of the most upsetting things that the Minister of State has said is that he wants to take the residents out of that place, that home and integrate them into the community but the community they are already in is a community in itself. It is a wonderful, beautiful setting where an awful lot, if not the majority, of the residents are happy, safe and content and they want to be left there. There are people in St. Mary of the Angels today who would be unable to integrate into any other place and it would be unacceptable to their families to try to do so. They are safe, happy and content and are getting excellent care from excellent care providers.

I urge the Minister of State to think of my late father, who always said, "If it's not broken, don't try to fix it." St. Mary of the Angels is not broken. I urge the Minister of State not to try to fix it because it is not the proper thing to do.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State has two minutes to respond.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I accept the concerns of my two colleagues. However, I have a plan to ensure that we deal with these particular issues. I have visited centres for people with disabilities where residents told me that they wanted to get out of congregated settings. I visited a lot of centres over the summer.

In the service to which the Deputies refer there are 17 residents in ward style accommodation which, in my view, is not suitable for any person. Of course I totally accept the important point that not all people residing at St. Mary of the Angels in Beaufort will be suitable for transitioning to community living. I am giving a commitment today that the HSE and St. John of God Services will liaise with the residents, the family members, the advocates and the staff members to ensure these issues are addressed. The HSE wishes to assure all residents and families that any proposed changes at St. John of God adult services will be fully discussed and that no changes will proceed until this consultation process has been completed. I am saying we will listen to the concerns of the families.

Of course I accept that one size does not fit all. I am trying to change the services for younger and, in this case, older adults with intellectual disabilities to suit people with disabilities. We have managed to get nearly 2,000 people out of congregated settings. There has been a fantastic response. As I listen to the Deputies, I am aware that the transition might need to be managed in other ways for certain people because of their medical and physical needs or particular issues. I assure them that this is not going to happen tomorrow morning or against anybody's will. I will not force anybody into a situation he or she does not want to be in.

Hospital Accommodation Provision

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I acknowledge the fantastic care that is provided at all the district hospitals in Cork South-West. The background to this debate is that in recent years, even as the good care I have mentioned has been acknowledged, one hospital or another has always been in danger of closing. It seems to be Clonakilty Community Hospital's turn this time. I am raising this matter in the House so that this issue can be put to bed. Will the Minister of State address concerns about beds being closed at the hospital? Clonakilty Community Hospital is a public unit with 137 beds spread over three blocks. I am advised that block 1 of the facility may be closed shortly and that the first floor of the block has already been converted into office space. I am further advised that just 129 of the 137 beds available are currently in

service and that 113 of the beds that are in use are earmarked for long-term use. In other words, they are for patients availing of the fair deal scheme. The other 16 beds are used as community support or respite care beds. There are no obvious issues with access to fair deal beds at present. The problem arises when a patient who does not need to access an acute hospital facility is denied a bed in a community hospital simply because only long-term beds are available.

I suggest that the current funding model needs to be addressed. Community hospitals are not in a position to facilitate additional community support or respite beds because they are not getting funding for such services. They are being asked to carry the ultimate cost of providing these beds, but this is not feasible. This is essentially what is causing the so-called “bed-blocking” in our main hospitals. Patients are entitled to specified amounts of respite care over the course of a year. Patients or their families may pay for further respite care. Patients or their families are often delighted to avail of this facility, only to be told they cannot be accommodated due to bed shortages. As I have pointed out, bed shortages are not necessarily an issue in this case. The matter is further complicated by HIQA standards, which have led to reductions in bed and ward numbers to comply with spacing regulations. While Clonakilty Community Hospital can work with these bed reductions in the best interests of the comfort of its patients, the hospital authorities need to be reassured that further beds will not be lost and that a funding model will be put in place to enable the number of beds in the facility to be maximised.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank the Deputy for raising the important issue of Clonakilty Community Hospital. The HSE is responsible for the delivery of health and personal social services, including those at facilities like Clonakilty Community Hospital. The hospital, which was built in the 1840s, is situated on the outskirts of Clonakilty in west Cork. In addition to providing long-term care to older people, the hospital historically provided residential care to people whose primary needs arose from social difficulties. The hospital is registered with HIQA for 129 beds for the provision of continuing care, respite care, palliative care and community support to older people in west Cork. Services available to residents include physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy. Activities are arranged daily by a mixture of volunteers and paid therapists. Approximately 157 whole-time equivalent staff are based in the hospital. The HSE is in the process of recruiting an additional two health care assistants. This will be completed shortly.

I assure Deputy Murphy O’Mahony that there have been no bed closures and there are no plans to close beds at Clonakilty. That is good news for the Deputy. There has been reduced demand for continuing care beds, however, with up to 20 such beds remaining vacant over the past 12 months. This can be partly attributed to the opening of a number of new private nursing homes in the west Cork area. Over recent winters, a number of empty beds have been made available by social care to acute services to facilitate early discharges during times of peak demand. The beds provided by public nursing homes like Clonakilty Community Hospital are an essential part of our health care infrastructure. Without those beds, many older people would not have access to the care they need. While demand has reduced in recent times at Clonakilty, these beds will be very much needed over the coming years as the number of older people increases in line with demographic trends. Therefore, it is essential that they are put on a sustainable footing and that the fabric of the buildings from which they operate is modernised and improved.

The €385 million capital programme that was announced earlier this year is one of the most comprehensive programmes of investment in public nursing home facilities undertaken by the State. It provides for the replacement and refurbishment of 90 public nursing homes across the

country over the next five years. Significant work was undertaken by the HSE to determine the most appropriate scheduling of projects over the five-year period from 2016 to 2021 within the phased provision of funding to achieve compliance and registration with HIQA. The good news for Deputy Murphy O'Mahony is that the plan includes refurbishment works at Clonakilty Community Hospital. It is anticipated that construction works will begin in 2019. They are scheduled to be completed by 2020. When these works are completed, they will ensure the hospital's long and proud tradition will continue well into the future.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I thank the Minister of State for giving me a lesson on the geography and history of Clonakilty Community Hospital. I am very aware of its beautiful location and, as I said earlier, the great work carried out by its staff. I welcome the Minister of State's commitment that there will be no bed closures at the hospital. However, I wholeheartedly disagree with his suggestion that there "has been reduced demand" for beds at the hospital. People have come to my clinic because their relatives have been told they are on a list that is quite long. Maybe I will talk to the Minister of State about that some other time.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Okay.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I need proof of this reduced demand, to be honest. I can show the Minister of State evidence to the contrary. I welcome the news we have heard regarding construction works at Clonakilty Community Hospital. I hope I will still be here to make sure that happens.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I will follow up on what the Deputy has said about particular issues and any other issues in respect of which I can be helpful. I assure her I have been told it is absolutely the case that there will be no bed closures and that there are no plans to close any beds at Clonakilty Community Hospital. I recognise the fantastic work the hospital has done in providing services to the local area. I will mention some of the details. The hospital is registered as having 129 beds for the provision of palliative care and community support to older people in west Cork. Its budget is €7.9 million and its current number of beds is 129. It has 118 residential beds, including 14 dementia-specific beds, and 11 respite and convalescent beds. The hospital's staffing level is 157, which is broken down as follows: 66 nursing staff; 71 health care assistants; 13.95 housekeeping and catering staff; three clerical support staff; and two medical officers.

6 o'clock

Recruitment is currently in process for two additional health care assistants. This will be completed shortly.

I assure the Deputy that we are aware of the need to ensure that projects such as the Clonakilty district hospital are supported. We will do our best. I will revert to the Deputy on the issues she raised earlier.

Brexit Issues

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Who is taking this matter?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Doyle.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Go raibh maith agat. I do not exaggerate when I say that the Irish mushroom industry is in peril. Of the 60 growers in operation at the time of the Brexit referendum in Britain and Northern Ireland, at least six have since ceased production. With 80% of Irish mushrooms destined for the British market, the decline in the value of sterling *vis-à-vis* the euro of almost 20% since the referendum is having a devastating effect on producers and processors in Ireland, not least in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, where there is a significant concentration of producers and one of the industry's leading players, Monaghan Mushrooms.

With some 3,500 people employed by growers throughout the country - representing a critical mass of employees across rural Ireland - the prospect of the closure of further mushroom producers' businesses because of the impossible situation in which they find themselves, not least as a result of fixed forward contracts set in sterling and the ever-hungry eyes of producers in eastern Europe eager to carve out an even greater share of the British market, would spell economic calamity for these producers and their employees, families, communities and local economies, and for Ireland's export earnings.

The export value of Ireland's mushroom sector is of the order of €180 million per annum. This is a major issue and we are facing a very serious crisis. In the absence of key measures in the 2017 budget, I ask the Minister of State and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, to spell out what they and the Government are willing to do to help the mushroom industry to survive this crisis. Having no increase in diesel excise duty - welcome though it was - will not cut it. What rescue measures is the Minister proposing? It is now that such measures are needed. Dilly-dallying will lead to further collapses and job losses and an ever greater cost on the Exchequer than any measure or measures might impose.

I appeal to the Minister of State, Deputy Doyle, to outline the consideration that has been given to possible schemes within EU state-aid rules. Some clever footwork is required. What is the potential of reintroducing the previous employment subsidy scheme? What is the position of this country, as an EU member state, sharing a border with a jurisdiction that is exiting the EU? Will our gallant allies in Europe step up to the plate to assist our vulnerable agrifood sector in surviving the turmoil that the British exiteers have inflicted on our economy, employment levels and opportunities? Will the Minister assure the Irish mushroom industry, which is the most vulnerable sector of the Irish food export business, that - in its hour of need - he and this Government will not be found wanting?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): I thank Deputy Ó Caoláin for raising this very important issue. It is particularly relevant to the area from which he comes. Let me reassure him that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, and I are acutely aware of the challenges the mushroom sector is experiencing in the aftermath of the UK referendum decision to exit the European Union and in light of recent significant currency fluctuations. I am focused on working closely with the industry - I can provide details on that later - to address these difficulties in the months and year ahead.

We are monitoring the situation regarding sterling volatility closely and have set up a dedicated unit to consider the impact of Brexit within the Department. In addition, Bord Bia is working closely with the sector on market intelligence, UK consumer research and quality assurance. It recently held a currency and negotiation workshop specifically targeted at the sector, which I understand was very well received by the mushroom industry. In the coming weeks, the

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Minister, Deputy Creed, and the CEO of Bord Bia will be meeting executives from all the UK multiple retailers to further highlight the difficulties producers are facing. The Minister has also arranged a meeting with his UK counterpart to discuss the impact the UK decision is already having on the agriculture and food sector in Ireland.

I am also keenly aware of the ongoing impact that the devaluation of sterling is having directly on the profit margins of mushroom producers and growers. The mushroom sector, like many other exporting sectors is particularly at risk because of the high dependency on the UK market. This week we arranged for the payment of just under €1.57 million to one of the mushroom producer organisations under the EU producer organisation scheme.

Bord Bia, in response to the difficulties being experienced by exporters, recently launched its marketing intensification programme. This programme aims to provide targeted marketing supports to companies with high dependency on UK markets. Grant supports will be prioritised to assist companies in strengthening their position in that market and in their efforts at market diversification. The marketing intensification programme is aimed at Irish food and drink producers that operate with a turnover of between €1 million and €30 million and that export at least 20% of their turnover to the UK. The total fund is €500,000, however, eligibility does not confer an automatic entitlement to aid. The selection process is competitive with between 20 and 30 companies expected to be supported. Eligible activities are those undertaken between the date of receipt of the application by Bord Bia and 30 April 2017. The closing date for receipt of applications for the marketing intensification programme is Friday, 28 October 2016.

As part of budget 2017, we have also secured an additional €700,000 in funding for capital investment in the commercial horticulture sector. This will increase the budget for this scheme to €5 million in 2017. In addition, the horticulture sector will have access to the €150 million low interest cashflow support loan fund announced in the Budget Statement last Tuesday, providing access to highly flexible loans for up to six years for amounts up to €150,000 at an interest rate of 2.95%, with an option of interest-only payments for three years. Through Bord Bia, we are also investing in a market development programme that will assist companies dealing with currency and trading difficulties.

Let me draw the Deputy's attention to the ongoing support being provided to the industry through national and EU schemes operated by my Department. Under the National Development Plan 2007 to 2013, the Department implemented the scheme of investment aid for development of the commercial horticulture sector. During this period, the Department paid just over €4 million in grants to mushroom growers, which supported €10.1 million in investment. To ensure ongoing support for the sector, the Department extended, under EU sanction, the scheme of investment aid for the development of the commercial horticulture sector to run until the end of December 2019. In 2014 and 2015, a total of €1.635 million grant aid was paid to mushroom growers. The further grant aid paid supported €4.1 million in investment by these growers. Under the 2016 scheme of investment aid for the development of the commercial horticulture sector, the Department issued approvals in the amount of €1.33 million to growers in the mushroom sector, supporting €3.3 million in investment. I will provide a commitment to ensure that payments under this scheme are paid as early as possible, so as to try to alleviate any financial pressure that growers are facing.

The EU producer organisation scheme is a vital support for mushroom growers with 65% of Irish growers in a producer organisation at present. This scheme provides an important mechanism for growers to achieve greater bargaining power in the marketplace by becoming part of

a larger supply base, which is very important in the current environment. Between 2005 and 2016, a total of €41.3 million was paid to the mushroom producer organisations as part of that EU producer organisation, PO, scheme.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Minister of State indicated that the Department has set up a dedicated unit to consider the impact of Brexit. That is important but the situation we are talking about is not post the moving of Article 50 by the British Prime Minister, the reality of the crisis facing the mushroom industry is immediate. The producers cannot wait until after March 2017. We can already measure the deleterious impact on the mushroom sector, as I have shown in the facts I shared with the Minister of State earlier.

The Minister of State also indicated that the Minister has arranged a meeting with his British counterpart to discuss the impact of the British decision on the agriculture and food sector. When will that meeting take place? We need to see a demonstration of the realisation of urgency.

While I have noted the measures in budget 2017, it is important to realise that the moneys paid in grants to mushroom growers over the period of the National Development Plan 2007 to 2013 were aids to investments undertaken by the growers. They made significant investments and are heavily indebted as a consequence. The grant supports were all very fine and good at the time but we are living in very different circumstances. This is a grave situation and it is imperative that we do not just offer some of the historical facts about supports presented. We need to hear about real and substantive measures that will help to secure the 35,000 jobs involved in the sector, many of which are concentrated in critical areas throughout the country and not least in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. This is very important and I ask the Minister of State to recognise and take on board the points I have raised. I appeal to him with all the strength I can command on behalf of those so affected to ensure that there are real measures to meet this crisis, to save this industry and to ensure that there is a future for people in traditional employment areas in rural Ireland.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: The Minister is in London today and was scheduled to meet his counterpart but she cancelled. I think another meeting is scheduled for two weeks' time. I fully appreciate the gravity of this issue. I met the chief executive officer, CEO, of Monaghan Mushrooms, probably the primary producer in the country, last week. We worked through some suggestions and no one knows the industry better than the man in question.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Ronnie Wilson.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: Yes, indeed. The Deputy is correct in saying that the PO scheme is for investment but the structure of the PO is such that the money involved might be accessed, along with some other measures that are incentives for lean producing with Enterprise Ireland. Officials from the Department are meeting representatives from Enterprise Ireland to see what might be available from its pot of incentives. We are talking about the impact of Brexit now on much of the agrifood sector, not post the triggering of Article 50. We are concentrating profoundly on the mushroom sector and some other sectors all of whose exports are into the sterling market which is probably 80% of what is produced. We appreciate that. We are trying to work out a resolution.

The low-interest finance has generated some interest as working capital with flexibility. This will only plug the dike for a little while. There is a choice to be made by customers in the

UK - do they want this fresh product from Ireland for which there is no question about standards, quality and reliability or do they want to push it over the brink? Prices are fixed generally in January but, unfortunately, do not kick in until the end of March or early April. We can do nothing about that without their goodwill. That is the importance of going not just to the Minister but over the next few months to the CEOs of all the producers to reiterate how precarious the situation is. We are doing everything we can, I assure the Deputy. It is not something that is particularly strong in my own area but I can appreciate its value in bordering counties and in the Deputy's area.

Flood Prevention Measures

Deputy Carol Nolan: I am sure that everyone in the House is very familiar with the damage to businesses, homes and farmland caused along the Shannon last winter. We need to ensure that this never happens again. In my county, Offaly, we witnessed serious flooding in areas such as Banagher, Shannonbridge and Shannon Harbour. In the catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, report Banagher is listed as not being a significant flood risk and Shannon Harbour is considered a low risk. I saw the flooding in those areas and the damage done. Will the Minister of State ensure that the inaccuracies in the CFRAM report are corrected as soon as possible? We do not want false information going out and that report is not correct.

People all across the midlands are absolutely terrified of the prospect of further floods this year. They want to know what action has been taken to alleviate the risk to their homes, property and land. Many people were particularly concerned at revelations contained in a report published in April to the effect that there are serious issues surrounding the national programme for flood risk assessment. The report in question highlighted the fact that the steering group did not meet for a four-year period.

In January of this year, the European Investment Bank, EIB, announced a €200 million loan scheme that is being made available through the Office of Public Works. I welcome this scheme and the fact that 29 flood defence projects have been approved. However, with ten of the 29 projects approved for Cork, five for Dublin and a large proportion of the rest for other urban areas, there is very real concern that there has been a failure to direct funding towards neglected rural areas, such as Shannon Harbour, Shannonbridge and Banagher. Areas surrounding the River Shannon have been completely ignored in the allocation of EIB loan funds.

In May, Matt McCarthy, Sinn Féin Member of the European Parliament, MEP, met Jonathan Taylor, vice president of the EIB. Mr. Taylor clearly indicated that the EIB is open for business and willing to offer loans to additional Irish projects. It seems that the Government is dragging its feet on this issue once again. We have already witnessed a significant delay in the preparation of the Shannon flood risk management plan. Many fear that actions and decisions on foot of this plan are not realistically expected before the winter months.

Sinn Féin has been constructive on this issue. We have met with householders, farmers and business owners and members of the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, all along the Shannon and heard at first hand how it affected so many people's lives. We heard of their concerns and fears. We have put forward a Bill that would establish an agency with overall responsibility for the assessment of flood risk and flood defences along the River Shannon, for co-ordinating the work of key stakeholders in the region and for the preparation of a strategic plan for management of the river. Can the Minister advise of the measures that are in place to protect homes, businesses

and farmlands along the River Shannon from flooding this winter?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I want to start by reassuring communities living along the River Shannon that the Government is doing everything it can to prevent flooding along the Shannon this winter.

The core strategy for addressing the significant flood risks along the River Shannon is the Office of Public Works, OPW, catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme. Of the 300 areas for further assessment, AFAs, nationwide, there are 66 along the Shannon river basin district that have been assessed within the Shannon CFRAM study.

Draft flood risk management plans have been made available for public consultation, and the consultation period for the Shannon CFRAM study, which included a series of local public consultation events, closed on 23 September. The flood risk management plans will now be finalised, taking on board the comments received, and will include a prioritised list of feasible measures, both structural and non-structural, to address flood risk in an environmentally sustainable and cost-effective manner.

Building on past investment, the Government has demonstrated its support of flood relief by extending its commitment to provide €430 million to flood risk management between 2016 and 2021. The annual allocation for flood defence works will more than double, from €45 million to €100 million per annum. The OPW estimates that up to €1.2 billion in benefit has been derived from that investment to date in terms of 12,000 properties protected and flood damages and losses avoided. That is a major achievement, and it is the Government's intention to continue to build on this major achievement and to prioritise investment in flood defence schemes.

Athlone experienced severe flooding last winter, and the situation could have been much worse but for the enormous efforts made by the local authority emergency response team assisted by volunteers from the local community. I am determined that residents and business owners in Athlone will not have to go through that experience again. It has been decided, therefore, to advance flood relief works for the town. The OPW and Westmeath County Council are working together on the development of a flood relief scheme for the town, and the OPW has agreed to fund the development and implementation of a viable scheme for Athlone based on the options identified in CFRAM. The works are estimated to cost approximately €6 million and are planned to commence in 2017. When completed, they will give protection to approximately 250 homes. Other major schemes along the Shannon are already under design and construction, including at Foynes and King's Island in Limerick and at Ennis Lower and Ennis South.

The OPW can provide funding to local authorities under the minor flood mitigation works and coastal protection scheme to undertake minor works to address localised flooding and coastal protection problems within their administrative areas. So far this year, 38 additional projects at a cost of €1.7 million along the Shannon have been approved by my office. These will provide important localised flood protection and mitigation.

Last winter, the Government took decisive action to support the existing plans in place to address flooding on the Shannon and established the Shannon flood risk State agency co-ordination working group to enhance ongoing co-operation across all the State agencies involved with the River Shannon, including ESB, Waterways Ireland, Bord na Móna, Inland Fisheries Ireland, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the OPW and the relevant local authorities.

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Its extensive work programme, published on the OPW website, highlights the current proactive and co-ordinated approach by all State agencies to flood risk management in the Shannon catchment. The working group is building on the existing work and commitment of all the State agencies involved in flood risk. The group is also focused on ensuring the best possible level of co-ordination between all statutory bodies involved in flood management on the Shannon, and is solutions focused and designed to deliver the highest level of efficiencies to add value to the CFRAM programme.

The group held three open days on its work programme to discuss the role and work of the group with the public, and met the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, to discuss and explore the approach being adopted to address its issues of concern. No later than this morning, the group met and discussed the benefits of possible measures to managing flood risk for the winter of 2016-2017.

I am pleased to announce that a decision has been taken by the group to trial the lowering of the lake levels in Lough Allen to help mitigate potential flood risk for this winter. From the analysis completed, this may have a positive impact on the extent of certain flood events that might occur during the winter. This is to be achieved through protocols being agreed between the OPW, the ESB and Waterways Ireland, with input from the relevant local authorities. The modelling and analysis completed shows that this action can only be done in specified conditions to avoid causing or exacerbating flooding downstream, and this trial will need to be carefully monitored. While the impact of this initiative might be small, it demonstrates the continued commitment of the agencies to work in a co-ordinated way to explore all measures that may benefit the communities along the River Shannon.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Seán Canney: I have just one more paragraph to read. The group has today also agreed to evaluate the benefits from any short and medium-term programme of localised dredging and any future piloting to remove some pinch points along the Shannon. The group will discuss this at its next meeting which will be held in November.

I chair an interdepartmental flood policy co-ordination group, and I will shortly bring a report to Government from that group. The group is developing a range of policy initiatives to underpin the overall investment by the OPW in managing national flood risk.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Seán Canney: It is also considering a number of other prevention and mitigation measures for providing flood relief which may include schemes for individual property protection and voluntary home and farmyard relocation.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Thank you very much, Minister.

Deputy Seán Canney: Local authorities are designated as the lead agency for responding to severe weather events, including flooding. The emergency response plans, which were effective during the flood events last winter, will be reviewed to ensure a rapid and effective response.

I assure the House that the Government will continue to ensure measures to deal effectively with flooding through the development of the proactive CFRAM programme and plans and the

continued significant investment in flood defence capital schemes will receive the highest priority from the Government. I thank the Acting Chairman for his patience.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I hope time will be added on to allow me give a response. I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response but I find it unsatisfactory. There can be no excuse for the delay in the drafting of a flood risk management plan for the Shannon region. I do not understand how the steering group on this issue failed to meet for a four-year period. The Government's response on this matter has been completely inadequate, and many people would agree with me on that. There are many frustrated people affected, and we need to work on this and move it along as quickly as possible.

Will the Minister of State advise me if the Government will consider the proposal put forward in the Bill published by Sinn Féin with respect to the establishment of a co-ordinated agency to deal with management of the River Shannon? There needs to be one agency involved because the current position is a mess and is not workable. As the Minister of State knows, the River Shannon touches 18 counties, and an effective co-ordinated response to flooding issues is almost impossible without an over-arching statutory agency. Will the Minister of State assure me if weirs along the River Shannon, particularly those at Ardnacrusha in Limerick and Meelick in County Galway, could be lowered or opened? He mentioned a weir in his response, but I would like to see those weirs lowered or opened as well.

I met representatives of the IFA as recently as last week with Matt Carthy MEP and they stressed that in addition to flood defences, we need a maintenance plan. We need to look at certain points along the River Shannon. In County Offaly, I urge the Minister of State to look at Banagher, Shannon Harbour and Shannonbridge. The IFA representatives stressed those points as well.

Will the Minister of State consider opening the weirs? It would increase the capacity of the River Shannon to hold more flood water should we be hit with a catastrophe similar to the one that occurred last year.

Will the Minister of State indicate whether the Government will seek additional supports from the European Union to bolster flood defences for rural areas and to ensure a maintenance programme is put into action as soon as possible?

Deputy Seán Canney: I have asked my officials to make contact with Offaly County Council to review the case of Banagher. Dredging on the Shannon came up this morning at our group meeting and all parties are now going to look at it, both from the point of view of what we can do in the short term and what we can do in the long term. Waterways Ireland is reviewing some of the pinch points so that we can find out more information. Some costs are being bandied around and I want to get a true picture of them. We may have to take one or two of them out in a pilot scheme to see what that would cost.

We will not solve the problems with flooding from the Shannon in one winter. The Deputy referred to the number of county councils along the catchment but a single agency will not do anything this winter. I assure the Deputy, though, and people who live along the Shannon, that I will do everything I can. The Taoiseach attended the meeting we held this morning and that is a reflection of how important the issue is to us.

In terms of investment, we have €430 million to spend over the period 2015 to 2021, and this year we will spend approximately €50 million. In two years' time that figure will have been

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cranked up to €100 million. There is money but we also need to overcome the challenges to getting work done throughout the country. People might ask what is happening but, by the end of this year, 12 major flood relief schemes will be under construction. Last year, there were four so we are cranking it up and I assure Deputies that I will keep the pressure on.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I gave the Minister considerable latitude on account of its importance for the areas concerned.

Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2016: Order for Second Stage

Bill entitled an Act to provide for review of raised bog habitats; to further provide for making, amendment and revocation of natural heritage area orders; for those purposes to amend the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000; and to provide for related matters.

Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move: “That Second Stage be taken now.”

Question put and agreed to.

Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2016: Second Stage

Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on Second Stage of this important legislation, the Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2016. The publication of this legislation is delivering on a commitment in the programme for a partnership Government.

Ireland has designated 75 natural heritage areas, NHAs, under national law for the protection of raised bog habitats. These sites complement the 53 areas of protected raised bog in Ireland which have been nominated for designation as special areas of conservation, SACs, in accordance with the EU habitats directive. Additional raised bog habitat within the natural heritage area network makes a contribution to the overall objectives of the habitats directive to maintain or restore these habitats to favourable conservation status.

Since 2011, over €18 million in taxpayers’ money has been spent on protecting and conserving the SAC raised bog network. The SAC network remains the bedrock of Ireland’s response to the conservation of raised bog under the habitats directive. Indeed, the previous Fine Gaelled Government was the first Government to tackle the issue of turf cutting and EU obligations. Our approach has been based on working with the turf cutters affected in a practical and pragmatic fashion, while also working to ensure we are protecting this rare natural environment and fulfilling our EU obligations. In recognition of the fact that the same legal regime did not apply to NHAs as to SACs, in April 2011 the then Government decided to carry out a scientific review of the natural heritage area raised bogs. This decision was taken in tandem with the work which was ongoing to ensure that SAC raised bogs were being treated in accordance with the habitats directive. The main objective of the review was to look at how the NHA network could contribute to our conservation objectives, while avoiding unintended impacts on the traditional rights of landowners and turf cutters and, therefore, minimising the cost to the taxpayer arising

from compensation.

Independent experts, working closely with departmental officials, carried out the review of the raised bog resource in Ireland. They examined over 270 individual raised bogs, including SACs, NHAs and undesignated sites. New scientific survey methods were employed and improved mathematical modelling methods used to identify the restoration potential of sites. A number of factors were taken into account when assessing the importance of individual bogs in terms of their economic, social and cultural contribution to individual communities. This included available ownership information, the number of active turf plots and restoration-associated costs. This has been the most comprehensive analysis to date of Ireland's raised bog habitats.

The selection process for the analysis of sites adopted a sustainable approach. The selection criteria, while including the primary environmental and technical factors essential for a raised bog's existence now and into the future, also included economic and social criteria. At the same time each site was examined by Department staff from a nature conservation and management perspective to ensure that the final outcomes of the selection process were practical and achievable. The review concluded that a reconfiguration of the NHA network was required in order to meet nature conservation objectives more effectively while having regard to economic, social and cultural needs.

The review of the raised bog natural heritage area network was published in January 2014. It sets out a series of measures to ensure that Ireland meets its obligations under the EU habitats directive, as well as its obligations under the EU environmental impact assessment directive relating to the regulation of turf cutting on NHAs, while at the same time avoiding unintended impacts on the traditional rights of landowners and users and minimising the cost to the State of compensation payments. The review concluded that Ireland could more effectively achieve conservation of threatened raised bog habitat through focused protection and restoration of a reconfigured network. The review concluded that this would entail the phasing out of turf cutting on 36 existing NHAs, which will remain designated, including seven sites to be divided, with part to be conserved and part de-designated; the complete de-designation of 46 NHAs, including the relevant areas of the seven sites to be divided where it has been judged that their conservation potential is expected to be marginal and-or that restoration would be prohibitively expensive for the conservation benefits achieved - domestic turf cutting may continue on these sites, while larger scale or commercial turf cutting will continue to be regulated through other consent systems; and the designation as NHAs of 25 currently undesignated raised bogs which are in public ownership or where there is reduced turf cutting pressure. These NHAs are being designated to make up for the loss of habitat within the sites where it is proposed that turf cutting can be allowed to continue.

The review clearly set out that the proposed newly configured network would have considerable advantages over the current natural heritage area network: a greater area of both active and degraded raised bog still capable of regeneration compared to the current network; in the short to medium term, losses of active bog will be reduced due to the lower intensity of recent turf cutting in the new network; costs to the taxpayer will be greatly reduced due to the smaller number of turf cutters required to stop turf cutting and requiring compensation - it is envisaged that there will be approximately 2,500 fewer actively cut turf plots in the new network; and increased potential for more rapid restoration of raised bog due to the inclusion of State-owned lands into the new network.

In short, the new network will have more environmental benefits, it will have less negative impact on turf cutters and it will cost less to the taxpayer. The total area of active and degraded raised bog under the proposed new network is 765 hectares, in comparison with an area of 694 hectares in the current network. The area of the new network will also contribute to the national conservation objective target area for raised bog within the SAC and NHA networks.

The Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2016 provides for a review of raised bog habitats, the making, amendment and revocation of natural heritage area orders, and for those purposes to amend the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000. The purpose of the Bill is to provide for the implementation of a reconfiguration of the raised bog natural heritage area network arising from the proposals from the review published in January 2014, an assessment of the effects on the environment of the proposals arising from the review and, if required, any other screening for an assessment or, as the case may be, assessment undertaken and observations or submissions received during the course of public consultation.

The Bill contains five sections. Section 1 is a standard provision providing a definition of the Act of 2000, which is the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000. The legislative provisions relating to natural heritage areas are contained within Part III, Chapter II of that Act.

Section 16(1) of the Act of 2000 provides for the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to publish a notice of the intention to make a natural heritage area order. Section 2 of the Bill amends this subsection to provide for the Minister to publish a notice of the intention to make a natural heritage area order arising from the completion of the natural heritage area review.

Section 18(4) of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 provides that where the Minister proposes to amend or revoke a natural heritage area order, the Minister will publish a notice of the intention to do so. The provisions of subsections (2), (4) and (5) of section 16 relating to seeking the observations of certain Ministers and public authorities and serving notice of the intention to make a natural heritage area order also apply where the Minister proposes to amend or revoke a natural heritage area order. Section 3 of the Bill provides that the provisions of section 18(4) of the Act of 2000 only apply to that section of the Act, as section 4 of the Bill contains publication and notification provisions where the Minister makes an order to amend or revoke a natural heritage area order.

Section 4 of the Bill amends the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 by the insertion of a new section 18A after section 18 as follows. Section 18A(1) provides for the Minister to continue to conduct and complete the review of raised bog habitats.

Section 18A(2) refers to the purposes of the review, including contributing to the achievement of nature conservation objectives of maintaining or restoring raised bog habitats, and selecting the most suitable raised bog habitats to be designated as natural heritage areas or to cease to be designated as natural heritage areas.

Section 18A(3) provides that the Minister shall, in respect of the effects on the environment of the proposals arising from the review, carry out a strategic environmental assessment, including public consultation, and if required, carry out any other screening for an assessment or, as the case may be, assessment, including public consultation. This provision arises from a commitment to carry out an environmental assessment in the 2014 review of the raised bog natural heritage area network.

Section 18A(4) sets out that on the completion of the review, having considered the proposals arising from it and having had regard to the strategic environmental assessment, any other screening for assessment or assessment undertaken and observations or submissions received during the public consultation, the Minister shall, where he or she is satisfied that a natural heritage area order should be made, publish under section 16 of the Act of 2000 a notice of his or her intention to make the natural heritage area order, and where he or she is satisfied that land should cease to be designated as a natural heritage area, make an order to amend or revoke the natural heritage area order which so designated the land. This provision allows the Minister to have regard to economic, social and cultural needs when deciding that land should cease to be designated as a natural heritage area.

Section 18A(5) states that where the Minister makes an order to amend or revoke a natural heritage area order which designated land as a natural heritage area, the Minister will place an advertisement in at least one local newspaper to inform the public of the making of the order and cause a copy of the order to be sent to defined owners or occupiers of land, defined holders of valid prospecting or exploration licences and various Ministers of the Government and various public authorities.

Section 19(2) of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 provides that no person shall carry out or cause to be carried out works which are liable to destroy or to alter, damage or interfere significantly with the features of a site without giving the Minister at least three months' prior notice. This obligation applies to land on which the Minister has served notice of the intention to make a natural heritage area order. Section 18A(6) clarifies that an amendment or revocation of a natural heritage area order means that the land or the part of it in question ceases to be designated as a natural heritage area and that the obligation arising from section 19(2) of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 is fully removed. Section 18A(7) sets out definitions for "environmental criteria", "habitat", and "restoration potential".

Section 5 of the Bill sets out the Short Title and commencement.

I view this Bill as an important piece of the jigsaw as we continue to deal with the need to protect the environment, live up to our EU obligations and work with landowners and turf cutters on whose lives these obligations can have a very real impact. As I stated at the outset, the publication of this legislation is an important commitment in A Programme for a Partnership Government. This legislation will allow for our raised bog network to be managed more effectively and in a more environmentally friendly manner.

It is important to remember that this Bill arises from the review of the raised bog natural heritage area network, published in 2014. The reconfiguration of the raised bog network, which this legislation will facilitate, is based on sound scientific evidence and will have a positive impact on the raised bog network.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to outline the provisions of the Bill, which I commend to the House, and I look forward to hearing Deputies' views on its contents. I recommend the Bill to the House.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I understand Deputy Ó Cuív is sharing time with Deputy Cahill.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is correct. We should first recognise that we are lucky in this country to have a largely unspoilt countryside and, because the Industrial Revolution passed us

by, we retained areas of high natural amenity and of high natural importance in habitats. The second element we must recognise is that all Irish land is farmed and all the rivers were fished. Traditionally, most of the rivers were cleaned, and particularly, if I might say so, there was not a farmer in Ireland when land was scarce who did not clean the drains within his or her farm. We have good farming practice to thank for the fact so much of our natural habitats survived into the second half of the previous century where in other countries that did not happen.

The other element that we must recognise as being unique is our settlement pattern. Most of us know from travelling on the Continent that the people tend to live in close settlements whereas we tend to live on the land that was farmed. It is a strange sight, certainly to me, to go for miles in countries, such as France and Spain, and suddenly see a town where all the farmers are living rather than our much more developed system of living where the cattle are. Part of that might be that if a farmer was engaged mainly in crop production, there was not the same need to live beside the animals, but if he was milking one or two cows, he would not want the cows to be in a field three miles away. Unfortunately, the European approach with respect to designations often did not have the necessary finesse to deal with the Irish situation. It is a crude instrument in many ways and sometimes I wonder if it is doing more harm than good. I do not know too many farmers who, if it was left to themselves, would not recognise the ecological importance of their own land. To say that farmers did not always care for wildlife would be wrong. The introduction of more advanced farming systems has done the big damage to song birds and so on. That did not happen with traditional farming.

I was on Inis Turbot Island last year with an islander, a lady who grew up on the island. Inis Turbot is a small island off Clifden and I had heard that the corncrake had returned to it. The fascinating aspect of the lesson on the corncrake is that it will not survive where the grass is not cut. If the land is let go wild, the corncrake will not survive. The grass has to be cut but the trick is to cut it at the right time. That lady explained to me that when her father used to cut the meadow in the old days, he always made it his business not to interfere with the corncrakes. To think that people in the past did not value the habitats in which they lived as much as the greatest ecologists of today is to misunderstand totally the incredible traditional relationship between traditional farmers and the land they farmed.

These designations eventually became Irish law in 1997, having been signed into an EU directive prior to that. I am talking about special areas of conservation, SACs, in the first instance. Síle de Valera, who was then my senior Minister, came into the Department in 1997 after that was signed and she and I took a unilateral decision to take out all of the commercial cutters and compensate them because, for them, turf cutting was a business. We left the domestic cutters because it more than a business for them. The Minister used the word “cultural” and I might use the word “traditional”. For the domestic cutters, it was not only a source of free fuel, but a way of life, and it was a type of fuel they liked. They liked the ambience it created, it was one with which they were familiar and it was part of their life. In doing that, we got rid of 96% of the effort at that time, or so we were told by the Department and I have no doubt that it had the correct figures. The domestic cutters at the time comprised only 4%. I stress for the record that we did not get a derogation from Europe, rather we gave a derogation. The then Minister, Síle de Valera, and I went to Europe and I remember the meeting well. We looked the officials in the eye and told them that we intended to tell the individual domestic bog cutters that they could continue cutting turf for ten years, to which they replied: “We hear you, Minister.” We took that to mean, and we were proven right in hindsight, that they were not going to take us to court within that ten-year period if we took out the 96% commercial element. That is how

it happened.

I welcome this Bill for many reasons. I congratulate Deputy Fitzmaurice who fought a long campaign over this issue. It is interesting sometimes how creativity comes into play when one is told something cannot happen. If I understand it correctly, the nub of what the Minister proposes is to dedesignate some natural heritage areas, NHAs - I stress these are NHAs and she might clarify if any parts of SACs are involved at any stage - and redesignate other lands to be NHAs as compensation. Therefore, she will make the case to Europe that there will be more conservation after this process is completed than there was prior to it. It is a pity this was not done ten years ago. Sometimes things take time and they take negotiation. I congratulate Deputy Fitzmaurice not only for standing his ground, but for reaching a solution with the Department. Standing his ground without getting a solution would not have served anybody well.

My understanding from a quick perusal of the Bill, and we can go into this further on Committee Stage, is that it is a general enabling one. Under it, the Minister will be able to relook at all NHAs in the country under certain criteria and identify if they are of major conservation value or if there are other places with a higher conservation value. It does not seem that there is a requirement in the legislation for compensation in terms of compensatory NHAs. It seems to provide the Minister could withdraw a designation if she decided it did not serve any major ecological or conservation issue and that there is not a legal obligation to compensate. I may have read the Bill too quickly and I will read it in much more detail when we come to deal with Committee Stage, by which time I will have read every subparagraph. I did not see a provision in it that specifically states that if a NHA is dedesignated, some other designation must be inserted. I stand to be corrected on that but that is what I have taken from it. It is quite a short Bill.

When the Minister is finished dealing with the specific bogs listed in the Bill, and it is quite a long list, we do not yet know what she will put back in but I hope they will not cause any controversy. Many of them are on public lands but I understand some of them are not. I hope the ones that are not on public lands will not create a new hornet's nest and it will not be a case of she stepped out and they stepped in again and we find that all we have done is transferred the row. I trust the Minister and her officials have looked after that angle.

There is a wider issue. As the Minister knows, some of the most eco-sensitive farmers in the country are getting to the point where they are very against designations. They are not against the ecology but they are against the way the designations are being used to halt all rural life in certain areas. Unfortunately, I live in the area with the most designated land - 80% of the land west of the Corrib is designated. Extending north between the Tourmakeady Mountains and the sea, I understand that 80% of the land between Leenane and Westport is also designated. We get into farcical situations, part of which, I accept, is due to planning law brought in during my time in office, not when I was Minister for the Environment but when I was a Minister. We can talk about unintended consequences and we are trying to watch every element. I see the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, is laughing, but I am sure he spends a good deal of time late at night reading small items of legislation and trying to check that nothing is going through any Department that he has not proofed down to the last degree for unintended consequences. I used to do a great deal of that and I would not say that I caught every pinkeen in fish of the provisions in Bills.

In all the legislation on this area, it is provided that if one is building a house within 15 km of an SAC, one has to carry out a screening operation. It is farcical the way this requirement is

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applied in places. I will cite the example of an area where a mountain has been designated as an SAC and the house in question is in the valley. In my part of the country, the water flows downhill. We have not yet found a trick to get it to flow uphill, although there was a road in County Louth that I was shown by a council one time where a car rolled up the road. The Deputy might know about that road in County Louth.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I fell up it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Everywhere else the water flows downhill. How could a house located downstream from an SAC possibly affect the mountain behind it through its septic tank? In this case, the poor house applicant has spent €300 or €400 on a screening operation to show it will not do any damage.

7 o'clock

One is located 10 km from the lake, yet this little house is supposed to destroy the lake in some way. All these tests are carried out by the county council on the most vulnerable septic tanks and we then discover that the tanks are doing virtually no damage and that municipal wastewater plants are the biggest single cause of pollution. That is a fact that we all know. These designations are being used to stop the building of houses in the countryside. There are zealots who will try to use anything to stop houses being built in rural areas. The problem is that a public that wants to love its countryside and to be at one with nature is finding that regulation is making it a lot less sympathetic.

The Minister is aware of a farcical situation that we will discuss in another forum. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, has planning permission for a road through Connemara but it cannot agree method statements to allow the road to be constructed. In the meantime, people's lives are at risk every day because they are obliged to travel on a substandard road as a result of the fact that we cannot find a way of building the new road. It would be much better for the ecology of the region if the new road was built without putting the habitats at risk or without levels of testing that are impossible to meet.

There are two things I find very difficult to understand. One is the way the precautionary principle is applied. If one applies the precautionary principle to its ultimate level, none of us would get up in the morning. We would not even stay in bed, however, because that might harm us also. The reality is it is impossible to guard 100% against something that might happen.

The other big bugbear relating to all of this in the context of small developments and, particularly, where public infrastructure is concerned, is the cumulative effect. Something needs to be done. Perhaps if it concerned private homes, there could be another and another but it is very foolish for the State to keep saying that there might be a cumulative effect in the case of some facility or whatever that is needed for the greater public good. I guarantee that TII will not build the second road to which I refer through the middle of Connemara and the SAC. We will be lucky to get the first one built. This idea of a cumulative effect is nonsense. When it comes to public infrastructure, we need to differentiate our approach from the one we take to private infrastructure. There is a fundamental principle in our Constitution which one keeps finding laid out in all of the provisions, particularly those relating to private property. When one has weighed everything up, all rights are subject to the exigencies of the common good. It is important we never lose sight of that.

We must impress on Europe that in employing these laws, it will get a much higher level

of voluntary compliance if it recognises the need to see there are competing interests. I was talking to somebody recently about this principle and I said that we must preserve the ecology, the SAC and habitats but that we should measure the index of risk to this. On the other side, in the case of a public road that is badly needed, we should also have an index of the danger of a major fatal accident. We should determine how much we could reduce that risk with a minimum increase to the potential risk to the environment when the road is being built. One cannot say that ecology trumps human safety at all times. We should try to find the happiest medium, reduce the risk to the ecology as much as possible but, equally, reduce the risk to human life by accident on a defective road. This applies again and again across everything we do.

The Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs has the competing interest of protecting something that is more valuable because it is more unique to Ireland than the natural heritage. There are natural heritage sites in other places in the world but other than very small populations in Scotland, there is no other country in the world that has native Gaelic-speaking populations. If it dies, it is truly dead as a community language everywhere in the world. One cannot be so absolute in the measure of a piece of ecology. Gaeltacht communities cannot be sustained without basic infrastructure. We will not hold our populations and we know of the massive decline in more rural areas. We have to have balance when making our ecological decisions.

The Minister has taken a very constructive route. She has opened up the possibility of looking at all of this. My only concern is that we cannot do the same thing to SACs that do not have a designated high value.

We will fully support the Bill. We will examine it carefully and table amendments. We absolutely support the principle behind the Bill. I hope it will resolve the issue of the turf cutters and that it will not open another box of problems. Perhaps it will not do so. It raises wider issues that people have been shy about debating for years. There is nothing absolute in human existence. There are competing ecological and cultural rights all the time. There is the basic right of people to live in their communities. There is also the value of very old, indigenous communities.

As a Dublin 4 guy, one of the things that always struck me when I went to Connemara was the surnames. They tell us a lot about settlement patterns in Ireland. If I go into the area where I live, O'Malley and Ó Cadhain are the old Gaelic names that predominate in the Joyce Country. Then there are the newcomers - de Búrca, Seoige or Joyce, and Breathnach, or as we call them, the Welsh people. That is what they are. Most people pronounce it as Walsh but we always call them Welsh because Breathnach means a Welsh person. That is where they came from in the 13th century. Then there is Ó Cuív, which came in the 20th century. In those names, one sees they are not irrelevant communities. They are history. There has been 2,000 years of habitation. Our surnames came in the 11th century and tend to be Christian names with "Ó" or "Mac" before them. We can trace these communities back to the archaeology of the area. They are as much a part of the archaeology as the archaeology itself. The preservation of vibrant communities is hugely important. I hope the Minister's officials do not see this as an end but understand it is the first step in a much bigger process that needs to take place. We need to harmonise all the goods in our society and make sure no one good trumps another and that everything is balanced.

We face a challenge in Europe. I have talked to MEPs about this and they just shrug their shoulders, throw their hands in the air and say they cannot do anything. Europeans do not fully understand our settlement pattern or that people live cheek by jowl with some of the greatest

ecology in the world.

I understand that many of the special areas of conservation, SACs, in the north of Sweden, Finland and other countries are far away from human habitation. That is far more common in Europe than in this country.

I will hand over to my colleague. I look forward to debating the specific proposals in the Bill on Committee Stage. However, as I said, I hope we will not view this in a narrow context but in the context of the much wider conversation we must have with landholders, farmers and communities to arrive at a far better balance than occurred in recent years.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I thank Deputy Ó Cuív for sharing time to allow me to make a number of points on the Wildlife (Amendment) Bill. I do not profess to be an authority on bogs, this Bill or compensation. Other Deputies have fought this case for a long time. However, I wish to make a number of points. Fianna Fáil is committed to supporting the Bill and we look forward to making some amendments to it on Committee Stage.

Deputy Ó Cuív spoke about SACs. Significant tracts of my constituency have been designated as SACs. Compensation is an issue for SACs because the designation has made the land virtually worthless to the landowners. There is a blanket ban on afforestation in SACs at present. The principal reason given for the ban is the hen harrier. A number of targets must be met to deal with climate change, yet here we have land that is eminently suitable for forestry but we are banned from planting it. There is no common sense in the argument. Evidence is now being brought forward to show that hen harriers in habitats where there are varying degrees of growth in afforestation can thrive better. The latest figures show that the hen harrier population in SACs where there is no afforestation is declining. We must go back to basics and examine whether the blanket ban is doing what it was intended to do, protect the hen harrier. If we are to meet our forestry targets, this land is definitely the most suitable for it. It would be a huge income source for the farmers in those areas. People tend to think my county has good land, but huge tracts of the land have been designated as SACs. I visited it recently. The land is lying idle. It is not fit for commercial farm production, but it is illogical to prohibit afforestation on it. It makes no sense. This must be reviewed. In the argument about SACs, the Commission must see the common sense of what we say. I do not suggest that we plant all the SACs at once, but a staggered plantation of 70% to 80% of those areas would enhance the habitat for wildlife rather than diminish it.

The other point I wish to make has been brought forward by interest groups, gun clubs and groups interested in promoting wildlife in mountainous areas of the county. It is the restrictions on the burning of gorse on the mountainside. Gun clubs do this voluntarily to facilitate ground nesting birds. In this country burning is prohibited from the last day of February, but in the UK the practice can continue until mid-April. Unfortunately, due to the damp conditions that prevail in this country during February in most years, it is not feasible for the gun clubs to burn the gorse in February. The practice of doing so up to mid-April in the UK is working very well. This must be examined. There are four or five breeds of ground nesting birds that need cultivation to be done on the mountainside. In the Knockmealdown region of Tipperary there are gun clubs and sporting clubs that do this and the population of birds in their area is greatly enhanced by this initiative.

However, this shows the illogicality of the regulations we have. The UK, although it is due to leave the EU, is still a member of the Union tonight. It can facilitate the burning of gorse up

to the middle of April, yet in this country it is banned from the last day of February. Again, this would be a practical change to the legislation in this country. It would facilitate the voluntary groups, who are enhancing the habitat on the mountainside and putting a huge effort into ensuring ground nesting birds have the food they need to thrive. I have figures from the gun clubs in south Tipperary which show that when they can do it successfully in a dry month of February, the number of birds in the area in the following autumn is greatly increased. Will the Minister examine this and consider extending the date to the middle of April? Even if we did it for a year or two and then assessed it, she would find that the bird population would be increased and the habitats enhanced.

People fail to distinguish between ground nesting birds and birds that nest in ditches. Obviously birds that nest in ditches would require the ban from the end of February, but it has been shown that ground nesting birds do not breed until well into the spring months. The Minister's Department should examine this matter. It would greatly enhance the habitats in the mountainous regions of the country.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire mar gheall ar an mBille seo a chur os comhair na Dála. Déanaim comhghairdeas freisin leis an Teachta Fitzmaurice mar gheall ar an obair atá déanta aige ar an bhfeachtas seo.

This Bill allows for the de-designation of bogs that were identified as natural heritage areas, NHAs, in 2014. It will allow for a new protected NHA bog network in place of the existing one which will be more sensitive to both ecological and human needs. What is important is that it will also allow for public consultation, something that was desperately lacking since the previous Government made a hames of implementing the EU habitats directive that was first introduced in 1997. To this day it amazes me that we had such a debacle during the term of the previous Government, especially when one sees the Bill before us today. The previous Government was absolutely rigid in dealing with turf cutters throughout the country. We should remember that not long ago we saw the images of gardaí, helicopters and so forth at bogs and recall the efforts by some to criminalise turf cutters, farmers and families simply for cutting turf, something their families had done for generations.

From my perspective, this entire process is one of social justice. It is a process in which people would have a right to heat their homes with the resource they have to hand. No compensation will ever be enough to deal with the anxiety and stress caused to farmers and families due to the threat of legal proceedings and so forth. Many of the turf cutters were not in it for the money. As a young fellow I spent summers on bogs and, as many others who had that experience will say, there is little if any money to be made from it for most families. There is no profit. It is back-breaking work and it is done by the families concerned with the objective of trying to keep themselves warm in the winter.

Our bogs are vital to our culture, environment and heritage. At almost a quarter of our land, Ireland contains a huge amount of bogland. It is a rich source of fuel, but is also vital in preventing climate change as bogs are a deep carbon store. Once they are damaged, however, they become harmful to the environment and emit carbon into the atmosphere rather than absorbing it. Turf cutting was a way of life for turf cutters around the country, they knew what they were doing and did it on a small scale for their families and because of this, most rural turf cutters managed the pieces of bogland they had in such a way that those bogs did not become damaging to the environment and did not emit large amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. The opposite was true when it was done on an industrial scale. Over 80 years, Bord na Móna did savage dam-

age to peatlands in the country. We now have less than 1% of active raised bogs.

It is very important that preservation takes place but that it takes place while we uphold the rights of farmers and turf cutters in the extraction of turf for their families. In 1998, Ireland transposed the EU habitats directive into law. The purpose of the law was to protect our bogland as a natural habitat. Owing to their endangerment, they were given a high priority status. The Fianna Fáil Government at the time chose which bogs would be designated as special areas of conservation, SACs. While the directive stipulated that measures must take account of economic, social and cultural requirements, in other words the needs of the people, it would appear that there was little or no public consultation at the time that these bogs were designated as areas to be conserved. It is no surprise that it was so controversial, to the point that a derogation was put in place to kick the can down the road for another ten years. The Government did not, as it could have had done, seek an exemption from the European Commission to allow for the continuation of turf cutting in the public interest. There are now European infringement proceedings against Ireland, which this Bill seeks to mitigate.

Since bogs were designated as SACs, the conservation of degraded raised bogs has actually worsened. This Bill aims to take on board an assessment of how best to mitigate the destructive effects of carbon emission from damaged bogs by the de-designation of those peatlands as well as engaging in public consultation. It is an acknowledgement that management of the conservation of boglands in this State has been a failure. An outright ban on turf cutting in certain State-chosen bogs is not a solution to habitat management in and of itself. Best habitat management involves leaving it in the hands of turf cutters who know what they are doing and who have been doing this for generations. In the review and consultation period, we must balance the needs of our turf cutters and adopt an acceptable strategy favourable to all for the management of raised bogs in Ireland. Undoubtedly, this Bill will confer benefits to the State in terms of reduced compensatory costs as well as environmental benefits. However, it is vital that there be a scientific assessment of the impacts on carbon emission that this new raised bog network will have to ensure that benefits to the climate are maximised.

Bogs are beautiful spaces. They are open spaces with wild flora and fauna abounding. We need to make sure that we make the proper use of them and that we develop them for leisure and tourism. There have been a few examples where bogs have been rewilded or at least developed into parks which have become very attractive for local populations and are visited by thousands of people. They are wonderful examples but there are too few of them. The issue of bogs is one of energy. I ask the Minister to ensure that measures to allow turf cutters who seek to retrospectively insulate their houses are continued in the future so that we do not forget about the energy element. If they wish to proceed down this route, the Government should allow it to happen.

I will now address the issue of sustainable energy. In the past six months, Great Britain has produced more solar power-generated electricity than coal-generated electricity. This is a startling fact given that coal was to Great Britain what turf was to Ireland and the fact it is playing such a pre-eminent role in the development of a broad-based sustainable energy package. We do not even have a solar energy industry in Ireland. It is fiercely frustrating that all of the different organisations that are trying to develop solar energy and looking for planning permission know that the route to the grid is years away. Many of the destroyed peatlands of the past and the rural areas in which they are located would make useful places for the development of solar power. I ask the Minister to at least take this into consideration and share this with individuals when she talks to the Minister for Communications, Climate Change and Natural Resources.

The issue of social justice in rural areas is at the heart of this. We have seen the closing down of large tracts of rural Ireland and the rebuilding of those areas on the east coast. I know of between ten and 15 schools in certain places in rural Ireland with as many new students as one single new school in the Dublin commuter belt. The attack on turf cutters in the past has been part of a swathe of attacks on rural communities. I hope that this Bill will play a part in turning this around so that rural communities can be sustainable into the future.

I will now address the issue of sustainable energy. In the past six months, Great Britain has produced more solar power-generated electricity than from coal-generated electricity. This is a startling fact given that coal was to Great Britain what turf was to Ireland and the fact that it played such a pre

Deputy Martin Kenny: Sinn Féin is committed to the preservation of our national wildlife and resources, including our raised bogs. It is fair to say that most people in this country who cut turf could say the same about themselves and they would be right. I feel as if I have to say this because there has been an inclination among environmentalists to suggest that turf cutters, even those cutting only for their own personal use, are somehow careless when it comes to the environment. This could not be further from the truth, a truth that can be seen in the regard in which Irish bogs are held by environmentalists at home and abroad and the amount of wildlife which survives and thrives in our boglands.

This Bill provides the legislative basis for the implementation of the review of the raised bog natural heritage area network which was published in January 2014. This review was needed as the first designations were very badly conceived. We support this Bill noting that as result of its enactment, there will be more and bigger areas of active raised bog and degraded raised bog still capable of natural regeneration. In addition, fewer turf cutters will be required to cease cutting turf on their bog. It seems like a lot of blood, sweat and tears of frustration and rage have been shed in coming to this conclusion which was going to happen anyway. It should not be the case that a Government has to act in haste to implement an EU directive such as the habitats directive which, after all, has been around since 1992.

In this case, due to years of failure to protect our bogs, mainly by Fianna Fáil Governments, the situation reached crisis point with the EU threatening a fine of €9 million plus €25,000 per day thereafter due to that failure to protect our raised bogs. There were people who were led to believe that because they were involved in domestic turf cutting only, they were working under a derogation but it seems that the derogation was granted by the Minister and not by the EU. All of this involved kicking it down the road. It did not lead to anything. It kicked the problem further ahead, left us in a situation where we were not really dealing with it and we created a bigger mess as a result. This neglect of the issue led in the end to disgraceful scenes of gardaí dragging people off bogs to prevent them cutting turf as their fathers, grandfathers and great grandfathers had done before them. The whole business had a devastating effect on some communities, made many people very angry, hurt people and put people under severe financial pressure because, of course, many of them were depending on their turbary rights to heat their homes. There were other effects as well. In my own area, people with farmland on the edge of bogs that were also designated could not farm the land properly because it came in under this area. This has created significant problems.

From when I was a child, we cut turf and reared turf on the bogs. Like Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice, I am a bog man. There is more than one bog man in the Dáil. More than anything else, working the bog was about providing for one's family. That is what the people were do-

ing. It was a disgrace that derogations were brought in which prevented people from doing something which they had always done in the past. It was totally wrong. While I welcome this day, it is regrettable that it took so long to get here.

The ecological destruction of our bogs by people cutting turf for domestic use is negligible compared to the massive destruction caused by the State and its neglect of environmental concerns in its turf cutting, mainly in the midlands, over many decades. Bord na Móna destroyed more bog in a couple of years than Irish people cutting turf for their own use have done over centuries. I am not just talking about turf cutting but peat milling. Across entire areas of the midlands, there are massive areas of bog where peat was milled. Bord na Móna took the surface of the bog away, piled it into big mounds, dried it and exported it for profit. This, more than anything else, has brought us to the situation in which we find ourselves. Never has any Government admitted it was responsible for doing it, instead blaming the people who cut a bit of turf for it.

While the Bill is welcome, we must ensure that a similar dispute does not affect our blanket bogs, where issues are arising. Domestic turf cutters in Connemara who thought they were permitted to cut turf on blanket bogs received letters from the Department last week telling them they would have to carry out an environmental impact assessment, EIA, in order to cut turf on their bogs. The Department has already carried out an EIA on the area, but despite numerous requests during the past three years, it has failed to provide it to these turf cutters. It does not seem to make sense that local people engaged in domestic turf cutting - more people are dependent on their own turf due to the financial pressure and the fact that we have a non-recovery in the west of Ireland - are being asked to fork out up to €5,000 to do an EIA when the Department has already carried out its own. The kind of pressure these people are being put under does not bode well and they hope it does not start another conflict-ridden and highly-charged dispute between the State and turf cutters. I have a copy of the letter people received from the Department telling them that an EIA statement had to be done. I hope the Minister will take the time to meet these people and come to a resolution with them. This situation must be resolved in order to avoid another debacle which might take years to resolve and impose a heavy toll on so many of those who might try to resolve it.

It is regrettable that it has taken so long to come to this conclusion. I know people who cut turf in west Cavan and around Lough Sheelin, in the Minister's constituency, who have been in a very serious and difficult situation regarding this.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I have met them. They are sorted now.

Deputy Martin Kenny: While I accept that great work has been done in a very short period, it is regrettable that it took so long and caused so much anguish among so many people and communities the length and breadth of the country to bring us to this day. I will support the Bill and I thank the Minister for her efforts in respect of it.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. The country's bogs are very important. The Bill sets out to deal with the 75 raised bogs, most of which are in the midlands. As a Deputy representing Laois-South Kildare, this matter is very important to my area. The Bill makes provision for the redesignation of 46 NHAs, the retention of 36 NHAs and the new designation of 25 bogs previously not designated. Some of the changes make a great deal of sense, particularly as there will be a better outcome environmentally and for turf cutters. It will be impossible to restore some of the bogs designated as natural habitat areas where

turf cutting was taking place. The size, shape, topography and location of many of them meant the hydrology could not be restored to a level where these bogs could become active growing bogs again. Turf cutting for domestic purposes cannot be phased out overnight. This is the one lesson to be learned. Going in and trying to bulldoze over domestic turf cutters did not work. Previous speakers covered that aspect very well. Five years ago, I said in this House that turf cutters would have to be fully involved in developing the plans. The Turf Cutters and Contractors Association, TCCA, and other entities throughout the country have been very active in it and want to be involved in decision-making around the future of the raised bogs. I raised the issue with the Minister's predecessor, former Deputy Jimmy Deenihan, and with the Minister in the previous Dáil.

The move on the NHAs has the potential, if done right, to bring about improvements for the environment and for turf cutters. However, the Government cannot phase out turf cutting overnight. Over five years ago, we had an all-party motion in the Dáil for a national plan to be put in place for the bogs that would be designated SACs. Although progress has been slow, there are signs of movement, and I recognise this. Consultations are happening with turf cutting groups in some areas, which is welcome. In the context of a number of bogs, relocation of turf cutters is not an option. People have worked hard to try to do it. Deputy Fitzmaurice did it in different parts of the country and I was involved in my county, Laois, with turf cutting groups trying to find alternative locations, particularly regarding Coolrain bog.

Coolrain in County Laois was designated under the term of the most recent Fianna Fáil Government. Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív was a Minister in that Administration. That Government also designated Knockacollier, which is right beside Coolrain. That was a strange thing to do. Several options had been examined for the relocation. Turf cutting has ceased in Knockacollier but not Coolrain. Some of the turf cutters who cut on Knockacollier want to relocate onto Coolrain, which is a very small bog. Options have been considered to relocate the turf cutters but, for various reasons, they were ruled out because they were not practical or workable. There are bogs such as Coolrain that should never have been included as SACs and sent to the EU to be included in a national plan and in the EU register of SACs. Deputy Ó Cuív will know this because he was a member of the Governments that were involved.

Four years ago, we took the trouble to go and meet people from the European Commission. We met the European Commissioner. Deputy Martin Kenny and Senator Trevor Ó Clocharthaigh were with me. The Commissioner clearly told us the plan and the list were sent to him by the Irish Government. The Commission wanted to see a credible plan that included substantial raised bogs, and was prepared to work with the Irish Government to facilitate making changes and putting in place a plan that environmentalists and turf cutters could live with. Some work has been done on it. This happened under the watch of Fianna Fáil, which was asleep at the wheel. Worse, having made a mess of it, subsequent Fianna Fáil Governments, throughout the 2000s up to 2011, tried to give people the impression that the EU had sanctioned the derogation to allow turf cutting to continue on the SAC designated sites. The deputy Commissioner was not aware of any such derogation. There was no word of a derogation on any sheet of paper, even a sheet of paper the size of a postage stamp. The deputy Commissioner made it clear to us that no such derogation was in place.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It was not from the EU.

Deputy Martin Ferris: Deputy Ó Cuív messed up.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: No.

Deputy Brian Stanley: While the previous Fine Gael-Labour Party Government may not have handled it well, it inherited an awful situation. I was often critical of what the former Minister, Jimmy Deenihan did, with gardaí going onto bogs and everything that happened during the past four or five years. It is not for me to defend the Government that entered power in 2011 but, by any objective analysis, it inherited an almighty mess that had been allowed to build over a period of 12 or 13 years by previous Governments. Let us not go back over that again. We are where we are and we must try to pull the situation together.

More than four years ago, we discussed Articles 6(3) and 6(4) of the habitats directive with the Commission and raised the possibility of de-designating some of the sites under them. We found an openness on the Commission's part that would have been relayed to our people in Ireland. Officials from the Department have been working to try to find a solution to the outstanding difficulties in respect of some bogs. While we may be critical at times, their efforts are to be commended and should be encouraged and facilitated. This is the situation that is in play, including in the case of Coolrain. Logic would dictate that it is a step in the right direction. What a pity it was not done sooner. The sooner one tries to sort out a mess, the easier it is. We were walked into this problem throughout the 2000s.

Coolrain bog cannot be restored. I have raised this point with the Minister's officials. Anyone who has read the scientific report on Coolrain bog will see that it cannot be restored as an active growing bog. It is too small and too high to retain water. Its topography does not allow for that. The scientific report is a number of years old. Works in the area mean that the chances of the bog ever being restored are zero. The Minister has many sectors to worry about, given her wide brief as Minister for a lot of issues, but this is a win-win situation. I call on her and her officials to note it.

When does the Minister hope to have the plan completed? Taking County Laois as the example, other bogs could be conserved. Abbeyleix bog is nearly four times the size of Coolrain bog and can be conserved. We want to preserve some bogs for ecological purposes, for example, as carbon sinks and for their habitat value. The Abbeyleix bog committee has installed pathways, boardwalks and signage, turning the bog into a visitor attraction. Not only will it be a carbon sink and a habitat, it will also have an amenity, tourism and educational value. It is a good example. If one wants flood attenuation, Abbeyleix bog will hold ten times as much water as Coolrain due to its topography and size. I am not an expert, but any casual look at them would show that.

We need to progress the special area of conservation, SAC, and natural heritage area, NHA, process. Hopefully, the review will allow us to achieve better outcomes for turf cutting and the environment in terms of habitats, carbon sinks and flood attenuation, all of which are important. We must facilitate the small number of domestic turf cutters, in particular on those bogs that cannot be restored. Along with that, we all have a responsibility to develop renewable sources of energy. That is where our future lies.

I hope that the Bill moves the NHA process on and that we use this opportunity in respect of SACs. I also hope that the Minister and her officials will take my points on board. I am being a little parochial but Deputy Fitzmaurice, who had a national remit with the Turf Cutters and Contractors Association and did a great deal of good work, knows of other examples around the country. It could be win-win in Laois if the Minister, her officials and the turf cutters work

together.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The Bill and the debate around it highlight everything that is wrong with this and previous Governments' attitude to all environmental issues, their contempt and disregard for our natural heritage, their weasel words and pretence of concern, and their attempts to con us into believing that they are taking action when they are doing the opposite. The Bill also highlights the problem with how the environmental movement itself deals with issues that involve a conflict between ordinary people and environmental concerns.

The Bill's explanatory memorandum reads:

Section 18A(6) clarifies that amendment or revocation of a natural heritage area order means that the land in question (or the part of the land in question) ceases to be designated as a natural heritage area and restrictions relating to a natural heritage area, arising from section 19(2) of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000, are fully removed.

We have been told by the Minister and her press office that the Bill and the review from which it came were designed to see how Ireland could "more effectively achieve conservation of threatened raised bog habitat through focused protection and restoration of a reconfigured network". They also told us: "This will entail the phasing out by 1 January 2017 of turf cutting on 36 [sites] ... the complete de-designation of 46 natural heritage [sites] where ... restoration would be prohibitively expensive for the conservation benefits achieved." I applaud the Orwellian language of "reconfiguring the network" but, to paraphrase a certain US army general, we are destroying the village in order to save it. Let us get this straight - in order to save our raised bogs, which are in areas that we designated as NHAs, we are going to de-designate them, remove whatever protection NHA status afforded them and allow further commercial and other forms of turf cutting. We are legislating in order to speed up the destruction of raised bog habitats and dressing that fact up as a reconfigured attempt to save them. Under all of the spin and nonsense is a gem of truth: we are doing this because restoration would be "prohibitively expensive".

The Minister has assured us that this de-designation will not matter because, in order to compensate for the loss of habitat within these sites, 25 undesignated raised bogs in public ownership or where there is reduced turf cutting pressure will be newly designated as NHAs. What confidence can we have in any environmental commitment from the Government, given its record and the wider record of the State in dealing with this and related issues?

The last report of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, on the state of our raised bogs in 2013 found that no site was in good conservation status. Raised bogs specifically were given a bad status because of a decrease in their range, habitat, structure, function and area. Past attempts by the State to safeguard raised bogs have failed miserably. Their health, extent and survival have diminished despite the NHA status afforded them. Now it is proposed with a straight face that de-designating them will save them. This farce is incredible and insulting. As noted in the report, the active raised bog area in the whole country is less than 4,000 hectares as a result of Government failures. The Minister assures us that the Bill will protect 290 hectares of active raised bog.

As noted by the Irish Wildlife Trust, if the Government was serious about the issue, it would recognise that:

[The] value of peatlands in adapting or mitigating climate change cannot be understated,

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in addition to the benefits they provide in mitigating flooding and protecting water quality. It would be far more progressive and proactive to designate the additional sites while enforcing conservation of existing NHAs and SACs.

The uniqueness of the raised bog as a habitat and a natural sink for storing and sequestering carbon is well known. Peatlands absorb 57,000 tonnes of carbon every year and store more than 1.5 billion tonnes of carbon. Conversely, more than 4 million cubic tonnes of carbon are released from burning peatlands every year. I note with sadness the facts to which others have alluded, for example, that more than 93% of our natural heritage is gone forever, not at the hands of individual turf cutters, but as a State policy via Bord na Móna and the ESB, with the increased commercial use of peat in gardening and so forth and as a consequence of mechanised turf cutting and commercialisation.

Even as late as 2009 and 2010, Bord na Móna extracted 1.8 million cu. m. of peat for horticultural purposes, 90% of which we exported abroad. This is neither sustainable nor necessary and should be stopped. The resources devoted to this extraction should be funnelled into preservation and conservation and those working there could be redeployed into sustainable jobs managing and extending these vital habitats.

Peat is used to produce 13% plus of our electricity and, scandalously, we are extending the use of peat-fired power plants despite our pathetic failure to reach existing targets for reducing carbon dioxide. Not only are we failing to reach these targets but the continued commercial use of our bogs will ensure an essential part in storing carbon will be destroyed in future. Instead of dealing with this, the elephant in the room, we are content on one hand to demonise ordinary rural dwellers who use small amounts of peat while simultaneously, in this Bill, de-designating natural heritage areas, NHAs, and refusing on costs grounds to allocate the resources necessary to deal with the preservation of this habitat. It is possible to conserve bogs with small-scale local use, and some of the better preserved bogs have been preserved because their small-scale usage acted to ward off the possibility of more mechanised use for afforestation and so on. I note with interest that the previous Deputy spoke at length about the Abbeylax Bog as an example of what can be done.

The question is why have we failed our environment so miserably and why this has often been presented as a conflict between environmentalists and ordinary rural dwellers seeking no more than the use of a resource used for generations to heat their homes. I am not the kind of environmentalist who cares for nothing but the environment and does not care for rural people. I want to preserve our unique environment but believe that can be done in a way that brings the skills and knowledge of turf cutters and many in rural communities into the campaign to preserve this habitat. Any environmental protection measure that sets out in opposition to the needs of ordinary people and which often portrays them as the cause of environmental damage is bound to fail and, worse, lose the very people who are both needed in such campaigns and who should be at the forefront of such a campaign. Any environmental campaign that ignores the fact that many turf cutters come from areas of severe disadvantage, where access to fuel is an essential way of making ends meet, will not only alienate those who rely on turf for fuel but will fail at its chief goal of protecting the bogs.

Let us look at the demonisation of turf cutters in this debate and the attempted imposition of laws to stop them accessing fuel and a resource they previously and traditionally had access to. Why did we not, before designating areas as NHAs or as conservation sites, go to these communities and enlist them in the campaign for preserving these bogs? Over the past decades,

the attempts to stop people harvesting turf in NHA sites have been marked by incompetence, hypocrisy and brutality. There was incompetence because a severely under-resourced National Parks and Wildlife Service did not try at the outset to win people over to the need to preserve these areas. There was hypocrisy because the levels of compensation offered were a fraction of the loss people would suffer and people would not be fooled by that. No real resources were invested in these areas and no real attempt was made to win people over or to see the potential of turf cutters and people in these areas as possible stewards who could play a vital role in restoring the health of these bogs.

If we were serious about these habitats, we should have offered free heating and energy to those affected. In a decade in which fuel and energy bills of ordinary people have rocketed, we told many rural people they could not access their own form of energy. We expected them to accept this. We should have offered jobs and opportunities in the conservation of our environment and the production of renewable energy by local co-operatives. We proposed a measure in the recently passed energy Bill that would have given small-scale, local co-operative producers of renewable energy access to the national grid, but it was opposed and defeated by the Government. We could have looked at using the more than 500,000 acres of public land in Coillte's hands that cannot be used sustainably for forestry and seen how we could use them with local communities affected by NHA sites. We could have, inventively and with proper resourcing, won allies in local communities in the fight to preserve our environment and raised bogs. We could have funded local co-operatives in forming renewable energy hubs and sustainable land management practices. We could have done this with the same vigour and largesse with which we throw tax incentives at multinationals and corporations. Instead we understaff and under-resource the National Parks and Wildlife Service, we offer derisory compensation to turf cutters and we pretend that individual turf cutting is the reason for the destruction of our bog habitats instead of the greater commercial exploitation of bogs overseen by vested interests.

Unfortunately, many in this debate play into the idea that the divide in this and other environmental issues is between an enlightened environmentalist lobby and a rapacious, greedy local bunch of gombeens. That is a huge mistake. With proper resourcing, rural dwellers can be advocates and defenders of these types of habitats and they can be the front line in preserving our unique environment. As long as we offer no real alternative to them, however, bar to tell them to stop using this resource and take the financial hit for the rest of us, we will never convince them or ever really win allies in these environmental battles. We oppose the de-designation of the NHA sites, and as the record of this and previous Governments suggests, this is not an attempt to preserve our heritage but to facilitate its destruction, as I have stated.

I want to end by emphasising that I believe this destruction is not at the hands of individual turf cutters but at the hands of State-sponsored bodies for commercial and industrial extraction. It could have been a sign that we are serious about our raised bogs if we had kept the existing NHAs and added to them while addressing the genuine concerns of local people and turf cutters. If we did that while switching from peat use in electricity generation and in horticulture, we could take the Government seriously. Instead we have another shameful chapter in the environmental record of this and previous Governments.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am thankful for the opportunity to speak on this issue. I welcome this legislation. In 2014, RPS scientifically examined many of the bogs that we have said for years were not suitable for conservation. It formulated a list of bogs used by ordinary domestic turf cutters throughout the country and especially in the west. I have listened to this debate and it is domestic turf cutters, ordinary people living in rural villages throughout this

country, who have been affected by this right throughout the midlands.

We heard the debate earlier and, rightly or wrongly, Ireland decided to set up Bord na Móna. It gave us much employment and people did their best at the time. It is very easy to come in 40 or 50 years later and be scathing about the objectives when Bord na Móna was set up. It provided much employment in the midlands and heated houses. People around the west sleáned turf during the Emergency and it was brought to the Phoenix Park to keep the people of Dublin warm. We should not just slate the company for what was done as there were many pluses in its time. As chairman of the Turf Cutters and Contractors Association, I have always spoken for domestic turf cutting. This involves people who just use enough for their own house each year. They are in many socially deprived areas and places with small farms or marginal land throughout the country.

The bogs being de-designated now will provide a way forward. I see Mr. Brian Lucas over there, and since he came on board, things have moved forward in a more positive way.

8 o'clock

There is a lot of fear on both sides of this argument, where relationships developed that through the years became strained. At long last, however, we are starting to build those relationships again. I thank the Minister for bringing this legislation before the House. It was promised earlier in the year but did not materialise. I thank the Minister for bringing it before the House now.

Debate adjourned.

Funding for Education: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Joan Burton: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

welcomes:

— the allocation of sufficient resources to meet demographic growth in our school system, including the allocation of additional special needs assistants and resource teachers;

— the funding of agreements reached with trade unions regarding pay levels for new entrant teachers, and full resourcing of the reform of the junior cycle; and

— the commitment contained in the programme for Government to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools;

notes:

— the failure to take any action in budget 2017 to continue the reduction in primary school class sizes that began in budget 2016;

— the lack of any measures in budget 2017 to begin reducing school costs for parents and, in particular, the absence of any improvement to school funding, which the Department of Education and Skills has described as ‘a critical issue’;

— that official costings provided in advance of budget 2017 estimate the cost of maintaining existing levels of funding per student in third level at €21 million in 2017; that the Department of Education and Skills has identified a requirement of at least €10 million each year to fund the development of technological universities; and that the cost of increasing the number of apprentices in budget 2016 amounted to €10 million;

— that the funding of €35 million provided for investment in further and higher education in budget 2017 will not even cover the items listed above, let alone the determination of the Minister for Education and Skills to fund targeted initiatives to provide skills, additional research funding and to support disadvantaged students; and

— that a minimal increase of 0.1% to the national training fund levy would have raised €67.1 million in 2017 which could have been used to fund such developments; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately commit to a one-point reduction to the staffing schedule of primary schools which controls average class sizes for the coming school year;

— publish a roadmap to outline how we can reach an average class size of no more than 20 within the lifetime of this Government;

— commit to multi-annual increases to school capitation rates, sufficient to end the practice of requesting voluntary contributions from parents;

— provide the full €21 million funding required to meet demographic growth in third level, and to direct additional resources at improving the staff-student ratios in third level and reducing the student contribution; and

— guarantee the funding required to fully roll out all new apprenticeships which will provide a wider range of opportunities for young people and, in particular, young women.

I wish to share my time with Deputies Willie Penrose and Brendan Ryan.

The failures and omissions in this year's budget are really quite startling. The failure to reduce class sizes, particularly for younger children, is difficult to understand, as is the failure to improve capitation payments for hard-pressed school budgets which would ease the pressure on parents for voluntary contributions and the failure to improve resources for simple schemes like book rental schemes in primary and secondary schools. It is very difficult to understand why these particulars were not addressed in the context of the amount of money that was available to spend. These issues are very well known not just to parents at school gates, but also to teachers, boards of management and everyone else involved in education.

As we face into the perils of Brexit, the greatest challenge this country has faced since the collapse of the banks and the construction industry, the lack of a detailed focus on education in budget 2017 is startling and disappointing. Regarding third level education, Deputy Micheál Martin frequently set out his stall and called for €100 million but what we saw in the budget was €35 million rather thinly spread. That €35 million in funding for investment in further and higher education in budget 2017 will not remotely cover the cost of a lot of the items on Fianna Fáil's shopping list, let alone match the determination of the Minister for Education and Skills, as expressed in quite a number of speeches, to develop targeted initiatives to enhance skills, provide additional research funding and support disadvantaged students.

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Official costings released in advance of the budget estimate that the cost of maintaining existing levels of funding for students in third level is €21 million in 2017. The Department also identified a requirement for at least €10 million each year to fund the development of technological universities, although I note that the Minister seems to have sent that off to a review or discussion group, *sine die*. In fact, if Deputy Micheál Martin waits long enough into the new year, his record for producing reports and reviews will be surpassed in one year by this Government, judging by the number referred to in the budget and accompanying documentation. The Department of Education and Skills also identified a requirement for at least €10 million to increase the number of apprentices. I note that while there has been a very welcome increase in the number of apprentices since the previous Fine Gael -Labour Party Government re-launched apprenticeships in 2014 and 2015, the number of female apprentices is disappointingly small.

Education is a great liberating force in Irish society. That is why, as a society, we value education and why each generation and each Dáil seeks to improve on what went before. Opportunities afforded by a good education, starting at preschool, enable the whole person, from childhood to old age, to be the best that he or she can be. Education enables people of modest backgrounds to achieve so that progress and achievement is not simply confined to those who have inherited wealth or position from family. Since the 19th century, the importance of education has been a defining value in Irish society.

Good teachers are a critical feature of a progressive education system. It is through their experience that we as politicians get to know more about what helps children, as well as through talking to parents. We learn, through our teachers and the work that they do, what we need to do as a Dáil to support and develop a system in which children, teenagers and adults can do best and thrive. When the Labour Party drew up its plans for improvements, chief among them was a reduction in class sizes. Our plan also included improvements to the capitation grant which would reduce the cost of running schools and to schemes such as the book rental scheme. Such measures would actually help schools.

We are also seeing increasingly diverse school communities in my own constituency and right across the country. There are lots of students of international origin in our schools. In some cases, the children were born in Ireland but their parents came to this country from abroad. This has given rise to serious issues in the area of language skills, for example.

As I said earlier, when the great recession happened, apprenticeships collapsed. My party colleagues Deputy Jan O'Sullivan and former Deputy Ruairí Quinn, spent a lot of time in Government trying to revive apprenticeships, which was done from 2014 onwards. However, the slow progress in this area that has been made by the current Government is astonishing. There is no sense of ambition or of an understanding of the opportunities that good apprenticeships can provide. Qualified apprentices can subsequently go on to pursue an academic path or can start their own businesses and many of us would have family members who have done just that. This Government, locked as it is in perpetual discussion and division, seems unable to focus, which has resulted in a fatally flawed education budget for 2017.

There are some very welcome measures in the budget, particularly the provision of additional teachers and resources to meet population or demographic pressures. However, when it comes to the practical issues, who wants a class of junior infants, senior infants or first class of 30? Remember, these are children who have moved from preschool, where class sizes are a fraction of that number. Yet we are expecting schools to adapt to class sizes which are, according to the OECD, among the highest in Europe. All of us here know personally, through work

experiences or through family and friends, that access to good education, where opportunity is identified and ambition is encouraged, is critical to everybody's development. Perhaps that does not apply if one happens to have been born into a very wealthy family.

Unfortunately, the budget introduced by the Government recently, following a number of very difficult years after the collapse of the banks and the construction industry and 300,000 people losing their jobs, lacks any sense of vision or ambition. Now that this country has started to grow again, we are facing into the difficulties of Brexit. There was no sense in the recent budget of extra opportunities being created. Will the Minister of State with responsibility for apprenticeships explain why women are being left out of apprenticeships? A small sum of money would have funded a programme to identify specific apprenticeship opportunities for women, but such a programme is just not there. In this regard, as in many aspects of the budget, there is a lack of breakthrough vision for the future, rather than the past.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I am glad to have an opportunity to contribute to the debate on this important motion. I urge people to support the motion which has been placed before the Dáil by the Labour Party. I am deeply indebted to our education system for the education I received in my formative years at Ballynacargy national school and at Coláiste Mhuire in Mullingar, which is an excellent Christian Brothers school. These schools had an important impact on me. I have always acknowledged the importance of providing adequate, vital and necessary resources to cater for a young school-going population that is set to grow for a number of years to come. This growth will present challenges in terms of the provision of adequate accommodation, teacher training places and, ultimately, vital third level provision.

The critical nature of the issue of class size and the pupil-teacher ratio cannot be overestimated. The Labour Party fundamentally believes in making classes smaller. This is a vital tool in tackling disadvantage. Our primary school classes are, on average, three or four pupils larger than our European counterparts. It was for this reason my colleague, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, commenced the process of reducing class sizes as Minister for Education and Skills last year even though she did not have a great deal of finance to play with. This move was widely welcomed and lauded. We anticipated, wrongly as it transpired, that this policy would be continued in the 2017 budget. It was deeply surprising that nothing was provided for a reduction in class sizes in the recent budget.

We know what it means to have children packed into overcrowded classrooms, especially at a young age. In our alternative budget, we provided for a reduction of one pupil in the pupil-teacher ratio. It would cost just €6 million, which is not an earth-shattering sum, to reduce the ratio in line with our proposal. I would say this cost could be met by taking money from the additional tax, above what was estimated, that will come in from self-employed people over the next month. We remain committed to focusing on this important parameter. We concur with the INTO's perceptive analysis of this fundamental failure in the budget. It has indicated that every week, more than 100,000 children are going into super-sized classes of 30 or more pupils. That is a severe indictment of our failure as a society and as a country to give the issue of class size the priority status it deserves. It is the Labour Party's view that class sizes should be reduced continually over time, with an ambition of reaching an average class size of 20 within five years or so. This would end the spectre of overcrowded classes forever.

The cost of education that is borne by many parents is a big issue for many people. Barnardos and other organisations regularly prepare comprehensive and detailed reports on the various aspects of this matter. The cost of schoolbooks, for example, is quite significant. During

its period in government, the Labour Party provided an additional €15 million in ring-fenced funding for schools towards the establishment of book rental schemes to reduce costs for parents. This scheme succeeded in reducing such costs by approximately 80%. We expanded the school meals programme significantly and took steps to enable parents to be consulted about the uniform policies of the various schools. We proposed to increase the capitation grant funding to schools by €10 per child in 2017, at a cost of just under €10 million. We committed to increasing that sum to €20 per child in the case of any school that agreed in writing to put an end to the practice of requesting voluntary contributions from parents. The imposition of such charges can be a severe load for people to carry. A new three-year book rental scheme, at a cost of €5 million per year, must be established to give funding to second level schools to set up book rental schemes and thereby help to reduce book costs for students. As I have said, such costs can be quite significant, particularly at second level.

The spectre of the failure of the budget to increase child benefit has had an impact. Child benefit was most important in our house when I was growing up. It helped my late mother to defray the costs associated with education. This is a fundamental issue.

My colleagues will deal with the issue of apprenticeships. There is huge potential to make significant progress in this area. My colleague, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, recognised that last year when she was involved as Minister in a fundamental review of the apprenticeship system. A number of new types of apprenticeships came on stream as a result of this initiative. It is clear that apprenticeships can create new and varied career paths for young people. We should widen them. It is disappointing that this has not been done. Approximately 350 apprenticeships are available in Germany. By contrast, we have taken a conservative approach. There is no better man than the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, whom I salute, to grab the opportunity to increase the number of apprenticeships available here to 350. He will leave a lasting imprint if he does that. It will be the equivalent of delivering for Waterford again. I advise him to ignore the conservative views. I know that bureaucrats are always conservative. I ask the Minister of State to give them a shake-up. There is an opportunity to increase the number of young people getting apprenticeships. This would open up career paths, especially for women, as Deputy Burton has said. As my colleagues have set out, the Government's objective of having an expanded apprenticeship programme will not get out of the traps in the absence of a proper basis for funding such a programme. As our motion points out, "a minimal increase of 0.1% to the national training fund levy would have raised €67.1 million in 2017". It is clear that such monies could be used to fund some of the important and worthwhile initiatives I have mentioned. We are not just proposing a motion; we are telling the Government how to get the money to fund important and vital initiatives.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: The Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education has found that our third level sector badly needs a long-term funding strategy. It has stated that the sector needs additional investment of approximately €1 billion by 2030 and that we need to start taking steps immediately to address that need. Unfortunately, the Government has kicked the expert group's report to touch. We propose to take immediate steps in the right direction to address this funding deficit.

In this motion, we propose to increase the national training fund levy on employers by a mere 0.1% and to legislate to allow the proceeds of the national training fund to be used to pay for higher education. We have already drafted the necessary legislation for this measure which would raise €67.1 million in 2017 alone. Although the measure we are proposing is modest, the sum of money it would raise is not. It would see employers pay a slightly higher contribution

towards the cost of third level, which is something that has been recognised as necessary by IBEC and other employer bodies. There should be little resistance to this proposal. We feel it is a no-brainer.

The additional money that would accrue from this measure could be used for three purposes. First, it could be used to increase funding to the third level sector in line with demographic growth, thereby ensuring class sizes do not get larger as student numbers increase. Second, funding of €10 million could be ring-fenced for the development of technological universities in Dublin, Munster, the south east and Connacht-Ulster. To date, such funding has been top-sliced from the funding available for all colleges. We believe a dedicated funding stream is needed. Third, a fund of €30 million could be set aside to be invested in minor capital works and equipment across our third level colleges. These proposals would not fix all the problems in the third level sector, but they would represent an important start.

We also need to work to redress the imbalance in staffing levels within our third level sector. Teaching staff and, perhaps in a less visible manner, support services in non-academic grades are under intense pressure. We need to start on a path which will see our third level sector invested with sufficient funding and sufficient workers. As we all know, college gives young people incredible and sometimes life-changing opportunities. No young person should miss out on such opportunities because of an inability to pay.

As well as asking companies to pay a little more towards the costs of third level education, we think that as the economy improves, it is time for the State to bear a greater share of these costs. The financial struggles of young people are not confined to their entry to college. They are week-to-week concerns for many students and families as they try to get by. Students can struggle with financial hardship throughout their college years for a variety of reasons. Students with disabilities often have unexpected costs that other students do not have to face. We need to increase funding to colleges to meet the requirements of demographic growth - this has been costed at €21 million - and to ensure funding is available to the student assistance fund and the fund for students with disabilities. When in government we expanded apprenticeships beyond the focus solely on construction-related trades and developed 21st-century apprenticeships in 25 new areas, including catering, financial services and information and communications technology. This has allowed many women to participate in apprenticeships to a significant degree for the first time. However, as Deputy Burton has stated, a great deal more remains to be done in this area.

We are keen to guarantee the funding required to fully roll out all apprenticeships for all our young people, especially our young women. We believe the number of places in the highly successful JobsPlus programme should be increased by 2,000 to help more young people secure employment. We proposed a €10 increase in jobseeker's payments to those under 25 years of age, along with an increase of the back-to-education allowance for young people to €188 per week. Combined with our proposals to reintroduce postgraduate grants, these proposals will provide over 10,000 young people with high-quality opportunities to prepare for sustainable employment.

Our motion is only a first step. However, if implemented, it would be a confident first step towards improving our education system.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan):
I move amendment No. 4:

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To delete all words after “Dáil Éireann” and substitute the following:

“welcomes:

- the commitments in the Programme for Government and in the Confidence and Supply Arrangement for a Fine Gael-led Government in the education area, including reducing class sizes, reintroducing guidance counselling for secondary schools and increasing financial supports for postgraduate students with particular focus on those from low income households;

- the commitments and allocations of resources in Budget 2017, including:

- an additional allocation of €458 million, a five per cent increase in 2017, resulting in an overall budget of €9.53 billion, the third highest in the history of the Department of Education and Skills;

- the recruitment of 2,400 additional teachers and 115 additional special needs assistants in 2017;

- the allocation of two thirds of the guidance resources that were previously cut, separately and transparently outside the quota on the staffing schedule;

- the reintroduction of the full maintenance grant from September 2017 for 1,100 postgraduate students from the lowest income category; and

- the allocation of an additional €36.5 million for higher education in 2017 as part of a broader multi-annual package; and

- the Government’s restatement of its commitment to delivering on all the elements of the Programme for Government and Confidence and Supply Arrangement for a Fine Gael-led Government in the education area over the lifetime of the Government.”

First of all I wish to comment on apprenticeships briefly. A total of €20 million has been made available in the budget for apprenticeships from the national training fund. The programme for Government commits to 50,000 new apprenticeships up to 2020. SOLAS and the Apprenticeship Council are preparing a detailed plan over a period of three years which will include what my colleagues in the Labour Party have said in respect of women in apprenticeships and so on. While that plan is under way, any information that Deputies need I will make available. That is going to happen, I guarantee Members that much.

The central ambition of the Government is to sustain economic progress and make ours a fairer and more compassionate society. We all believe in that, irrespective of where we come from or what part of the House. Essentially, all Deputies believe in that much. Investment in high-quality education and training is critical to achieving these goals. The programme for Government states: “Education is the key to giving every child an equal opportunity in life.” We are keen to support our teachers and institutions to continually improve. Building better links between education and the broader community, including the enterprise sector, is vital.

Last week’s budget was a first step in delivering the resources we need to progressively deliver on the action plan. The Department’s budget will increase by €458 million compared to the 2016 allocation, which represents a 5% increase. Overall, the Department will have a budget of over €9.5 billion, the third largest allocation after the allocations for the Departments

of Social Protection and Health. This will allow us to invest in measures throughout the education and training system which will drive reform, improve outcomes for new learners, tackle disadvantage and enhance quality.

A wide range of measures across the education and training system will be implemented as a result of the funding announced in the 2017 budget. The increased allocation will allow us to employ 2,400 additional teachers as well as over 100 special needs assistants. It gives us the resources to implement agreements reached with teacher unions, including an allocation of €130 million to implement the Lansdowne Road agreement. We will also implement the recent agreement reached with the TUI and INTO on salary increases for new-entrant teachers. We are willing to conclude a similar agreement to benefit newly-qualified ASTI teachers within the Lansdowne Road agreement. In that context I am keen to say that I have no wish to see any teacher taking industrial action. Everyone has a right to do so and I understand the frustration that exists. However, I echo the calls of the Minister for Education and Skills for ASTI to engage in constructive dialogue and see it as the only means to resolve the issues that concern ASTI members. That needs to be done and I hope it will be done.

Next year will see the first phase of the new investment in our higher education system. This will be critical to Ireland's economic development. As a result of the budget, over the next three years an additional €160 million will be invested in higher education. For the first time in recent years specific additional funding is being allocated for 2017 and beyond to cover the impact of increasing enrolments in higher education. Building on this, the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform will also be undertaking a review and consultation on the new employer-Exchequer investment mechanism to support multi-annual funding in the higher and further education sectors. This will complement the important work of the Oireachtas joint committee in examining the Cassells report on future funding of higher education. Funding will be provided to implement the new international education strategy, which is intended to increase the economic value of the sector by €500 million per year and attract in the region of 37,000 additional students by 2020.

The budgetary allocation in my area of ministerial responsibility will provide for increased demand for traditional apprenticeships as well as the roll-out of apprenticeships in new economic sectors. I spoke earlier on this point. In the coming months I will make all the information available that Members need on our plan for apprenticeships up to 2020.

The Springboard initiative has been maintained and new funding is being made available for flexible learning and skills development in higher education. This will be of significant benefit to employers and learners. Research investments are important as well in producing the highly-educated workforce that we need to grow the economy and contribute to society. Additional funding will allow the commencement of a frontier research programme and a new initiative to attract leading researchers. Over 3,000 students will benefit from measures to support more disadvantaged students to attend higher education. The measures will include the introduction of a full maintenance grant from September 2017 for over 1,000 postgraduate students in the lowest income category.

The budget will fund the implementation of the action plan on educational inclusion, which will be launched later in the year by the Minister, Deputy Bruton. The plan will include additional measures in areas like school leadership, teaching methods and clusters to improve the outcomes for students in the relevant schools.

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Following development and piloting over recent years, a new model for allocation of teaching resources for children with special educational needs will be implemented from September 2017. An additional €18 million will be provided in 2017 to provide for approximately 900 resource teacher posts. Further details regarding implementation of the new model will be announced in the coming months.

The budget continues the process of restoring guidance to schools. The equivalent of 100 additional guidance posts will be provided in September 2017. These will be allocated separately, transparently and outside of the quota in respect of the schedule of posts.

We recognise that school leadership is vital in promoting a school environment which is welcoming, inclusive, accountable and focused on high-quality teaching and learning. The budget will allow us to give greater support to schools in this area, including additional deputy principal posts for larger second level schools and middle management posts for primary and post-primary schools. We will be providing funding to support ongoing curriculum reform. This will include provision for individual professional time for teachers of the junior cycle and will involve 550 additional teaching posts. We will also be supporting reforms in several leaving certificate subjects, including economics, politics and society and physical education.

The Department's capital allocation next year will be €690 million. In the school sector this will support the creation of up to an additional 20,000 permanent school places in 2017. It is expected that up to 50 large-scale projects will reach substantial completion next year. Overall, the budget will allow us to make significant progress across a range of important areas within the education and training system and this will ultimately benefit learners.

I wish to take issue with the observations in the Labour Party motion to the effect that we will not be able to deliver on the commitments laid out in our budget day announcements. Some of the figures they have published are incorrect. For example, the cost of keeping pace with demographic growth in the higher education sector is €14 million, meaning that with the remaining €22.5 million we will be able to deliver on all the initiatives we have set out, including over 3,000 students who will benefit from an additional package of €8.5 million to support more disadvantaged students, including lone parents and Travellers, to attend higher level. This includes the introduction of a full maintenance grant, worth almost €6,000 from September 2017 for 1,100 postgraduate students in the lowest income category. There will be new targeted initiatives to provide skills, additional flexible learning places, funding to commence a new frontiers research programme and a new initiative to attract world-leading researchers in the context of Brexit.

For the first time in recent years, specific additional funding is being allocated for 2017, 2018 and 2019 to cover the impact of the increasing enrolments. Funding for 2017 will support 179,000 full-time enrolments. There will be provision for expansion in apprenticeships and to implement the new international education strategy, increase the value of the sector by €500 million per year and attract 37,000 additional students by 2020. On top of this initial three-year funding commitment, the Government will work on putting in place a new comprehensive and ambitious multi-year funding package for the sector from 2018. As part of this, the Department will undertake a review and consultation with the aim of developing a multiannual funding model for higher and further education and training. We have been very clear that the commitments we have set out in the action plan, reflecting the programme for Government and the confidence and supply agreement, including the commitments for further reductions in class sizes, will be progressively implemented over the coming years as resources allow.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: If Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin is present, I will yield five minutes of my time to her.

Tá má sásta seasamh anseo agus labhairt ar son na scoileanna, na hollscoileanna agus córas oideachais na tíre seo. Níl aon dabht ach go bhfuil ganntanais móra sa chóras sin. Tá a lán ag teastáil ó dhaoine. Tá tuilleadh múinteoirí, áiseanna agus scoileanna ag teastáil. Níl aon dabht ach go bhfuil tuilleadh pá ag teastáil ó mhúinteoirí. Tá a lán dúshlán againn sa chóras seo. Caithfidimid obair le chéile ar son an chóras oideachais, ar son na mic léinn agus ar son na múinteoirí. We recognise that some progress has been made in this budget and on some key educational priorities of our party which we insisted on as part of the confidence and supply arrangement with Fine Gael. We enabled this progress to happen by taking our own leadership responsibilities seriously, by recognising that my party leader did not have enough votes to become Taoiseach and acknowledging that somebody else did but in that engagement we made sure that the policies we prioritised would be implemented. Some of those policies have been listed by Members here. It would have been very easy for us to say we did not want anything to do with it but we took the responsible course that will see some of those policies delivered.

Despite the Labour Party having been in office for the past five years, some really unfair decisions were taken on education, several of which members of the party had to fight against in order to protect the education system. We recall Pat Rabbitte hosting a large meeting of the Labour Parliamentary Party to reverse savage cuts that former Minister Ruairí Quinn proposed. Several shortsighted cuts have impacted heavily on students and teachers, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as the cuts to special needs assistants, SNAs, and resource teaching and the savage cut in guidance counselling. I do not know who thought that one up. I am proud to say several Fianna Fáil Ministers have pushed forward guidance counselling over 40 years, starting with Paddy Hillery. I am glad that our party has been instrumental in bringing back the ex quota system of guidance counselling because never has it been more necessary not simply for career guidance, but also for mental health. On the one hand, the Government is developing mental health strategies for second level schools, referring to guidance counsellors, and, on the other, guidance counsellors are being taken away from schools. We have to get this job right.

We also see in the confidence and supply agreement the start of the rowing back on the other disgraceful cut removing postgraduate student grants. Students on the lowest income will receive them as they start college next year. That is very welcome. If we want to have a knowledge economy and a society that values learning, we must allow every section of society to engage in postgraduate education. The numbers entering postgraduate education since that cut dropped by 5%. That has had a devastating effect not just on the poorest families, but also society as a whole because we value learning and continuous learning.

We welcome the increase in teacher numbers but that is simply to keep pace with demographics. It had to happen and the money has been found for it, but it has not led to a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio. That is one of the conditions in the confidence and supply arrangement whereby we sit back at budget time, for the election of a Taoiseach and in confidence votes, but we need to get our policies implemented. We look forward to more progress on the pupil-teacher ratio. We will highlight it over the coming year as the debate on the next budget starts earlier than ever before through the committee system, and will look for it to be prioritised and to make sure the money is available to make the classes smaller, particularly for the youngest age group. Some students at third level are in classes of more than 500. They can cope with that, although it is not entirely satisfactory, but class sizes at primary level of up to 40 pupils

and more in some cases are not acceptable. We have to work to ensure that those very small children have the best possible learning opportunity.

I will not dwell on the Labour Party tactic in the last Government because it did not work too well but it eroded many remarkable advances in education. Some of the worst decisions of that five years were not simply in terms of cuts, but were a clear policy direction. Several schemes to tackle educational disadvantage and access were abolished. Ruairí Quinn effectively abolished postgraduate grants in 2012, except in one category, which was inconsistent with all the talk about a high-skill smart economy. It was devastatingly regressive. It compounded inequality by creating an advantage for families that could afford it. That was not what I expected from the Labour Party and it is not what we want from society. I am glad we have got that changed.

In 2011, guidance counselling became part of the staffing schedule and its ex quota aspect was removed. In schools with a better socio-economic background that did not make a difference but other schools noticed a difference and many students were left out and did not get the guidance they needed. Somebody was not there for them in a time of need or, in fact, if somebody was there for them, that person had to come out of the history or English class where they had been redeployed to give that guidance. That is what was happening over recent years. Our party is very happy to see that guidance counselling is now ex quota so that a guidance counsellor will not be in an English class when a crisis arises. That is a significant achievement. It took a lot of talking with the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Bruton, to remind him of what was in the confidence and supply agreement but that job has been done.

The Labour Party lost many votes because of what it did and did not do in respect of higher education. That is a fact. We welcome the publication of the Cassells report on higher education. Since its publication, we initiated a debate in our party about funding for higher education. Politically, it is not the most vote winning idea. No one will go back to a constituency and get a pile of votes for trying to deliver for third level. The right thing to do for our country, society, young people and third level teachers is to try to work together to provide that funding. In our manifesto, we identified a gap of approximately €100 million per annum. The Cassells report identified a similar gap. We are not happy that €100 million has not been delivered. However, we are happy that €36.5 million has been delivered and that, for the first time in years, some State funding has been added to the pot for third level education because in the past, the student registration increased and the State funding decreased. That was the Labour Party way. Whatever model of funding is decided on eventually, and the Oireachtas committee will examine that and some Government, although possibly not this minority one, will have to decide on a fair way to fund third level education to ensure people have access to it but no matter what decision is taken, it will require more State funding. We have to get to first base on that. It needs more State funding, and while the €36.5 million that has been allocated is welcome, it is not enough. It was the result of political pressure my leader and my party put on over recent weeks and months. In the Government's action plan on education there was hardly any mention of third level funding and when it came to budget time, we were told there is a three year strategy in place in terms of third level funding. I agree with Deputy Burton that this demonstrates a total lack of vision regarding education. Instead of sitting down and having an overall vision, the Minister and the Department are reacting to events. Fianna Fáil identified this funding gap in our manifesto. The Cassells report was published, and we imposed serious pressure to get that funding delivered because there is a huge deterioration, particularly in the staff-student ratio at third level. The average staff-student ratio in the OECD is 14:1. In Ireland, it is 19.5:1 at this stage. That is an issue that will begin to be addressed because if that funding was not allocated,

the problem would just get worse because there will be increasing numbers of students.

We will have to consider also the type of vision that Fianna Fáil Governments demonstrated in the past in terms of establishing the regional college network and when Blanchardstown Institute of Technology was established. We will have to establish another college somewhere because in terms of the demographics coming up through the system at primary level, and it is starting to go into secondary level, now is the time to plan the type of extra third level provision we will need over the next ten or 12 years and identify the location, skillsets and all that goes with that because it is an issue we have to take seriously.

The average class size in Ireland is 25. It is greater than the European average, which is 21. However, there are a huge number of small schools here which affects the average. Approximately 130,000 children, including all three of my children, are in super-sized classes of more than 30 students. That figure is up from 96,000 in the school year 2006-07, which admittedly was at the height of the resources that would have been available. Almost 10,000 children are in classes of more than 35 students. That cannot continue. As a first step to ease that burden, Fianna Fáil will be pushing to reduce class sizes at primary level, and we have already got a commitment on that in the confidence and supply arrangement. We want the Government to reduce them to an average class size of a maximum of 23 children. Over the term of the Government, from the next budget on, year on year, we believe the ambition should be to progressively implement one point reductions in the scale, prioritising the youngest children under nine years of age where lower ratios have been shown to have the greatest impact.

With everything that is being said and done currently with regard to teachers, we must always remember that teachers are one of the fundamental building blocks of our society and the community in which we live. To a large degree, they are the people to whom we sub-contract the education and the imparting of knowledge to our children when they are at school. I am sure every colleague here will agree that the work of teachers is appreciated by this Dáil so we have to make sure that in terms of the public sector pay commission announced today by the Government, something Fianna Fáil demanded as part of the confidence and supply arrangement, the role of teachers in shaping our economy and our society is addressed. First and foremost, we must get the pay scales fully equalised. I acknowledge that significant progress was made over the summer in terms of restoring the allowances and building them into the pay scales. That has been done, and the INTO and the TUI members will notice that in their wages next year. They will also notice the benefits of the Lansdowne Road agreement and the restoration of income. That is very welcome. Like everybody else, I wish it could be more but it is significant.

Some teachers will get significant pay rises next year if they are in the INTO and the TUI. The ASTI members will not get them because they have chosen to remain outside the Lansdowne Road agreement. This and that has been said about the ASTI teachers. The average ASTI teacher is a very middle of the road person, generally speaking, from very good schools. They do a very good job, and if one meets them they will say they have the education of children as their first priority. Strikes are planned, and other industrial action is planned also. They are meeting with the Government on that but I ask the ASTI members to examine the benefits that are available to their colleagues in the TUI and the INTO to see if they would like to be part of that and to receive those benefits. Every major party in this Dáil, except the small left wing parties, supports the Lansdowne Road agreement because we realise there is a certain amount of money available. All the unions in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Government have got together and negotiated this to try to get the best possible deal for them. We might not agree with every aspect of it, but it seems to me to be a reasonable attempt to work out a fair

deal for unwinding the financial emergency measures in the public interest legislation. It is part of rowing that back.

If we rowed it back immediately, it would cost €2.3 billion, as has been often quoted. A huge amount of that would go to higher paid civil servants because they are getting much greater benefit than those at the lower end. We cannot unwind it all at once. We have to unwind it very carefully, going from low to high. Already, some of those at the very bottom of the scale will be on slightly more pay than they were on in 2008. We would like them to have even more, but the unwinding is happening at a progressive rate. We want to see that continuing to happen.

The Minister of State should see himself not just as part of a Government that is on another side in the negotiations with unions. He can also be an advocate for teachers. He can be somebody who says that we value what teachers do, that this is the direction in which he sees the teaching profession going, and that this is the value we put on teachers as educators and as the building blocks of society and of our economy. That message can be sent to get goodwill among the sector, and the public service pay commission will play an important role in that regard. If the opportunity arises, I look forward to making a submission to it on the work of teachers and other staff throughout the education sector; it is not all about teachers.

With regard to the ASTI, its members should look at what is available and on what they are losing out. I am not in the business of having arguments with them. I am in the business of listening to them and their many and various concerns. They should look at what is available to see if there is a realistic possibility of a better deal.

There is a realistic possibility of making further progress on the question of the young teachers. We have already made a substantial move on that within the Lansdowne Road agreement. There is no reason we cannot show the way on that, and move even further forward on it. Everyone accepts that it cannot all be done on day one but if we say to them that this is what we can do, it will indicate a seriousness of intent to eliminate that discrepancy.

We have tabled an amendment to the motion that recognises the items we have done and acknowledges some of our concerns. In terms of education, however, most of us here would prefer to work together to ensure we get the best possible system, the best pay for our teachers, the best outcomes for our young people and the best value for society because that is what it is all about.

Níl mé chun mórán eile a rá, ach ba mhaith liom críochnú trí thrácht a dhéanamh ar thábhacht na Gaeilge sa chóras oideachais. Tá sé mar sheasamh ag Fianna Fáil go bhfuil sé tábhachtach an Ghaeilge a choimeád i gcróilár an chórais sin agus freisin gur cheart níos mó dul chun cinn a dhéanamh ar theangacha eile. Foghlaimíonn daltaí Gaeilge, Fraincis, Gearmáinis agus teangacha eile ar scoil. Caithfidh torthaí na foghlama sin a dhéanamh níos fearr. Ba cheart dúinn a chinntiú go bhfuil daoine flúirseach sa Ghaeilge, agus sna teangacha eile atá foghlamtha acu, nuair a thagann siad amach as an gcóras scolaíochta. Is léir go bhfuil ag teip orainn sa dúshlán sin faoi láthair. Tá a lán oibre le déanamh. Ba mhaith liom níos mó a dhéanamh. Measaim go n-aontóidh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle liom gur chóir do Theachtaí sa Dáil seo níos mó Gaeilge a labhairt sna díospóireachtaí éagsúla, seachas díospóireachtaí ar an nGaeilge amháin. Thaispeánfadh sé sin do dhaoine go bhfuil an teanga beo agus tábhachtach agus go bhfuil toradh úsáideach as foghlaim na Gaeilge ar scoil.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tuigim go bhfuil an Teachta Nolan ag roinnt a cuid ama leis

an Teachta Funchion.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Roinnfidh mé trí nóiméad léi. Tá mé lán-sásta caint faoi oideachas anocht. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhairt ar an gcóras oideachais. Níl aon dabht ach go bhfuil bearnaí móra sa chóras oideachais faoi láthair. Tá sé soiléir nach bhfuil páistí nó daltaí tríú leibhéal ag fáil cothrom na Féinne faoi láthair. Iarraim ar na páirtithe atá i gcumhacht feabhas a chur ar an scéal agus i bhfad níos mó a dhéanamh chun é seo a athrú go buan.

This motion does not go far enough. I agree that the issue of class sizes is one that must be addressed and I am hugely disappointed that, despite our having the second highest class sizes in Europe, there was no provision for a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio at primary level in budget 2017. I am also disappointed that there was no significant move to address spiralling back to school costs that are crippling ordinary and middle income households across this State. This is a huge issue and a joint Oireachtas committee report was produced on it, which I assume is sitting on a shelf somewhere. The Government needs to take it off the shelf and do something about back to school costs as soon as possible.

The Labour Party is right to highlight the fact that the €36.5 million allocated to third level will not address the immediate demands of the sector and will scarcely cover demographic changes and ongoing policy initiatives. On these matters, the Labour Party and Sinn Féin agree. However, the motion put forward by the Labour Party completely ignores the significant cuts to critical areas such as the NEPS service, school transport, the school completion programme and guidance counselling services. Sinn Féin has called for the restoration of one guidance counsellor per 500 pupils, ex quota, and 100 is not enough. The motion also conveniently ignores the fact that previous Labour Party Ministers for Education and Skills stood over one of the most despicable cuts to our education system, namely, the 15% cut in resource hours' teaching for children with special educational needs. This was outrageous, considering the fact that these children have been in overcrowded classrooms for many years. It ignores the fact that it was a Labour Minister for Education and Skills who increased student fees despite a clear promise not to do so during an election campaign.

Unfortunately, the Labour Party has very little to be proud of in terms of funding for education. That is the simple reality. Budget 2017 does not go anything like far enough to reverse the regressive, harsh cuts imposed on our education system since 2008. It is a missed opportunity and makes a sham of the Minister's so-called plan to create the best education system in Europe. Over 200 schools are currently using prefab accommodation to teach our children and a significant number of schools do not have access to broadband or robust wireless networks. A survey by the Higher Education Authority stated that almost 40% of the capital buildings at third level are in need of upgrade or replacement. Children all across this State wait years to obtain an educational assessment while those with an established special educational need cannot obtain the recommended hours with their resource teacher.

The ESRI has pointed out that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have been disproportionately affected by the cuts to guidance counselling. While I welcome the announcement of the 100 posts in budget 2017, this is not nearly enough to provide the 750 posts needed to provide guidance counselling on the basis of one counsellor per 500 students ex quota.

Every year I am sure everyone in this House, particularly rural Deputies, is contacted by constituents who have had issues with the school transport system. It is clear that the system does not provide for the needs of our students and does not reflect the reality on the ground,

where parents wish to send their child to the established school for their community, the school their friends attend, the school their siblings attend or the school that has been the traditional school for children from their neighbourhood. The huge increase in the numbers of children availing of concessionary transport highlights the fact that this system is failing miserably. The programme for Government contains a clear commitment that a review of the school transport system would be carried out prior to budget 2017 but this has not been fulfilled.

The programme for Government also contains a clear commitment that a review of the barriers to education for lone parents would be completed prior to budget 2017. This raises the question of how many more commitments in relation to education under the programme for Government will not be delivered. This Government needs to show that it is serious about investing in our education system, and about securing the best possible future for our young people. We on the Opposition benches must continue to fight to ensure that this happens. We must not be content to settle for scraps. Our young people deserve much better. This motion does not go far enough and I am urging all parties to support the Sinn Féin amendment. Iarraim ar na páirtithe eile tacaíocht a thabhairt do leasú Shinn Féin.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I welcome some of the positive aspects in budget 2017 on education, such as the increase for resource teachers and special needs assistants. One serious obstacle, however, is the rising costs for parents of sending their children to school. The Bill calls for a multiannual increase to school capitation rates and I support this as it could put a stop to the need for voluntary contributions from parents. Anyone who is a parent will know exactly what this contribution is. Voluntary contributions are often a minimum spend of €150 per child, a significant amount of money that many families simply do not have and which pushes many over the poverty line. This Government has not committed to tackling the high costs associated with sending children to school. Many families struggle to meet the basic costs and the notion of a free education system is a myth.

There is no consistency in respect of voluntary contributions. In Kilkenny in my own constituency, the range goes from €100 to €160 per child at primary school level. We cannot blame schools for this - it is due to the cuts in capitation rates over the past number of years. Schools have to bridge this gap but they are using the money for basic things such as heat and electricity. It is crazy in this day and age that we have to ask for the necessities our children need on a daily basis. They should be funded completely by the State and pressure should not be put on schools and teachers to come up with this money. This puts pressure on parents and families who are often already struggling. On top of the voluntary contribution there are school books, uniforms, transport and all the other school supplies. It rises every year and it needs to be tackled.

All levels of education are important in a child's life, but primary education is crucial for a child's development. If their stability is already being challenged at such an early stage, this will inevitably have a knock-on effect for their later educational prospects.

9 o'clock

One of the proposals we put forward in our alternative budget was to increase capitation rates by 2%. This was seen as a first measure, but it would go some way towards deal with the problem of these voluntary contributions and the notes that constantly come home for €5, €10 or €20 for this and that. I do not blame the schools or the teachers - it is not their fault. They are left with no choice. In order to run the school, they need the money, but it puts a lot of pressure on parents and families. It is very difficult for some parents to explain to their children

that they do not have the money and they have to be the one sent into school without it. It is not good, particularly at primary level which is so important for children. I support that aspect of the motion.

As my colleague stated, we have tabled an amendment and I urge Deputies to support that also.

Deputy Mick Barry: I will refer to the issues of pay rates for new entrant teachers and big business funding for third level institutions. I will start with the latter.

In his speech to the Dáil on budget day, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, stated that “Ensuring education remains the linchpin of our economic success requires an intensified focus on a sustainable long-term model for higher and further education”. He went on to state:

The Minister for Education and Skills and I are, therefore, initiating a consultation process on the design and operation of an Exchequer-employer investment mechanism to operate from 2018 onwards. This is also intended to drive continued reform, quality and performance across the sector, in line with the action plan for education. I expect this proposal to be brought to the Government by the middle of next year, following the conclusion of consultation.

I believe that these are key sentences in the Budget Statement made by the Minister and they have not, to date, been given sufficient attention either by the Dáil or the media. The Minister clearly seems to be opening the door here for an increased level of private sector investment in the third level sector. This is in line with neoliberal trends in other countries, trends which are undermining the value of third level education as we have known it.

In the journal *Academic Matters*, in a piece about private sector investment in third level education in Canada, Dr. Jamie Brownlee wrote recently that “once underfunding has undermined the integrity and functionality of a public system, corporations and market-oriented bureaucrats are invited to come in and reinvigorate these ‘failing’ institutions through restructuring or privatization”. Dr. Brownlee outlines how private sector investment in the Canadian third level sector has over time boosted the commercialisation of research, increased contract faculty working, resulted in increased co-ordination of university programmes and labour market needs to the severe detriment of arts based courses, resulted in the appointment of management consultant company representatives to the boards of universities and led to ever higher tuition fees with students being seen increasingly as customers.

In the United States, two individuals, brothers Charles and David Koch, donated \$23.4 million to colleges and universities in 2014. Of course, there were strings attached. These strings included control over the curriculum and the right to obtain personal information about students. Control over curriculum included the promotion of what were described as “deregulatory government policies”. In Britain, the Conservative Government is turning the higher education system into a competitive market-driven system. In four years’ time, private providers will get the power to award degrees. For-profit business will have the power to use the title “university”, somewhat like the Trump University in the United States. Writing in the *Financial Times*, Mr. Martin Wolf recently commented that the British Government proposes to turn them into the equivalent of purveyors of baked beans. No doubt the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, will say that cannot or will not happen here, but that is what happens when big business gets

a strong grip on third level. It would be naive to think otherwise. It would be naive to think that Ireland would take the same road as Canada, the US and Britain but end up at a different destination. There needs to be far more debate about the Minister's proposal and resistance to it should not be delayed until 2018.

The Labour Party motion states that it welcomes "the funding of agreements reached with trade unions regarding pay levels for new entrant teachers". The Labour Party used to support the principle of equal pay for equal work. Why is the Labour Party, and Fianna Fáil, now supporting a deal between Government and some trade union leaders which keeps in place unequal pay for equal work? According to the president of the largest secondary teachers union in the State, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland, Mr. Ed Byrne, this morning, the agreement referred to in the motion will mean that a secondary teacher who joined the profession between 2011 and 2016 will earn €2,775 less next year doing exactly the same work as someone who joined the profession before 2011 with the same number of years on the clock. Would the Labour Party support pay discrimination on the grounds of race, gender or sexual orientation? If not, why then support it on the grounds of what year one joins a profession, in most cases, effectively, on the grounds of age? No doubt the reply will be that partial restoration is a step in the right direction, but one would not justify a mere partial bridging of a gap between workers with different skin colour. Why then justify it in this case? Equal pay for equal work is a principle and cannot be subdivided.

Perhaps the Labour Party might argue that the example given above would be illegal but that this case is actually legal. So what? Votes for women was once illegal. The right to strike was once illegal, and still is for gardaí. Free speech was once illegal. Unjust rules and laws were fought and overturned by struggles from below. Never were they changed, by the way, by the establishment imposing fair play. Always they were won as a result of an organised fight against that same establishment.

The ASTI is to be congratulated for deciding to fight for the basic trade union principle of equal pay for equal work. We will be more than happy to back them in their strike every inch of the way.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The next slot is being shared between Deputies Maureen O'Sullivan and Pringle. I understand Deputy O'Sullivan is having four and a half minutes and then she will hand over to Deputy Pringle.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I acknowledge some of the positives in the budget: the increase in funding, the extra teachers, the guidance counsellors change, the additional posts for SNAs and resource teachers, and also the provision in relation to those one-teacher primary schools that are on islands. The facts are that there is an increase in the numbers attending both primary and second level schools, and the question is whether the education system is able to cope with that increase. The schools are still very much suffering the effects of the austerity budgets and it will take time and a lot more resources to redress those cuts.

There is a couple of particular issues that I want to discuss. One is the pupil-teacher ratio. For me, the priority is those classes with over 30 pupils. Some of them are also dealing with foreign national students who have language difficulties. They are also dealing with pupils with behavioural issues and also with learning difficulties. The research shows the benefits of the small class size, in particular, its role in identifying those with special education needs. The research also shows that higher student achievement is attained in smaller class sizes. That

must be a priority.

Looking at educational disadvantage, of course, I look at my own constituency. In the very disadvantaged areas there, almost half the population only reached primary education, or even lower. While there is an improvement in the progression to further education and third level, parts of Dublin Central in the north inner city are very far behind. Therefore, I stress the importance of early childhood care. Small class sizes, the school completion programmes, the role of the home-school liaison scheme and parenting programmes all need continued support because they are making a difference.

DEIS status is important. There are schools with significant numbers of children who are disadvantaged but the school does not have DEIS status. That issue is not getting the attention it deserves.

For early school leavers, and I have many of them in my constituency, literacy programmes are vital because some people are still struggling. The special community employment, CE, scheme plays a particularly positive role. From my own teaching days, I know the value of post leaving certificate, PLC, courses as an end in themselves, but also as a progression route to third level. I heard what the Minister of State said about apprenticeships and it is welcome that we are seeing a return of those programmes. Those of us at the Restaurants Association of Ireland briefing the week before last know of the need for more apprentices to go into the hospitality area.

Looking at educational disadvantage in terms of the motion and the amendments, there was no reference - unless I missed it when I was reading through them - to the funding that goes into private education and into the fee paying schools. I am appalled when I see second level fee paying schools offering scholarships to children from the non-fee paying primary schools and presenting this as their contribution to educational equality. That implies that the education they provide in their fee paying schools is somehow better than that provided by the community school or the voluntary secondary school.

I wish to raise some other points. I was very critical of the Teaching Council on numerous occasions in the previous Dáil but I am appalled at the treatment of some teachers who, for various reasons, did not get their renewal form in on time due to personal circumstances that were not taken into account. In one case, the fee went through but not the renewal. Unfortunately, teachers have no recourse to anybody beyond the Teaching Council unless they go the legal route.

Second, there are teachers who chose, as is their right, not to join a union but in some schools they are being deemed to be members of the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland, ASTI, and so the Lansdowne Road agreement does not apply to them. Almost 1,000 teachers are suffering financial penalties because they did not join a union. There have been legal judgments in Ireland and in Europe where the right of employees not to join a union has been upheld and also the right of an employee not to incur penalties because they did not join a union. There would be a huge hue and cry if somebody was penalised for being in a union but there is nothing for those teachers who exercised their right not to join a union.

As a former history teacher, my final appeal is that we would have another look at history at junior certificate level. It cannot be taught in a modular way. It just does not work. We know the importance of history. As a former teacher, I acknowledge the great work that has been done

over the years. We hear so much about what is negative but I want to acknowledge the work of teachers, students, and boards of management in schools over the years.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: All the positive developments that have been included in the budget were acknowledged earlier in the debate, but that serves to highlight even more the failings in the budget in terms of dealing with education. While the positives are that the budget has set out to meet the demographic requirements of a growing population of school-going children, it has neglected to deal with any of the issues remaining from the recession and austerity years. This budget, as pointed out previously in the House, is a continuation of the austerity budgets.

The budget has failed completely in even trying to tackle the issue of class sizes across the board. At the end of 2017, we will have the biggest class sizes in Europe. That is a damning indictment of our so-called recovery and our so-called growing economy in that the Government cannot even see its way to attempting to reduce class sizes. For the 100,000 children who are in classes of more than 30 students across our national schools, it is vitally important that class sizes are reduced. It has been proven, and this was outlined by Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan, that educational outcomes are better for children in smaller class sizes. We need to make sure that the outcomes for students are as good as they possibly can be. That is what should be at the centre of everything we are doing in terms of education.

There was nothing in the budget to address the cost of running schools. All of us in the House probably hear from parents who have to constantly fund-raise for the schools their children attend in order for the school authorities to provide heating, to be able pay electricity bills and to provide needed materials for the teaching of their children. We could have granted a pay increase for parents by reducing the burden on them of funding schools through voluntary contributions and constant fund-raising and, thereby, put more money in their pockets by making sure that they did not have to contribute more to cover the cost of the education for their children.

Barnardos estimates that an allocation of €103 million a year would make primary education free for all parents and their children. It would have been a good use of the fiscal space to make sure that primary education would be truly free. A number of other issues have not been addressed in regard to the education budget. One startling issue is the ongoing use of prefabs across the country. There are two schools in particular in County Donegal, Gaelscoil na gCeithre Máistrí where the students have been in prefab accommodation for 17 years and St. Mary's national school in Stranorlar which has 35% of its students in prefab accommodation. If we consider that we have spent €83 million in total over the past five years maintaining prefabs, we need to speed up the delivery of the capital programme to provide proper buildings for those schools.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The next group is the Rural Alliance. Is Deputy Mattie McGrath sharing time with Deputies Harty and Danny Healy-Rae?

Deputy Michael Harty: Yes. We will each have two and half minutes.

I would like to address the issue of primary school class sizes. In County Clare and in many peripheral parts of Ireland, there are small rural primary schools. The 2017 budget gives some element of protection to two-teacher schools but three and four-teacher primary schools are still substantially curtailed by the cuts inflicted by the then Minister for Education, Ruairí Quinn, in the previous Government. In 2008, a two-teacher school qualified for a third teacher when it

reached a threshold of 48 pupils. This now stands at 55. In 2008, a three-teacher school qualified for a fourth teacher when it reached a threshold of 78 pupils. That now has risen to 85. Thus, small schools which are growing can have class sizes of up to 27, or perhaps 30, before they qualify for a second or a third teacher. To compound this problem, pupils of several different ages can be spread across large class sizes. These two factors are helping to put increased pressure on teachers and are putting our pupils at a disadvantage.

Teaching becomes a very difficult task especially when delivering new programmes such as the Aistear programme, a play-based programme for junior and senior infants, and the new integrated language curriculum for English and Irish. The methodology of these programmes is very difficult to implement in the context of an overcrowded small school, particularly when they require one-to-one interaction, group based learning, peer learning and the identification of clear progression milestones for each pupil.

Small rural schools are the bedrock of our rural society and must be resourced in a fair and equitable manner. Overcrowded classes are unacceptable and inhibit the potential of our children, especially when they struggle to achieve. Virtually all our children spend eight years in primary school. Unfortunately, many drop out after their junior certificate and many do not reach further levels of education. If we want to have greater equality in our education system, it must be properly funded to reduce class sizes and to give our children the best possible start in life. If we resource our primary schools, they will deliver a better educated and more adaptable group of young students who will thrive and flourish in their adult lives.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Reports suggest that 600 rural national schools are under threat as numbers drop below 50 students. If a large number of these schools close, it will be to the detriment of rural Ireland. Something must be done and the Minister and the Department must understand that when it is suggested that a two-teacher school needs 19 pupils, different factors need to be assessed. About the only thing I agree with the Taoiseach on is that things will turn around in rural Ireland. We hope they will but if the schools are closed it will not help. I know of families that have come back to the area. One family has brought five children to the local school. That is a big difference. It should ensure the school will stay open for a lot longer than was thought. There must be 19 pupils for a two-teacher school. The Minister of State should look at what will happen going forward. Is there a possibility that more children could come back and we will have more in the next couple of years? The Minister of State should take into account that when that small school is shut, the town school will need extensions built on. There will be no bother then getting more teachers and it will cost a lot of money. That also has to be taken into account. There are longer distances for the children to go to the central school. Many families are down to one car now and will not get school transport. The commitment given to students of schools that closed down before, that they would be taken to a central school, has been reneged on.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank Deputy Healy-Rae for his co-operation. Deputy McGrath has two and a half minutes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am glad to be able to speak on this motion tonight. It is a bit rich coming from the Labour Party. It was founded in my own town of Clonmel.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Deputy McGrath jumped ship after his party sunk the country.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: How many ships did Deputy Howlin jump?

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Deputy Brendan Howlin: Deputy McGrath jumped ship.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Labour Party is shipwrecked. It has lost the ship and lost the party.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am in the same party.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Can I continue?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy should address the Chair.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He cannot take the medicine. The Labour Party could not hold a conference in Clonmel three years ago. It was founded in Clonmel as a party of the people, the ordinary working man. They got into bed with the blue shirts and now we only have the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, over here-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am sure Deputy McGrath's constituents asked him to come here to discuss the situation of rural schools.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am, but I am being interrupted.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy should speak without interruption.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am being interrupted. I am surprised that the Labour Party has the audacity to propose this motion.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy McGrath-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am looking at the Acting Chairman, not at the Minister of State. Tá mé ag féachaint ar an gCathaoirleach. I am speaking through the Chair. Tá mé ag déanamh mo dhíochill. The Labour Party put down this motion having spent five years in Government when FEMPI legislation went through and the Labour Party did not vote for it. Its members blamed others for voting for it. They went with gusto and added to it because they were attached to the Fine Gael big farmers and they did not know how they could pass it with the little people. My colleague, Deputy Michael Harty, was elected after a "No doctor, no village" campaign. If there is no school, there is no community. They ought to recognise that.

I hope the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, will go away from Waterford city, out to Coolnasmear, Tooraneena, Ballymacarbry, and out to the Nire and see the small schools there and the work they do. School is vital for the education of our children but a whole community evolves around it. There is room and space and if we close these schools if they go below 19 pupils, as Deputy Danny Healy-Rae said, we will never rebuild them. We have seen them closed all over the place in rural Ireland and there has been huge loss there. Families are coming back but they have to go into the towns. That has not been good. It is really high handed of the Labour Party which used to be the party of the people going back 50 years ago, including Séan Treacy, who is still alive, Michael Ferris, Dan Spring and many people like that, but they have lost their way completely. The Labour Party has come in here only six months out of office and put down this motion to tell us all about what it wants to do with rural schools when it persecuted them, obliterated them and-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Will the Acting Chairman give me 30 seconds because Deputy Howlin interrupted?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Deputy is out of time.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): No.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Deputy Howlin interrupted.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Please, Deputy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Deputy Howlin cannot bear the truth.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I would really appreciate-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I will finish.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy can have ten seconds.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Labour Party has a brass neck to come in here and put down this motion when it persecuted the people and brought in-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Thank you.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: -----when it said it would burn the bondholders, what did it do?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Thank you.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It was Labour's way and Frankfurt's way. It persecuted the people and got into bed with the Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, and Ms Merkel.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy McGrath and Deputy Howlin, please. There are other Members present. We have to move on with the debate. The next section is being shared between Deputies Catherine Martin, Stephen Donnelly and Seamus Healy. Is Deputy Stephen Donnelly here?

Deputy Catherine Martin: No.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We will proceed and if he comes in, we will divide the time equally. Are the Deputies dividing the time between them?

Deputy Catherine Martin: I am taking four and a half minutes and Deputy Healy is taking three minutes.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): That is lovely. The Deputy should proceed.

Deputy Catherine Martin: For the past six years the education system in this country has been slowly strangled. It has been called a managed decline by some of those presiding over it. Education is fundamental to the progress of any country. It allows us to innovate, will attract businesses, encourage job creation and enhance our reputation globally. As the Labour Party motion has rightly identified, budget 2017 showed little vision when it comes to education. It let our young people down. Is é an réalachas ná gur ligeadh síos ár ndaoine óga agus rinneadh

neamhaird ar riachtanais ár ndaoine óga chomh maith le riachtanais ár muinteoirí óga. Where was the vision needed to address key issues of concern in our education system?

Primary school classes in Ireland are the second most overcrowded in the European Union, but the Government has decided to leave them as they are. The Government did not commit to multiannual increases to school capitation grants even though many of our schools are currently operating on shoestring budgets and dependent on parental contributions and fund-raising. In respect of third level, how can our third level colleges continue to excel when they are neglected, starved of resources and ignored? Some of the colleges, despite their very best efforts, clearly cannot make ends meet. How can their leaders focus on what matters most, namely, the quality of education, when they are worried about paying the bills every month? Last week, the Government and the largest Opposition party seemed quite content with the announcement of an additional €36.5 million for the higher education sector in 2017. The truth is that it is totally inadequate. It will do little to tackle the effects of successive cutbacks which have had a devastating impact on students and lecturers.

Regrettably, even though I commend the Labour Party on seeking to address key issues, I do not see any intention in this motion to address the huge inequality in the teaching profession. That is why the Green Party is proposing an amendment to this motion requesting the Government to commit immediately to a plan to eliminate all outstanding pay inequality for newly qualified teachers. Our young teachers play a vital role in the future direction of education. They are highly skilled and specialised classroom practitioners entrusted with huge and far reaching responsibility on a daily basis. By allowing the differential pay scales to continue, we are telling our teachers they do not matter and we do not care. It is difficult for a person who is blatantly and unjustifiably discriminated against on salary to continue to get up every morning, go into their place of employment and impart knowledge and positivity to the very best of their ability and also be a role model when at the same time they are being insulted and treated differently from some of their peers in the same place of work. This must stop. While I appreciate tough decisions were made in a time of crisis, the Government cut vital services without thought or consideration to the long-term consequences. These consequences are coming home to roost now in social welfare, health, justice and urgently in education. We need strategic vision. That vision needs to be clear and unequivocal. Crucially, the Government needs to bring those charged with delivering on that vision with it as respected partners and team players. The Government will only do so by treating them with basic fairness and respect.

Deputy Seamus Healy: In the very short time available to me, I will concentrate on primary education. Young people get one chance at primary education. They can re-sit their leaving certificate and do secondary education as part of a second chance programme or as a mature student. Third level is similar but they get only one chance at primary education. That is why it is vitally important that students get a good grounding and support at primary level. Primary education is the basis for all further learning and education. Every euro invested in primary education is invested in students and their future and will stand to them through the rest of their lives. Ensuring that every student is supported to reach his or her potential in primary school has lifelong benefits for employment and health prospects. Unfortunately, budget 2017 has failed primary education. There was no improvement in class sizes. There is an average number of 25 pupils in our classes, as opposed to the EU average of 20. We have the second most overcrowded classrooms in Europe. Indeed, 100,000 of our children are being taught in classes with more than 30 students. Those students, in particular, have been abandoned by this Government. I remind the Minister that, despite the commitment in the programme for Govern-

ment, the budget has failed to change class sizes for the better. All research shows that smaller classes work well for children and that no class should have more than 20 students.

Time and again, we are told that we have free education. The reality, of course, is very different. The failure to increase the daily funding for primary schools will leave them dependent on voluntary fundraising and parents' contributions. The Government's funding of 92 cent per pupil per day does not cover the basic running costs and puts huge stress on parents and principals, with them having to run quizzes, cake sales, church gate collections and race nights. This budget should have restored the pre-cut rate of €200 for capitation at the very least. That would have been a first step.

The budget does not deal with the restoration of lost posts, increased release time for teaching principals or parity of pay. Special needs children also do not appear to have been a priority in the budget. They still wait far too long for assessments. In fact, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has had to pay for these assessments on numerous occasions. The failure to fund and support primary schools properly is very short-sighted and must be reversed immediately.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It is precisely because of the power of education to make an enormous difference in a child's life and to a child's potential, particularly through investment in the early years of the child's education, that we tabled this motion. We consider education policy to be important not only in terms of the opportunities of individual children but also in developing a more equal and inclusive society. That is the reason we tabled the motion. It is for that reason, too, I find it hugely disappointing that the budget has not continued the progress we made last year in reducing the size of classes in our schools.

Last year, despite the fact that there were far fewer extra resources than are available this year, we were able to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio at both primary and post-primary level. What we have now is a step backwards, and that is deeply concerning. I was genuinely surprised that this was done in the budget. I expected that the progress started last year would continue, until we reach the point where the average class size is no more than 20. It was possible to do that in the lifetime of a normal Government. Unfortunately, however, this year has seen a step backwards. There has been no progress on class size. We all know, as has been said by previous speakers, that class size makes an enormous difference for children. Our class sizes are among the highest in the European Union. For the individual child, whether they be quiet, a child with troubles or a child who does not have the same supports at home as other children, being in a class of over 30 pupils can mean it is impossible for even the best of teachers to give them the individual attention they need. For that reason, I find it amazing that the Fianna Fáil Party did not insist on that being done in its confidence and supply arrangement with the Government.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We had other vicious cutbacks by the Labour Party to reverse.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It is also surprising that the Independent Alliance did not insist on continuing the progress on class size.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy O'Sullivan without interruption.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Your party colleagues had to stop you destroying the DEIS scheme.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Fianna Fáil destroyed the country.

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Deputy Seamus Healy: Fianna Fáil is responsible for it as well. Its hand prints are all over it.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: Let me address the issue of why my predecessor, former Deputy Ruairí Quinn, had to make very difficult decisions in the early years of the last Government. It was because of Fianna Fáil destroying the country. It was due to the troika deal which meant that every Department had to slash expenditure, whether it liked it or not.

(Interruptions).

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Members, you have had your say. Deputy O’Sullivan has the floor.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We are interrupting because the former Minister for Education and Skills is addressing us directly.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Please do not interrupt her.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: In the first couple of years of the lifetime of the last Government every Department had to cut funding, and it was almost impossible to cut funding in education because there were constantly growing numbers. The fact that we are being lectured to now by the people who caused that is really hard to stomach.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: You have good stomachs all right. You stomached a lot with the Blueshirts.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: However, I wish to return to the point I was making. Thankfully, I was lucky enough when I was appointed Minister for Education and Skills to receive a slight increase in my budget in my two years as Minister. I was able to make some progress, even a little progress on small schools. That was after consultation with the INTO. In particular, we were able to make progress on class sizes. That was because we had finally sorted out the country’s finances, to some extent. We made some progress, which is why I am so disappointed that progress was not continued this year. Class size makes a real difference for children.

There also could have been progress on capitation. Our proposal in that regard was very good. We proposed that schools which got rid of the voluntary contribution should get a bigger increase in capitation than those that did not. That would take the pressure off hard-pressed parents who, in many cases, feel forced to pay this so-called voluntary contribution and find it difficult to do so. There could have been that progress on capitation.

I welcome the increase in the number of teachers and SNAs. However, I am concerned. There are probably enough teachers to cover the demographics both among the teachers and in resource teachers, but I am concerned about the number of extra SNAs. I do not believe there will be enough. Last year, I got the Government’s approval for an extra 610 SNAs, but we had to add an extra 100 for the first six months of this year. We had to make provision last year for that. I believe the little over 100 extra SNAs provided for in the budget will not be enough. That will have to be monitored. We also made more restoration in guidance last year than what is being provided for this year. I welcome that there is further progress on that, but the point should be made that we added more numbers last year.

We were criticised by Sinn Féin as well with regard to cuts. I attended the INTO teachers' conference in 2015. People with placards were there protesting against education cuts. The INTO is an all-island union and their protest was against the Sinn Féin Minister of Education in Northern Ireland, not against me.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I did not raise that.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I know, but the Deputy's colleague did.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The party's spokesperson.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I was anxious to make that point.

I do not have much time left so I wish to say a little about apprenticeships. I wish the Minister, Deputy Bruton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, well in making progress in that area. One of the major objectives of myself and my predecessor, former Deputy Ruairí Quinn, was to increase the number of apprenticeships available in Ireland. We increased the number of traditional apprenticeships in the construction sector by 100%. We also established the Apprenticeship Council of Ireland. It made a recommendation on more than 80 new forms of apprenticeship and began the process of introducing over 20 of them in the current academic year. That widened the availability of apprenticeships in many different areas, such as manufacturing, the built environment, tourism, sport, cooking, transport distribution, logistics, information technology, financial services and so forth. That gives opportunities to young people to take an alternative route, which we have not had previously in Ireland in a real way. I am very proud to have been part of that. I am pleased that the Government intends to continue that. It is certainly something we will support but we will also keep the Government accountable because we need to see the progress that is required in that area.

We want to give young people the opportunity throughout the educational process. This is why we support the early years interventions this year, why we introduced the second preschool year last year, why we are so disappointed that class size and capitation have not been appropriately addressed and why we introduced the apprenticeships and opportunities at third level, about which Deputy Burton spoke. We want to ensure young people have all these choices and opportunities and that they are valued equally regardless of whether they take the apprenticeship or higher education route.

Deputy Barry spoke about the privatisation of higher education but I do not think that the Irish higher education system is in the bracket he spoke about when he referred to Great Britain and the US. There is great pride in our higher education institutions in how they provide for all our students. I do not think that privatisation is the direction in which our higher education system is going.

For us in the Labour Party, education is very important. This is why we have chosen to use our Private Members' time to highlight the particular issues in education that we feel need to be appropriately addressed by Government, particularly the fact we have not seen the progress we could have had to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio, because it is not very expensive to do, and give all our children from the very early years the opportunity to get the individual attention so many of them need in our school system to prepare them for life and to allow them to fulfil their potential. This is especially so for those children who may not have had the opportunities because their parents may not have been particularly well educated, to give them the early start and opportunities they so need.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): I am glad to have the opportunity to participate in this important debate. I started my primary school education in a small school with 27 pupils. We moved and my mother became a teacher in second and third class, which had 40 in the room, so there was a slight change.

Deputy Joan Burton: I would say the Minister of State was an easy pupil.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I was certainly not the teacher's pet. I certainly felt picked on, shall we say, and I never got over it. My mother went on to teach her five other sons as well and she survived. Last week, Flahavan's and Keelings held an eating porridge week and the local school that won was the school in which my wife now teaches and through which my four children and six nieces have passed. That is a little small crossroads school that was threatened with closure in 1967. They put in a new school with two teachers that struggled to stay open. It now has five classrooms. It is in the middle of nowhere. Not even a shop is nearby. Where we live, on a clear night, we can see the light pollution in Dublin but it is still very remote. It has been an ongoing process. I am the son, husband, brother and brother-in-law of schoolteachers. I might not say I know a lot about teaching but I certainly hear a lot about it.

I note that several teachers have been in this Chamber this evening. Every Member of this House understands the transformative role which education and training plays in people's lives. It gives individuals the opportunity to participate fully in society. It is a driver of economic growth supplying skills and cultivating innovation. It is vital to the efforts to tackle disadvantage throughout our society and underpins efforts to improve health and well-being. In short, education is critical to delivering so much of what we want to achieve as a Government, which is building a fair and prosperous society in which all our citizens can reach their full potential.

The importance the Government attaches to education is reflected in the scale of investment we are making next year. An additional €458 million has been provided to education compared with the allocation announced in last year's budget. This represents a 5% increase and a budget of more than €9.5 billion, the third largest allocation in the history of the Department of Education and Skills. This is very welcome. I take on board the observations made by members of the Opposition. We will be putting in more than 2,500 additional posts in schools throughout the country. These include additional teachers to meet demographic demand, more resource teachers and special needs assistants to support children with special educational needs, additional posts for guidance, and posts arising from enhancements to school leadership and from support for implementation of the junior cycle, which the previous Minister for Education and Skills, who is present in the Chamber, so nimbly manoeuvred into agreement. She is to be recognised for this, which was difficult. When everybody had the same motivation, it was resolved.

The budget will allow the resourcing of measures to tackle disadvantage in schools with the publication of a new action plan for educational inclusion. It will also mean the rolling out of targeted measures to increase participation of disadvantaged groups such as lone parents and Travellers in higher education. Grants will be provided to the most disadvantaged cohort of students undertaking postgraduate studies. We will invest at least €160 million extra in higher education over the next three years after a number of years where State funding declined to a degree that was becoming very serious. This is a critical investment in a sector which is central to Ireland's economic development, especially in the context of preparing for Brexit. The schools building programme will deliver up to 20,000 places in schools throughout the country in 2017. These projects will support around 8,000 construction related jobs.

Overall, these measures form a balanced and coherent package which will allow the Government to implement the first phase of the Action Plan for Education resulting in better learning outcomes across the system, including apprenticeships. I will certainly be watching apprenticeships because I do not believe that when a student graduates, it is all about going to third level education in the classic sense. At the end of the day, we will need people to wire and plumb houses. A trade can take somebody around the world and back and they will certainly find something to do anywhere they go on the planet. I do not think we should ever lose sight of it. The new apprenticeship model that is being rolled out over 20 different disciplines is the model for the future. From the feedback from the development phase, we can see that the old model was not going to work and deliver the quality and quantity of skills that are necessary in a modern society.

There are, of course, many other things we could discuss that need to be done in future budgets, but budget 2017 is just the first step for the Government in reinvesting in our education system. As the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, said, we dispute the claim in the Labour Party motion that any of the elements of our budget 2017 will not be delivered. I do not believe the intention is to not to deliver on anything. We intend to deliver on all the commitments in the programme for Government and the confidence and supply arrangement in the area of education and training as resources allow in the coming years.

I commend the amendment to the House. In the new era we have in the Houses, I think people will work together through the committee system with the Ministers of the day to try to deal with roadblocks in the system. I believe the intention here is to provide the world's leading education to young people. We are in a very good position. In spite of all its faults, we have a reputation for a highly educated and highly skilled workforce that is articulate and educated and that can travel anywhere in the world with the education it receives in this country. The bigger challenges are to get the cohorts of people who cannot get into second or third level or skills training into the system, move people from leaving school at an early age and ensure the environment and supports exist to see these children, students and young adults to finish their training and education, which may not always be mainstream, so they are equipped when they go out into the world to meet the challenges they will meet and make a positive contribution to society.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I call on Deputy Brendan Howlin to sum up the debate.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I will not try to sum up, but I will try to address the motion.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): To conclude.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: In simple terms, we are debating whether education really matters. This is only the second opportunity the Labour Party has had in this Dáil session to table a Private Members' motion, and we chose education as the topic, because it really does matter. Education is the liberator. It is the key to establishing real equality in any society. I thank all the speakers who spoke in the debate. Many spoke with passion and real belief. It is important that we can build across the House. While we can have banter about each other's records, it is important that we look forward, now that we have spent five years trying to grapple with a broken economy, to see what a recovered Ireland could look like. At the heart of this is the need for a world-class education system. Can we not all agree on this and work towards it?

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It is extraordinary, a week after the budget, that we still cannot confirm the date on which the social welfare increases will come about. It is not a minor matter, given that every day will cost €1 million. There is a difference between paying the social welfare increases on 1 March and at the end of March. It is a sum of money that, if deployed in the education sector, would make a real difference and be able to address many of the matters we are discussing. It is reasonable, given that the parties that are supporting the Government are in discussions on the matter, that we propose another adjustment to the budget to deal with something that is of fundamental importance, and foremost in the list of issues in our motion, namely, class size. Education matters, and if anybody was listening to any contribution from any side, they will know we have a consensus on this.

I listened to the Minister of State, Deputy Andrew Doyle, talk about his strong links with education. I started my working life as a primary school teacher and every day I got to experience the simple joy that comes of watching young minds grow and develop. I also saw first hand the frustrations of overcrowded classrooms, underfunded schools and the pressures imposed on parents to meet the cost of education. While we can have our banter about the significant funding constraints, let us deal with some realities. During the past five or six years, we have come through the most horrendous economic time since our independence. Even against this very difficult backdrop, the then Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, found the money to begin the reduction in class sizes. We reversed the increases to class sizes which Fianna Fáil introduced at the start of the crisis and brought them back to their smallest ever. Everybody working in education, as Deputy Jan O'Sullivan said, believed this progress would continue and that last year would be regarded as the first step. During the last general election, every party in the House has argued for smaller class sizes. The programme for Government agreed between the parties that constitute the Government noted the value of smaller class sizes for younger children in particular.

In advance of the budget, everybody presumed that reduction in class sizes would be among the first of the listed items on the budget agenda. Sadly, we were all wrong. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation, INTO, has noted that the Government's plan for education lies in tatters because the Government has failed to match ambition with resources. The INTO has called on all its members to contact their local Deputies to support the Labour Party motion. We are grateful for this support. More important, we are grateful for the INTO's campaigning work. It has highlighted that more than 100,000 children attending school this week are being educated in classes with more than 30 pupils. It is a crying shame that this year we did not continue the incremental work to address this unacceptable fact.

Back to school costs in Ireland are enormous. This year, Barnardo's in Ireland reported that parents of primary school children spend an average of €100 per year per child on school books. We have had a major crisis and protests about €160 for water charges. The cost of school books is an enormous imposition on many families. Parents of children in second level education spent approximately €300 per year. Over 70% of parents are being asked for voluntary contributions to maintain the infrastructure of their schools. These are real costs and they put parents under real pressure.

The alternative budget my party proposed set out modest but meaningful measures to tackle these issues. We know we cannot address them all in one fell swoop and that there must be incremental progress. However, we must continue incrementally in order to make a significant step year on year. The State should continue to invest in the seed capital needed to make the book rental scheme a reality in every school. For primary school children, the average cost of a

book rental scheme is approximately €20, an 80% saving on the cost of buying books for hard pressed parents. Funding was provided over each of the past three years to expand the school book rental schemes during the worst of times. Like class sizes, progress in this area has come to a shuddering halt. Funding of our schools has been described in the Department of Education and Skills as a critical issue, yet the budget delivered no change and no additional funding.

A small amount of money goes a long way in capitation payments to schools. To increase capitation rates by €10 per child would have cost less than €10 million. Even doing half of it would have been a start. However, the Government delivered nothing in the budget. As Deputy Jan O'Sullivan said, the Labour Party believes increased capitation should be enhanced for any school that commits to ending the practice of voluntary contributions. It would have been a socially progressive thing to do. We could deliver real and tangible savings for parents. It is a shame that we did not do it this year.

The Minister, Deputy Richard Bruton, made hay on budget day unveiling a significant additional investment in higher education, which both Ministers of State who spoke this evening underscored. He announced funding of €36.5 million to cover further and higher education. Apprenticeship numbers are increasing. However, we have seen this welcome pattern over the past three years and it seems set to continue. The Minister cannot announce how much, if any, of the €36.5 million is going towards delivering these important opportunities for young people. I take heart from what the Minister of State, Deputy John Halligan, said this evening, as reinforced by the Minister of State, Deputy Andrew Doyle. However, we want to see it tangibly impact on the number of apprenticeships created. The Minister of State specifically said €1.5 million would go towards the international education strategy and that €8.5 million would go towards a very limited expansion of the student grant supports. If this is true, it leaves only €5.5 million to fund apprenticeships. The sums do not add up and we must see whether there is truth in the words both Ministers of State uttered.

One of the proposals in the Cassells report on higher education funding was a modest increase in the national training fund. We welcome the proposals. Amazingly, IBEC welcomes them.

10 o'clock

That tiny improvement, an increase of 0.1% next year, would have yielded €67 million, a sum that could have been used to make a meaningful impact on the creation of apprenticeships. It is a shame that the consensus, even among employers, that this be done was ignored.

We in the Labour Party believe that education matters. We believe that the motion deserves the support of Members from all sides of the House. Whatever points may be scored on this, we need to make incremental progress to ensure we have the best education system in the world. It is a modest set of proposals, but an important incremental start. On Thursday, I hope that, when we get rid of the amendments and posturing in this regard, we will have a majority in the House in support of the motion. I hope that we will not delay in decreasing class sizes and that we will, by consensus, start that important work immediately.

Amendment put.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 19 October, in accordance with Standing Order 70(2).

Financial Resolutions 2017

Financial Resolution No. 2: General (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following motion:

That it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

- (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade).

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): The Government's continued commitment to the agrifood sector has been firmly reflected in the agrifood and marine budget for 2017. The increase in spending on the rural development programme, RDP, to €601 million in 2017, with the introduction of new schemes such as the animal welfare scheme for sheep, which is worth €25 million, and the innovative €150 million agri cashflow support loan fund, are key examples of the level of support provided.

I wish to focus on my key areas of responsibility as Minister of State, those being, forestry, horticulture, organics and the greyhound sector. It is intended that total expenditure in this area will amount to just over €142 million in 2017. The Government's ongoing commitment to the forestry sector is reflected in this year's budget. It is intended that €111.6 million will be made available for forestry development during 2017. This commitment is particularly significant, given the potential role of forestry in helping to achieve the targets set by the recent EU proposals on climate change mitigation, etc. The funding will allow for more than 7,100 ha of new forests to be planted, which is almost 800 ha more than the total area planted in 2015, 110 km of new forest roads and forest management initiatives. This is important, given that these aspects have been neglected in previous afforestation programmes. Payments under the new reconstitution scheme will also commence during 2017.

Much has been said and written about the forestry sector and its potential conflict with agriculture. It is my firm belief that forestry has a role to play, and not only in terms of climate change. Speaking as a farmer who recently planted some of my land in the second phase, the sector is part of the overall farming enterprise and can deliver asset value, increase the future-proofing of marginal parts of farmland and add to income streams, allowing for the development of other areas of farm enterprise. Forestry is not in conflict with other agricultural activities at all.

I am keenly aware of the challenges that the horticulture sector is experiencing in the aftermath of the UK decision to exit the EU, particularly in light of currency fluctuations. I dealt today with Deputy Ó Caoláin's Topical Issue on the mushroom sector, which is particularly vulnerable in areas of the country that do not have a tradition of other agricultural activities. We are making every effort to deal with the crisis. Brexit will happen at some stage, but the immediate impact has been the fluctuation in currency. The UK is important for exporters across the agrifood industry, but it accounts for almost 100% of the mushroom sector's export trade, so the fluctuation in sterling is having a profound effect on it. Many initiatives need to be taken together to ensure that the sector has a viable future.

In this context, funding for capital investments in the commercial horticulture sector has been increased to €5 million in 2017. The horticulture sector will also have access to the €150 million low-interest cashflow support loan fund that was announced last Tuesday, providing access to highly flexible loans for up to six years and for amounts of up to €150,000 at an interest rate of 2.95% and an option to pay interest only for up to three years. Bord Bia is also investing in a market development programme that will assist companies dealing with currency and trading difficulties. These measures, coupled with continued engagement through the Consultative Stakeholders Committee on Brexit, the Food Wise 2025 high-level implementation committee and the Department's dedicated Brexit unit, will assist the sector in meeting emerging challenges.

Organics have been a significant growth industry. Last Thursday, I attended the annual organic awards at the Bord Bia Food Centre on Mount Street where there were 268 entrants and 22 finalists across seven sectors. It is a vibrant sector which has grown significantly. It is still not large, but it has considerable potential. The allocation of €10 million for the organic farming scheme reflects the Government's commitment to ongoing support for this sector and the unprecedented success of the scheme, in that it is fully subscribed to. The allocation will support more than 1,600 farmers who have opted to go organic, many converting for the first time. This growth sector provides farmers with a key opportunity for adding value through the development of processed organic products.

Funding is also available for capital investments in the organic sector under the organic capital investment scheme, one of six measures available to farmers under the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS II. These measures were launched under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 and are co-funded under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, EAFRD.

Regarding the greyhound sector and Bord na gCon, I must say that, after I was told that I had been appointed to this position, it was only when I went to Agriculture House that I realised that greyhounds were also part of the package. Deputy Ó Cuív will know that, since being appointed as Chairman of the Joint Sub-Committee on Fisheries, I have been on a steep learning curve. However, I am pleased that the Government is signalling its intention to continue to support the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund in 2017, with an anticipated increase in expenditure to €16 million next year for Bord na gCon. This sector is an important contributor to the economy and provides employment in rural and urban areas. Deputy Ó Cuív is aware that in the previous Dáil the agriculture committee was trying to get impetus into the provision of new greyhound legislation, as it dates from 1958. I am pleased to say I have met officials and the board and we are advancing draft heads of a Bill. We hope to give the new agriculture committee a little bit of business in the form of pre-legislative scrutiny of that Bill. My intention is this will commence before this session finishes and we will be able to fine-tune an item of legislation for the future, dealing with the likes of governance, finance, control and appeals. There is also concern about welfare.

We have much work to do on this. As somebody with no particular vested interest, I am able to look at this with a clean pair of eyes and say we should move on with it. It is a sector that has much potential and many challenges. We can work together on it and I implore that those in the industry work with one other as well. If they do that, we can help them but if they do not, it will be difficult.

The 2017 budget has moved along issues in the agricultural sector. I am cautious as Brexit

and the fluctuations in sterling in particular will present challenges, along with the possibility of tariffs and borders in times to come. The value of sterling in the immediate future will present a major challenge to the sector and agrifood exports in particular. The UK market amounts to 45% of everything we produce. It is our nearest trading neighbour and it always will be important. Whatever finally comes to pass by way of arrangements, agreements and currency differentials etc., we will still trade with the UK. We must try to ensure as little damage as possible is done to what has been a real growth sector over the past five or six years. It is one of the few areas that was able to grow and develop significantly during the challenging economic crisis. It is vital that we deal with the issue and the Department has its own Brexit implementation team to do that as best it can. It is a cross-sectoral and cross-departmental issue. Ultimately, we have been doing everything right from a trade stability perspective, meeting market demands. It is something we must fall back on in the next 12 months and beyond.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The next slot is for Fianna Fáil and will include Deputies Ó Cuív, O’Keeffe, Gallagher and O’Callaghan, if they wish.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I always like to get the opportunity to speak on the budget. All of us would rather get more than five or seven minutes to do that but I will try to say what I have to within that time. We must take the budget in context. It involves €58 billion of expenditure, so €1.2 billion from that is a bit like a household with an income of €58,000 adjusting its budget by €1,200. Thinking of it in that context, one realises it will not shake the world and any adjustments will be quite modest. I welcome the 3:1 split in favour of expenditure. It is clear to anybody at the moment that there is an absolute crisis in health. Even with simple issues, I have never seen it as bad as it is. Of course, we know the position with housing. Ultimately, there is only one solution for the housing crisis and that is to build more houses.

We are living in a very uncertain world and the Minister of State spoke about one such uncertainty, that is, the biggest fallout of Brexit so far has been the currency fluctuation and the challenge for our exporters into Britain. Some have been more affected than others. Brexit in itself is a large uncertainty and it is important that we take a strong stand so that Europe should not try to take some revenge on Britain because it has been perceived as being naughty or that another country might follow it. Even if it causes collateral damage to Europe or particularly to Ireland, there may be attempts to raise tariffs because some people are not happy with Britain’s decision. That would have major consequences within this nation and island, and it would have significant consequences for our trade with Britain.

There are also other challenges, such as if Britain opens a market for beef from South America and so on. That would also pose problems. We must recognise in this country that world markets are very important. For many industries, particularly indigenous industries, the handiest big market is the neighbouring market because it is physically nearest and easiest for us to deal with. As there are 60 million people on the island of Britain, we must continue to recognise that no matter how much we develop trade around the world, the British market is inevitably still going to be a major market for us and particularly for our food.

Allowing that we do not have much time, there are some comments I wish to make. I welcome some of the changes introduced in social welfare. For example, I welcome the reversal of some of the very bad decisions made by the previous Government, such as those relating to lone parents. I note the back-to-education measure has been restored. I also recognise that the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Varadkar, listened to what people like me have been saying and restored the disregards for the farm assist scheme. I regret that this does not apply

to all self-employed people and it seems absolutely farcical to means-test anybody at 100%. That is the equivalent of a 100% tax on endeavour for smaller people. From the very first day I stepped into Connemara, it seemed absolutely farcical to take €1 away for every €1 earned by self-employed people who need some social welfare. One would never think of doing that with family income supplement. I welcome this measure as a step in the right direction.

I also welcome the extra places on the rural social scheme. I have a question put down on when the changes will be implemented, if they are means assessed and if the schemes will be automatically recalibrated. We always seem to think the micro will work in rural Ireland when we, quite rightly, recognise that the macro is needed in cities. There are 3.5 million people living outside the greater Dublin area and there seems to be an idea that €8 million here or €2 million there will solve their problem, which is totally unrealistic. I notice that, quite rightly, in Dublin there will be three brand new hospitals, the new DART underground and metro north. These projects run to billions of euro. As I have said, I have nothing against them. I come from the city and realise the major transport problems here. Sauce for the goose, however, is sauce for the gander. It is absolutely time that people realise rural Ireland needs significant investment in infrastructure if we are going to compete. I am absolutely disgusted at the lack of investment, even in something as fundamental as fibre broadband.

Ar deireadh, tá airgead na Gaeilge gearrtha go dtí an dúid. Caithfidh mé a rá gur náireach an scéal é sin. Gealladh i gclár an Rialtais go mbeadh airgead breise don Ghaeilge, ach a mhalairt ar fad atá tarlaithe. Beidh mé ag caint leis an Aire agus ag ardú na ceiste seo nuair a bheidh deis agam.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: The 2017 budget proposals are now a week old. It was not a Fianna Fáil budget but I welcome its overall thrust. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, stated in his opening address that thanks to the sacrifices of the Irish people, we are back on the path to a dynamic economy and a just and fair society. My concern is that a vacuum is being created on the right. I read with interest an article by Kevin Doyle in last weekend’s *Sunday Independent* in which he expressed concern about the parties in this House. My party has always been seen as being just left of centre but Mr. Doyle suggested that the biggest party in the House is also going to the left. The concern that arises, as epitomised by Brexit and Donald Trump in America, is that we are creating a void for the militant far right to evolve in this State because hard-pressed, middle class people feel they are being left behind, with no incentive to work.

I am my party’s junior spokesman on sport. My concern in this area is the overall cut to the Department’s funding of 17%. No matter what the Minister of State, Deputy O’Donovan, says, there is a 17% cut across capital and current expenditure. That is a fact. I welcome the announcement that the Department will be providing sports capitation grants in the coming year but we are two years behind schedule in that regard. We are all aware of the positive contribution of sport to people’s general health and well-being and the fact that this reduces the pressure on our health system. The big announcement I must welcome relates to my own backyard, that is, the commitment of the Government to provide funding for the development of Páirc Uí Chaoimh, the well-known GAA ground in Cork city. I would ask that we support wholeheartedly the IRFU in its efforts to secure the Rugby World Cup for this country in the future. The union has been successful in moving forward in the tendering process but it is important that we continue to support it. On that note, I wish to express my sympathy to family of Anthony Foley on his untimely death.

Transport, as Deputy Ó Cuív said, is becoming an east-south issue in terms of the availabil-

ity of funding. Having read the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport's speech last week, the only good news for people from the south west is the upgrade of the Naas bypass. Why is that the case? At present, if one is driving south on the M7, the outer lane is slower than the inner lanes because of the congestion approaching Naas and so forth. What is wrong with upgrading the M20? When the previous Government, which included the Labour Party, went into the general election campaign, all we heard from Labour Party and Fine Gael Deputies was that the M20 was back on the agenda. One would think that if it was on the agenda, progress would be made. However, there was no reference in the budget to the M20. The Acting Chairman is also affected by the M20, which, if upgraded, would be a motorway that would run from Cork up into the western corridor. Both from an economic and commercial perspective, funding is needed for the M20 project. It is urgent if there is to be growth in the west.

I welcome the jobs announcements in various sectors, including the posts relating to new teachers, gardaí and nurses. I am concerned, however, that we might just be putting more people on the picket lines because we are not paying the requisite wages.

On agriculture, I welcome the tax adjustments and the new €50 million low-interest loan fund.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I appreciate the Minister's earlier comments about help for those in the horticulture sector - particularly mushroom growers - which is badly needed. I also welcome the funding for the greyhound sector but I must express my concern-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy must conclude.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I am very concerned about the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, II. I have been promised, day in and day out, that tillage farmers will be accepted into the scheme but no application forms have been made available. I am concerned about this because tillage farmers are telling me that by the time TAMS II is opened up to them, the pot will be empty.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I have to stop the Deputy now. His time has run out.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I ask that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine would speed up the application process for TAMS II. Finally, I wish to refer to the fair deal nursing home support scheme.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): It breaks my heart but-----

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: What is going on at present is just talk about talks regarding the fair deal scheme.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I must stop the Deputy now.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: This does not just apply to farmers but to all self-employed people who have an asset based business.

Finally, on housing-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy must stop now.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: We are going to be here until midnight-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy agreed to share time-----

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: It is not often that I, being a member of one of the larger parties, get an opportunity to speak.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): An agreement is an agreement. I now call Deputy-----

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: I ask the Acting Chairman to allow me to make one more comment. On housing, I welcome the Minister-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): No, we are not moving on to housing. I call Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher.

Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher: I was going to thank my colleagues for sharing time. I will thank Deputies Ó Cuív and O’Callaghan, who is coming after me. Things have not changed - when one has possession, one keeps it.

In terms of the budget, I was pleased that the Minister for Finance took on board an issue I raised in this House shortly after my re-election, namely, the extension of the seafarer’s allowance to fishermen. That was one of the recommendations in the report of the review of marine tax. I welcome that measure because it is important that fishermen are treated in a comparable fashion to mariners.

The budget refers to our airports and I am particularly interested in Donegal Airport, which I flew out of today. This facility has provided an excellent service over the years. While it was not mentioned specifically in the budget, it was referred to in the aviation programme. The future of that airport has been consolidated because money will be provided for the public service obligation, PSO, which is absolutely essential if Donegal Airport is to survive. Donegal does not currently have a rail link or a motorway. It will not have the latter until such time as the N2-A5 is completed, the situation in respect of which does not look very promising. I have been very involved with Donegal Airport which is vitally important. It plays an important role in the economic and social development of the region, particularly west Donegal.

I am glad that CLÁR funding is referred to in the budget but we must look at the finer details to determine what exactly is involved. I was disappointed to hear the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport speak in the House last week and spend eight and half minutes criticising Fianna Fáil and others but only make reference to his own Department for the final minute and a half of his ten-minute speaking slot. He did not fully understand the issues being raised about local improvement schemes. Those of us who have served on local authorities or as Deputies know that the most important road in rural Ireland is not the national primary or secondary road, the regional or county road but the road leading from a person’s house. When I had responsibility for these schemes, I provided one of the largest ever allocations for local roads and councillors had the opportunity to allocate funding in respect of such roads. These roads are now in a disastrous state. It is vitally important that the Minister deals with this and reintroduces the local improvement schemes, but not on a cosmetic basis as is currently the case. At present, councils can only spend a small percentage of their county road allocation on local roads.

Ar ndóigh, chuir sé díomá orm nach raibh an oiread sin airgid le fáil ar mhaithe le hairgead

breise a chur ar fáil do Roinn na Gaeltachta i mbliana. Ós rud é go bhfuil an Ghaeltacht chomh tábhachtach sin, ba cheart airgead a chur ar fáil do na bóithre áise agus na bóithre straitéiseacha ag dul isteach go dtí ceantracha éagsúla sa Ghaeltacht.

Reference was made to Brexit. We will have other opportunities to discuss that issue. However, it should be noted that in the Border counties, we have already felt the effects of the referendum in the UK. Too many people are now going from the Border counties and further south into Northern Ireland. Much has been said about a soft Border but I am extremely concerned, having been in the export business for many years, that the economic borders of the past could return once more. I remember quite well that when shipping through from Lifford to Strabane, from Dundalk to Newry or from Monaghan to Armagh, one had to be there before 10 p.m. to deal with one's customs papers and then one was rushing, trying to make the boat at Larne. Let no one tell me that nothing will change. Of course it will change. I have been coming to the Dáil since 1981 and apart from the peace process, the greatest transformation I have seen in my lifetime came about as a result of the Single European Act, which removed the economic borders. The necklace of Border counties - six in the North and six in the South - has benefited greatly from our membership of the EU. They obtained substantial funds from Europe, first and foremost through the International Fund for Ireland, to which the EU is a major donor, and subsequently through the peace process. During my time in Europe, we insisted on a clever approach whereby any funding provided in this context would have to be additional and not substitutional. Of course INTERREG has been very important as well. We have benefited greatly from our membership of the EU over many years. I would like to think we can continue to benefit from Europe. Of course things could change after Brexit and the triggering of Article 50. We have seen the effects of the decline in sterling over recent weeks and months.

I would like to speak about education. I was disappointed that the budget did not provide for an increase in the capitation grants for primary schools and did not include a firm commitment to deal with the pupil-teacher ratio, which was discussed in the House earlier in the context of a Labour Party motion. The Government does not understand the importance of part-time workers in industries like fishing, agriculture and tourism. I hope that, during the course of the debate on the forthcoming social welfare Bill, the Minister will take on board recommendations I have made to him regarding seasonal and part-time workers, who play a pivotal role in the development of fisheries, agriculture and tourism. It is getting increasingly difficult for them to draw down social welfare benefits. It is now necessary to have almost 39 contributions each year, which means a person must almost be employed full-time before he or she can draw down any benefits. That is not possible for many people. I know from my connections with the fishing industry in Killybegs that those involved in fisheries are having trouble getting part-time workers because there is no incentive for people to go to work part-time. I hope the Minister for Social Protection will deal with this issue in the context of the social welfare Bill.

Mar a dúirt mé roimhe seo, tá sé fiorthábhachtach go gcuirfear airgead ar fáil d'Údarás na Gaeltachta. Mar a dúradh i Ráiteas Buiséid an Aire Airgeadais, an Teachta Noonan, cuirfear airgead ar fáil chun cuidiú le Enterprise Ireland agus IDA Ireland maidir le Brexit. Níor luaigh sé Údarás na Gaeltachta, áfach. Má tá airgead ar fáil do Enterprise Ireland agus IDA Ireland, glacaim leis go mbeidh airgead ar fáil d'Údarás na Gaeltachta, a oibríonn mar eagraíocht fiorthábhachtach sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Tá jabanna á gcruthú ag Údarás na Gaeltachta sna ceantair sin, an ceantar ina bhfuil mé i mo chónaí san áireamh, thar na blianta. Tá jabanna cailte againn thar tréimhse ach, ag an am céanna, caithfidh mé ard-mholadh a thabhairt don údarás as ucht an méid atá á dhéanamh aige chun comhlachtaí a mhealladh go dtí an taobh sin

den tír. Tá mé ag smaoineamh ar chomhlachtaí ar nós Randox atá tar éis 120 post a chruthú i mo bhaile dúchais, agus beidh suas le 500 post cruthaithe ag an údarás faoi dheireadh na bliana 2020.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: I hope the Chair can divide by three.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy got eight and a half minutes.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: I did not.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy did not do too badly. The next three speakers are Deputies O’Dowd and Fitzpatrick from Louth and Deputy Carey from Clare. I presume they are sharing time.

Deputy Fergus O’Dowd: Tógfaidh mé deich nóiméad agus roinnfidh na Teachtaí eile an chuid eile.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Okay.

Deputy Fergus O’Dowd: Ba mhaith liom i dtosach a rá go bhfuil rudaí ag feabhsú sa tír seo. Ní aontaím leis an bpáirtí thall atá ag rá nach bhfuil rudaí ag feabhsú. Tá sé soiléir i mo chontae féin go bhfuil laghdú mór tagtha ar an méid daoine atá dífhostaithe. Bliain ó shin, bhí 2,000 duine níos mó dífhostaithe i gContae Lú ná mar atá sa chontae sin anois. Tá sé sin ag titim amach timpeall na tíre. Measaim go bhfuil rudaí ag feabhsú mar thoradh ar pholasaithe IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland agus daoine eile. Tá rudaí ag dul chun cinn ó thaobh fostaíochta de, ach go háirithe.

This important budget marks a tipping point in terms of how the economy stands at this time and in the context of our future as a country. For the first time in many years, the budget has not imposed a clawback on any sector of the community. Everybody has benefited to some extent. Some people need to benefit a lot more. I do not agree with the suggestion that the centre is holding and this country needs to maintain a centrist position from a political perspective. Now that we have more money, and more funds are coming in as employment increases, we need to improve our social welfare, health and family support services. We need to look after people with disabilities even more significantly than we have been doing. While I welcome the changes that have been made in our social supports, we need to build on them.

I welcome the improvement in disability provision. People with disabilities suffered most in the recession and need the most support now. Although I welcome the €30 million that has been allocated in this area, this country continues to have significant problems with disability services. I would like to mention one such problem in County Louth. The lack of proper respite care for people with intellectual disabilities who live at home is having an adverse effect on a number of families. During the summer, there were many problems with respite services in County Louth for people who need such services. It would be unacceptable if this were to continue into the future. I met representatives of St. John of God Services during the week. I hope changes will be made, even though such changes will have to be made by the Minister rather than by St. John of God Services because of the closure of the congregated settings and the movement into communities.

I would also like to speak about the need for improvements in social and medical supports,

such as speech therapy. It is very important for children who cannot speak properly because they have problems with their speech development to get access to speech therapy as quickly as possible. I do not understand why the HSE has decided to designate for County Meath six of the nine new speech therapists who are coming into counties Louth and Meath. Just three of them are being assigned to County Louth even though there are ten times more people who have been assessed as having an urgent speech therapy need on the waiting list in County Louth than there are in County Meath. The figure in County Louth is 270, but it is less than 30 in County Meath. We need to have equity in the allocation of HSE resources across various counties. People in counties Louth and Meath who need speech therapy should be on a universal waiting list. A person in County Louth should not be ten times worse off than a person in County Meath.

The question of new emerging needs in disability services is arising in my county. Since it was decided to move from congregated settings, which was a decision I welcomed, a significant number of additional people who need proper and adequate living conditions in residential care outside congregated settings have emerged. I have been told there is no provision for such people in this budget. It is not good enough.

I continue to have concerns about medical cards. While I welcome the health allocation, it is neither good enough nor acceptable that people in my constituency who suffer from cancer are still being refused medical cards on appeal. There is a lack of transparency and accountability about many of these decisions.

I welcome the increase in home help allocations because it is a very important area. If people can be looked after in their own homes, it is better for everybody concerned. It is far better to have people looked after in their homes than to have to spend approximately €50,000 a year to keep them in nursing home beds. The cost of keeping people in their own homes with proper home help support is a fraction of that. It is unacceptable for the HSE to give people half an hour of home help. I know a person living outside the town of Drogheda. The parent has dementia and lives with just one family member, but they cannot even get into Drogheda to shop, go to the doctor or do anything because the home help time expired so soon and someone always has to be present with a person who has dementia.

One good thing about the budget is the action plan for housing. It is critical that this funding increases and I welcome the new repair and leasing arrangements. I welcome the vacant site tax that will come in next year. I welcome the buy and renew facility for local authorities to buy and renew homes and I also welcome the vacant site levy which will come in next year for under-used lands.

However, there is one point I wish to make clearly. There is a responsibility on people who own homes but do not let them or live in them. They should put these properties on the market because of the extraordinary crisis. There are significant additional supports for landlords to bring homes that are not necessarily in good condition back into use. We should consider the arrangements in the United Kingdom. In the UK, houses remaining vacant for two years or more incur a significant increase in property taxes. Local authorities there can put a property tax increase of up to 50% on those homes. It is not fair on people who need homes here that others have a buy-to-keep or own-to-keep mentality. These are furnished empty homes vacant in this country and they number more than 193,000. These 193,000 homes are not holiday homes but they are vacant. It is a disgrace that this scandal continues. I understand from academics that the vacancy rate is twice what it should be. The vacancy rate nationally is approximately 12% but academics believe it ought to be approximately 6%. Are people holding on to homes?

Are they speculating? Are vulture funds buying and holding on to properties for the prices to go up? I am deeply concerned about it.

I welcome the commitment in the budget on the part of the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. He spoke about the significant further work being done in this area. The bottom line is that we must be able to tax furnished properties that are vacant for two years or more. They should be and must be made available for others. It is a question of the greatest good for the greater number. Let us get our people into those homes. Landlords get paid an increasing price under the housing assistance payment.

We have a significant problem with the nursing crisis in our country. We cannot get nurses to come home. I welcome the initiatives and extra funding to encourage nurses to come back to Ireland. It is unacceptable to have a situation like that in Drogheda Cottage Hospital, which has nine beds vacant. These beds are for people who need care before they can go home. Moreover, in the St. Oliver Plunkett community nursing unit in Dundalk a further nine beds are vacant. This means there are 18 beds vacant in County Louth. What does that mean? It means as the winter crisis and influenza come along 18 beds are unavailable. Yet they are essential to take the pressure off our accident and emergency units and provide people with a proper and safe place to recover before they go home. The absence of nurses in these wards is a critical problem for the future of our health services in County Louth. Every effort must be made by the HSE to attract nurses home. The Government must provide increased supports to nurses to help them to come home, including special allowances and extra pay, if possible, to ensure a proper health service and to ensure that every available bed will be filled by a patient who needs it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick is next. I understand you are taking five minutes.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Like some other Deputies I first entered politics in 2011 when I was given the great honour of representing the people of Louth and east Meath in the Thirty-first Dáil. It was a time when the country was at its lowest. We were bankrupt. We had lost our financial independence. We had to rely on others for financial support to pay the wages of our front-line staff, including nurses, teachers and gardaí. We were losing our young people to mass emigration. Jobs were being lost at an alarming rate. Our international reputation was in shreds.

I wish to remind everyone in the House that this was only five years ago. We must never forget what got us into this position in the first place. The boom and bust policies of the last Fianna Fáil Government must never be repeated. Over the course of the past five years, the Fine Gael-led Government had to make some difficult decisions to get back our financial independence. This year, thankfully, the budget has started to reverse the trend of austerity budgets in recent years. In particular, I welcome the reduction in the universal social charge. I hope this is the start of the abolition of this tax, which was originally introduced as a temporary measure.

We often hear of the squeezed middle. I firmly believe this section of society should be one of the first to benefit from a recovering economy. The squeezed middle has shouldered most of the financial burden caused by the recession. This should be recognised as we continue to recover from the Fianna Fáil-caused recession.

The increase in the State pension is welcome, although I would have preferred a greater increase for our pensioners. Furthermore, I call for clarity on the date of the increase because,

as things stand, pensioners do not know the position. Another aspect of the budget that is particularly pleasing is the commitment that 2,400 new teaching posts will be created along with 800 new gardaí and 1,000 extra nursing posts.

As the economy continues to recover it is vital that we invest in our public services. I am pleased to see that children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance will be automatically entitled to a medical card now. I come from the Border area, which has a rich history and strong tourism sector. Hence, I welcome the fact that the 9% VAT rate has been retained. I believe this rate has been instrumental in helping the tourism industry throughout the worst of the recession.

Another welcome measure in the budget is the extension of the mortgage interest relief scheme to 2020. The increase of the amount to be earned under the rent-a-room scheme from €12,000 to €14,000 is welcome, as is the introduction of the low-cost flexible loan fund for the farming sector. The provision of €319 million for local and regional roads is welcome. I look forward to Louth County Council using this funding to commence repair and maintenance programmes for the local roads in County Louth.

Overall the budget is fair and prudent but I am keen to comment on certain aspects. The introduction of the help-to-buy scheme is welcome but certain aspects need to be examined. Since the announcement, my constituency office has been inundated with calls from concerned people in respect of the 80% rule. In order to qualify for the scheme, a person applying for a mortgage must take out a mortgage of at least 80% of the purchase price. This rule is too restrictive and will result in those people who need most help being unable to access the scheme. For example, let us suppose a couple wishes to purchase a new family home in County Louth for €295,000 and they have a joint income of €60,000. That is a typical scenario in County Louth. For the couple to be eligible for the scheme, they must take out a mortgage of €236,000, which is 80% of the purchase price. Under current Central Bank rules, the maximum mortgage that such a couple could take out is €210,000, which is equivalent to 3.5 times gross income. We must also bear in mind that this is the maximum amount that the couple could borrow and, in many circumstances, the bank will not offer them this amount. Therefore, a couple earning €60,000 and looking to purchase a family home for €295,000 will be automatically excluded from the scheme under current Central Bank rules. I urge the Minister to re-examine the proposal.

I agree with the Minister that measures must be put in place to help those looking to purchase a first family home. I agree with the help-to-buy scheme in principle but it needs to be changed. I call on the Minister to consider reducing the 80% minimum mortgage threshold to 60%. This would open the scheme up to a larger proportion of people who need help most. I am keen to see a reduction in the cap for eligibility to €400,000. I strongly believe that people who can purchase a new home in excess of this amount should not require help from the taxpayer. Reducing the cap will also stop developers from pushing up prices beyond €400,000. I fear this will happen unless we address the problem now.

I call on the Minister to offer an option that the rebate can be either a tax refund based on tax paid over the previous four years or a tax credit for tax to be paid over the coming four years. This would allow those who had to emigrate during the recession to return home and still avail of the scheme. I welcome the fact that the Minister extended the city living initiative to include landlords. I look forward to the Minister making a favourable decision in respect of including Dundalk and Drogheda in the scheme soon.

Deputy Joe Carey: Budget 2017 was a sensible prudent budget. In the short time available I wish to concentrate on aspects relating to agriculture and rural affairs. I welcome the fact that budget 2017 will facilitate the development of an action plan for rural development to co-ordinate and implement initiatives to support economic and social progress throughout rural Ireland. The budget increases funding to the rural development programme by €107 million; from €494 million in 2016 to €601 million in 2017. The reopening of schemes such as the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, and the beef data and genomics programme are welcome and offer opportunities to farmers in County Clare and throughout the country to bring increased income inside the farm gate.

Many deputations to my office over recent months have expressed concern with regard to the income averaging facility. The new arrangement, as announced by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, which will allow a farmer facing an exceptionally poor year to step out of income averaging and, instead, pay only the tax due on a current year basis with any deferred tax liability becoming payable over subsequent years, is a proper and common sense solution to what had all the ingredients of the perfect financial storm for many of our farmers at the end of October 2016. I also welcome improvements in the means testing arrangements for low-income farmers on farm assist, including farm families with children. The expansion of the rural social scheme by 500 places is a further underscoring of an important initiative supporting rural Ireland.

The headline issue with respect to agriculture in budget 2017 is no doubt the announcement of the plans for a €150 million, 2.95% interest, agri cashflow support loan. I welcome the fact that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has been exploring new and more competitive sources of funding for Irish agriculture. There is no doubt that there are evolving market requirements, not least the potential impact of Brexit. The Minister has given us the outline of the new scheme. I urge him to continue in this proactive vein and not leave the delivery and final design of this initiative solely in the hands of Ireland's commercial banks. His work and that of the Department is only beginning now with this potential agricultural game changer.

A genuine fear expressed in response to this initiative is that this scheme could be a Trojan Horse, designed to wean farmers from the Common Agricultural Policy. I would like the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to address this point. In fairness to Commissioner Phil Hogan in his speech of 23 June 2015 at the National Convention Centre he dealt with this question. I would like to hear the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, hammering home the point that this scheme is not a replacement for a farmer's basic payment scheme, BPS, payment.

I welcome the 2017 budgetary allocation of €111.6 million for forestry development as announced by the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine with responsibility for forestry, Deputy Andrew Doyle. This level of funding is further evidence of the Government's ongoing commitment to the sector as set out in the Forestry Programme 2014—2020. It will ensure continued progress in the drive towards increased forestry and mobilisation of the existing timber and biomass resource. These are two core objectives necessary for growing Ireland's timber processing industry. The level of funding provided is also significant given the recent EU proposals on climate change mitigation and the potential role of forestry in helping to achieve the targets set. I note that in the 2017 budgetary allocation there is a capital carry-over. Does this relate to the sterilisation of lands with respect to forestry established in hen harrier special protection areas, SPAs? Could the Minister of State clarify that?

18 October 2016

Deputy Seamus Healy: The proposals in respect of social housing in this budget are grossly inadequate. Housing is a fundamental right of human beings but shamefully the Taoiseach has written to the EU seeking permission to borrow the money required to build social housing. Ireland does not have the sovereignty to house its own people.

There are 140,000 people on local authority waiting lists and in the first four months of this year an additional 3,527 have been added to that figure. This probably underestimates the situation because people now availing of the housing assistance payments, formerly rent supplement, are being removed from local authority lists. We need an emergency house building programme of at least 10,000 houses per year to address this situation. The Government's target of 47,000 houses to be provided between now and 2021 will fall far short of dealing with the problem. In 2021 we will be, as we are today, in a housing crisis. There is an absolute necessity to declare a housing emergency. The Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Coveney, said publicly in July that he believed we had a housing crisis. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, signed off on an emergency measure to ensure that public service pensioners were deprived of their pensions under the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2015 but this Government refuses to declare a housing emergency which is absolutely necessary to halt evictions generally and in rented and mortgaged properties. The Government, through the banks it owns, Allied Irish Banks, AIB, and Permanent TSB is effectively allowing evictions. It is also allowing them through other banks and landlords, including vulture funds. These evictions are continuing. As a result, many unfortunate families have been devastated by suicide.

A shocking eviction was attempted last week in Clonlara in County Clare. I demand that the Minister for Justice and Equality instruct the Garda to investigate the conduct of security companies at that failed eviction of a family. Will the Minister establish what security companies were involved and whether those security firms possessed an execution order for taking possession of that family home? Did they present an execution order to the owners of the property? If they had no execution order or did not present it to the family, were they guilty of trespass? Were all the security firms involved in this horrific event licensed according to the law? Had all the individuals involved in this attempted repossession legal authority for their actions? Were all the individuals registered employees of the security firms? Were children unlawfully detained during that incident? Were all involved acting on behalf of the Bank of Ireland in which the State has a significant shareholding? This was a shocking and horrific attempted eviction. Thankfully, it failed. In a year when we celebrate the 100th anniversary of 1916, when we promised to cherish all the children of the nation equally, what would Pearse and Connolly and the signatories to the Proclamation think of the eviction battering ram of 2016?

11 o'clock

I compliment the family, their friends and neighbours and the anti-eviction task force which successfully stopped this eviction. People power stopped this eviction. People power will force this Government to stop evictions and to declare a housing emergency. The sooner the Government does that, the better.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I now call the Government representatives. I call Deputy Pat Deering, who I understand is sharing his time.

Deputy Pat Deering: That is correct, a Leas-Chathaoirleach, with Deputy Moran.

I am delighted to have an opportunity to say a few words on budget 2017, but I have to record my disappointment that this debate is being held in the slot between 10 p.m. and midnight when there was other time available during the week. That is not the fault of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, but it is a matter that needs to be discussed further. We are in an era of new politics but if this is new politics, it is not very good for the system in general.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: A lot of people would agree with the Deputy.

Deputy Pat Deering: Before and during the recent election and before the budget we heard much talk, both inside and outside this House, about fairness. The word “fairness” was used by many people, but fairness is a state of mind. I would ask those people who argued for fairness if it is fair that in ten or 12 years prior to 2011 the blind pension was cut by 16%? Is it fair that the Christmas bonus was abolished? Is it fair that the minimum wage was reduced not once, but twice? Is it fair that the universal social charge was introduced as a temporary measure that we still have and for which we are still paying a penalty? I would say it is not fair. It is important now, as we discuss budget 2017, that fairness is discussed in an honest way. The budget announced this day last week is the first step to ensuring there is fairness for everybody across the board.

I want to concentrate on a number of issues, the first of which is the agriculture sector. As Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I want to talk about a number of areas in the agriculture budget. It is important to acknowledge that the agriculture sector has been a key driver of this economy in the recent difficult years, growing to one that will be worth almost €11 billion in exports in the coming year, which is very important.

There are many challenges facing agriculture, none more so than Brexit, which is an issue that needs careful and honest deliberation. The past year has been difficult for the agriculture sector in general and has resulted in cashflow difficulties that have put many farmers under serious pressure. I welcome a number of the initiatives introduced in the budget last week that should go some way towards helping those farmers. For example, it is essential that the loan scheme was introduced. It was something for which I lobbied hard, in my position as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, both outside and inside this House. I welcome the fact that the Government not only matched the €11 million required from Europe but that it put €14 million into that fund. It would have been pointless giving a handout to farmers to the tune of €300 or €400 under that fund. It is essential that money is put to good use in acquiring capital that can be used to alleviate the cashflow difficulties being experienced. The loan fund being introduced at an interest rate of 2.95% should be hugely beneficial to farmers who can use the money, up to the tune of €150,000, to offset against the capital and loans they may have, which will be a huge saving for them.

I welcome also the new sheep scheme to be introduced under the rural development scheme. There has been much criticism in the past week that €25 million has been allocated for a sheep scheme whereas €35 million is needed for some other area. It is important to remember that sheep farmers are minimum wage workers. It is a labour intensive job. The average sheep farmer’s income is between €14,000 and €16,000 per year. That is a very small amount of money for people who work very hard, and it is important that their livelihoods are protected. I welcome the announcement of the €25 million for the scheme and hope it will be as flexible as possible over the coming period.

It is also important that funding for the green, low carbon, agri-environment scheme, GLAS,

will be increased to €211 million. That will cater for 50,000 entrants over the coming period.

From a taxation point of view, a number of initiatives introduced in the budget are very important. We talk about cashflow and volatility in income, which will be a huge issue as we move towards Brexit. The income averaging opt-out is very important whereby people will not have to pay tax on last year's income, which may be difficult. They can park that for one year and move on to the next year. I welcome that.

There is an area in the agriculture-horticulture sector about which I have concerns and which I want to put on the record again tonight. The mushroom sector is going through a very difficult time. Mushroom producers made a presentation to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine two weeks ago. There are 3,500 people working in the mushroom sector, with approximately 80 producers in the country. Unfortunately, three or four of those have gone to the wall. They have become the first victims of Brexit. The volatility in sterling has been a huge issue in that regard. We need to ensure their livelihoods are protected. That we have 3,500 people in one sector under serious pressure deserves special attention.

Some of the other taxation measures introduced can be very beneficial to the agriculture sector. Also, it is important that the farm assist difficulties experienced in the past three or four years have been reassessed and we are now back to where we were prior to the cuts in the previous period. I welcome the fact that 500 new places have become available for the rural social scheme.

I welcome the reintroduction of the sports capital grant this year. It is an important scheme that affects every town and village throughout the country. It is a stimulus package in terms of getting people back to work and doing jobs in a local area, and it creates good will across the board. In my county of Carlow, in the past difficult three years of the last Dáil term, 55 sporting organisations benefitted to the tune of €2 million, which is not bad for a small county. We need to continue reinvesting in those schemes over the coming period.

It is very important that we maintain the 9% VAT rate in the hospitality sector. There was much talk prior to the budget about the fact that it may not happen but it is important that we acknowledge and recognise that there is a huge difference between the hospitality sector in this city of Dublin and that in rural Ireland. It is important that Dublin's hospitality sector does not kill the golden goose that we have developed. The hospitality sector, and the tourism sector in general, has been the good news story over the past four or five years. A large number of visitors come to this country. Approximately 40,000 extra jobs have been created in that sector and it is important that we make sure it continues to develop.

The final area I want to touch on briefly is housing. I welcome some of the initiatives announced in the budget with regard to the first-time buyers scheme. It is not just the first-time buyers scheme; it also relates to first-time builders. As the previous speaker mentioned, it requires tweaking. Like other speakers, I have been inundated with calls to my office about the 80% mortgage issue. From what I understand, it is almost impossible to get an 80% mortgage; the maximum available appears to be 75%. I ask the Minister for Finance in particular to consider making adjustments to the scheme. The principle is good, because it is all about supply and demand. We do not have the supply, and this scheme will ensure that supply is increased.

The other area I would like to mention, which a previous speaker also mentioned, concerns the lack of respite services. My constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny has suffered from a lack of

respite services. The Health Information and Quality Authority investigations and reports have ensured that the respite services available previously for children with serious difficulties and disadvantages are no longer available. We need to make sure these opportunities are presented again to the parents of these people, who deserve a break when they are in difficulty. Without these services it is difficult to survive and to have a decent existence. I ask the Minister for Health to set up a special fund for respite services. HIQA does a very good job but it must be aware of the consequences of the job it does. There is no point doing a good report and closing down an institution, a respite house or a hospital without being aware of the consequences.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: As this is my maiden speech in the House I say to fellow Deputies that it is an honour and privilege to stand here today as a Member of the Thirty-second Dáil. I thank the voters of Longford-Westmeath for giving me the opportunity to represent them. Over the years, the constituency has been honoured by the calibre of its public representatives who have graced this Chamber and I sincerely hope I continue that proud history by serving the public to the best of my ability.

I express my sincere appreciation to my wife, Michelle, and my two sons Jamie and John for their help and support over the years since I first entered politics. I am forever grateful for their help and encouragement. I also congratulate the Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, on his re-election. I wish him every success in government as he sets out to restore people's faith in politics and in the economy so that, in the upcoming years, we can bring about real and sustainable improvement in people's lives.

Last week's budget had one key element - a rise in public expenditure of €1.3 billion. It was not long ago that people's anger spilled out into the streets outside this very Chamber at the level of cuts they had to endure to their livelihoods, cuts that affected every man, woman and child in this country. Thankfully, we are now in a different place and last week's budget had a number of key highlights in the areas of rural Ireland, agriculture, education and health. In particular, there was funding for 800 new gardaí, 1,000 nurses and 650 teachers and special needs assistants, a total of 4,500 front-line staff in the coming months.

The budget also addressed concerns of rural Ireland and the help required by those trying to make a living from the land. Positive measures included the introduction of sheep farming grant schemes to the value of €25 million, a review of the improvement of farm assist payments, an increase in rural social schemes and €12 million for town and village renewal schemes.

The Independent Alliance is proud to have made a significant contribution to the shaping of this budget with our Government partners. While much more needs to be achieved, it is our first budget and our first step along the road to recovery and we are committed to this. With a strong group focus on ensuring the vulnerable and sick in society are protected, the Independent Alliance sets priorities where people and communities will come first. We now need to rethink how we do things. Since the economy crashed, people have felt they are not getting their fair share of opportunities and profits generated in society and there is now a great need to look at a new kind of social contract where everyone plays their part and feels valued again.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am sharing my time with Deputy James Browne. A former leader of my party frequently referred to economics as a dismal science. That comment may have been unfair to economists but it reflects accurately the relationship that sometimes exists between politics and economics. Economics is a science. It is based on a close study of previous economic development and an appraisal of vast amounts of economic data. In many

respects, economists are like meteorologists. Their job is to warn of dangerous climate changes that lie ahead and how any turbulence should be avoided. Some are overly cautious but in general when economists speak they should be listened to by politicians.

Politics is not a science. It ebbs and flows depending on the public mood and perceptions about the immediate past and the short-term future. Politicians in general will seek to follow the direction of least resistance, what looks like the clearest, least problematic path. A lot of times they make it and get through but sometimes they get caught, as happened with world economies back in 2008. The Irish economy is progressing and recovering after the traumatic events caused by the global crisis of 2008. Although politicians can be legitimately blamed for contributing to that crisis, they also deserve credit for identifying the painful path out of that crisis. The people of this country and the political system deserve credit for being able to steer the country through what was an economic hurricane.

We are now sailing in calmer yet unpredictable waters and the budget needs to be viewed in that context. Unfortunately, just as we have come through one storm there is, on the horizon, an equally dangerous storm which will pass directly over Ireland in the near future. That is the storm called Brexit. Unfortunately, our budget was completely inadequate to deal with the threat posed to this country by Brexit. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle, as a Deputy for a Border county, will know that the Border counties are particularly vulnerable to the threat from Brexit but so is the island of Ireland. The decision of the British Government to have a referendum on leaving the European Union will probably go down as one of the worst foreign policy decisions of a British Government since the Munich agreement of 1938. A Prime Minister who was in favour of remaining in the European Union was reckless in allowing that referendum to take place at a time when there was an unprecedented refugee crisis in Europe and a growing feeling of anti-EU sentiment throughout the Union.

The vote in Britain was predominantly a vote about immigration. It was an opportunity for those who have been let down by the British political system to blame an entity that was presented as being the cause of their problems. That was unfair and wrong. The European Union has done more to improve the working conditions of British workers than any other entity and the biggest failure of the British Labour Party over the past number of years was its failure to communicate that message to the electorate of Britain prior to the referendum. Nonetheless, the vote in Britain is a milestone in British history. I may be wrong but I suspect that, ultimately, the people of Britain will come to regret their decision. Unfortunately, Britain is now being guided through this enormous crisis by very inexperienced politicians whose compasses are set not to the interests of the British people but to emotion and English nationalism.

The history of this island has been dominated for many centuries by our relationship with the larger neighbouring island. That changed with our membership of the European Union and the increase in this country's wealth that really took off in the 1990s. Unfortunately, because of the short-sightedness of a British Administration, we will suffer again. Although we have been liberated from domination in our relationship with the neighbouring island, that will change again because of Brexit. Brexit means that the progress of this country over the next ten years will be defined, if not determined, by what happens on the neighbouring island. We need to recognise and re-emphasise that Ireland's future rests with membership of the European Union and not with our large neighbouring island.

The level of preparedness for Brexit in Britain is abysmal. We are told that Brexit means Brexit but that means nothing. They do not know in Britain where this journey will lead, nor

where it will end. In this country we are also grossly unprepared and the budget announced last week was disappointing. It failed to recognise the biggest threat posed to this country as a result of the decision made next door. We need to make decisions to ensure we are protected against the ramifications of Brexit. We need to identify what we as a country require the negotiators from the European Union to seek on our behalf when they come to negotiate with Britain after March of next year. We need the European Commission negotiators to recognise that this country has a unique position because of the Border on this island. Therefore, the first thing the Government needs to do is to have a plan for the purpose of influencing the European Commission in respect of its negotiations with Britain which will commence at some stage in the middle of next year.

We also need to recognise that Brexit not only will have economic consequences for this country, but has constitutional consequences also. In 1998, the vast majority of people of this country, and, indeed, on this island, voted to amend Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution for the purpose of giving effect to the Good Friday Agreement. It is sometimes forgotten that the Good Friday Agreement involved two agreements. It involved a multi-party agreement between the parties in Northern Ireland. It also involved an agreement between the two sovereign states, between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. That treaty is registered as an international treaty in the United Nations. We agreed to amend Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. In return, the British state agreed that it would change its legal system so that the European Convention on Human Rights would be incorporated into British law. They did that by introducing the Human Rights Act 1998 into domestic British law. We are now told that the British Government intends to repeal the Human Rights Act 1998 as it operates in Northern Ireland. It will be replaced with some ambiguous unknown British bill of rights. That was not what we agreed to when we voted to amend Articles 2 and 3. That was not what the State agreed to when we entered into an international treaty, registered in the United Nations, with the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, no one in the Government is emphasising to the British Government that it will be in breach of its international obligations. For instance, there was a court case in Belfast recently when a lot of interested parties were joined as notice parties for the purpose of giving their views on the Brexit decision. Why was the Irish State not represented as a notice party in those proceedings where we could have given our assessment as to what was required based on the Good Friday Agreement?

I suppose the vote in Northern Ireland was also of particular interest because for the first time, many Unionists recognised that their interests were best served not by being part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain but by being part of a federal European system. That is a significant change. It is a change that needs to be carefully nourished. It does not require knee-jerk reactions seeking people to call for a Border poll so that people can revert to traditional sectarian positions. In Scotland, there is likely to be a vote in the near future on whether or not Scotland will remove itself from the Union.

We have seen a devaluation of the pound by 20% against the euro. This is placing a significant burden on Irish exporters and manufacturers. It will have a negative impact on British tourists travelling to Ireland. We need to have a plan for those sectors. Unfortunately, that is where the budget has failed. It has not put forward any plan for how this country will deal with the serious problem which will arise when the Brexit negotiations commence.

Deputy James Browne: As the Fianna Fáil spokesperson on mental health, I intend addressing the mental health aspects of the budget.

The enactment of the Mental Health Act in July 2001 by Deputy Micheál Martin, was a game-changer. In the decades prior to 2001, mental health attitudes were all too often still mired in stigma, prejudice and a paternalistic attitude of lock them up for their own good. The importance of positive mental health did not get the coverage or support back then that it gets today. The Act was the first real reform of mental health legislation in this country for over half a century. In addition, the creation of the Mental Health Commission in April 2002 created an implementation body to ensure that the intention of the Act was fulfilled. The main objective of the Act was to address the civil and human rights of mentally ill persons while additionally putting in place mechanisms by which the standards of care and treatment in our mental health services could be monitored, inspected and reviewed.

Following on from this reforming Act, A Vision for Change was developed under the then Fianna Fáil Government as a strategy document which sets out the direction for mental health services in Ireland. It describes a framework providing and supporting positive mental health across the entire community and providing accessible, community-based, specialist services for those with mental illness. It was developed by an expert group, which combined the expertise of different professional disciplines, health service managers, researchers, representatives of voluntary organisations and service user groups. It had broad support from patient groups and medical professionals and across the political divide.

A Vision for Change is a detailed strategy which proposes a holistic view of mental illness and seeks to address the many co-factors that can impose on one's mental health, such as biological, psychological and social factors that contribute to mental health problems. It proposes a person-centred treatment approach which addresses each of those elements through an integrated care plan, reflecting best practice, and evolved and agreed with service users and their carers. Special emphasis is given to the need to involve service users and their families and carers at every level of service provision. It is based on a recovery model that seeks, where possible, to keep those with mental health problems centred in their communities and retain their involvement in their family and social circles. While the document may be in need of updating, the principles it was founded on and its fundamentals remain sound.

As a republican party, Fianna Fáil believes that mental health policy is ultimately a question of citizenship. It is about a right to be able to participate in society on an equitable basis. That demands those with mental health problems being encouraged to seek help and ensuring that the rapid and expert help they require is available when and where they need it. We all know that currently is not the case. In the absence of the necessary mental health supports, these citizens are denied their rights to participate fully in their society. It has become clear that if we are to achieve the ambition of transforming the lives of those with mental health problems in this country, we need to drive a fundamental cultural shift in the attitudes of our health system, and that means giving mental health parity of esteem with physical health. That is why Fianna Fáil, in the confidence and supply agreement to facilitate a minority Government, made the implementation of A Vision for Change a condition of that agreement. The preamble to that agreement states, "The Confidence and Supply votes are dependant on the full implementation of the policy principles attached to this document (Appendix 1)". Within Appendix 1, one of the terms states, "Fully implement 'Vision for Change' in the area of mental health". The confidence and supply votes are dependent on the full implementation of the policy principles attached to this document. We agree to facilitate budgets consistent with the agreed policy principles attached to this document which run over a full term of Government.

The Government needs to understand that a commitment to increase investment by €35 mil-

lion annually is a commitment to increase investment by €35 million, not to partially increase it or put in place initiatives with a full-year value of €35 million but only to spend €15 million in 2017. The Government tried that in 2016, announcing €35 million while withholding €12 million. It was forced into an embarrassing U-turn in June last. It must be borne in mind too that Fine Gael pledged to increase funding for mental health by €175 million.

Last week on budget day, the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy McEntee, pledged to initiate €35 million in mental health spending in 2017. There was concern that this means only a partial spending of the €35 million. Such concern is justified on the basis of what the Minister stated today in the Dáil. The Government seems determined to repeat the mistakes it made last year when €12 million was withheld. It seems that only €15 million will be drawn down in 2017.

The confidence and supply arrangement commits to fully implement A Vision for Change in the area of mental health. I want to see a multi-annual plan for how that will be done. I want to see put in place the reforms necessary to deliver long-lasting improvements in our mental health services. Government credibility on this matter is stretched thin, especially in view of what happened in 2016. To restore credibility, we need a clear commitment on funding and an implementation plan with clear measurable goals with a multi-annual service plan.

In the time remaining, I will address the issue of Brexit. It would appear that many of those who campaigned for Brexit never expected the referendum would be passed. Since the referendum, the UK Government appears lost as to what to do. They are divided but even if they were united, they have no plan. They are totally unprepared. Equally, the Government here seems to be totally unprepared for the decision taken. We need to seek real measures to protect our industries against the consequences of what is, according to the Taoiseach, probably the most serious economic event in the past 50 years. We have seen sterling weaken to 91p against the euro and most economists predict it will go to parity by the end of the year, with some saying that within another year these values could reverse. In my county of Wexford we are almost totally reliant on SMEs, the agrifood sector, the fabrication sector and tourism, which is extremely vulnerable. We are in a similar position to the Border counties, and while we do not have a land border with the UK, we have a harbour and a ferry with links directly to it and the majority of our tourists come from the UK. Those industries are the most vulnerable. They are significantly employment reliant. They have a very thin margin and are not in a position to take any hits. We need the Government to take significant steps to provide support for those industries. Counties like Wexford did not see any recovery in the past few years and are only now starting to see a small element of it. There are no shock absorbers for those industries. They cannot take any further hits and they need supports from the Government. The Government needs to set out quickly a clear plan on how it will protect those businesses. We have already seen with the mushroom industry the consequences of what is happening and we will see more of that happening in the concrete industry, the agricultural industry, the agrifood sector and the tourism sector. While some steps were taken by the Government in its announcements in the budget, they were nowhere near sufficient. Full support needs to be provided for those industries or we could find ourselves in a situation that could be even potentially worse than what we saw during the economic collapse.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Twenty minutes is available in the Sinn Féin time slot. I understand Deputy Ellis is sharing his time with Deputies Mitchell and Martin Kenny.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: This budget is another missed opportunity to move towards a fairer

society. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have colluded in forging this budget between them. It once again represents the failed politics of a failed class and a failed system and one with no vision. It is also a mean budget especially when we consider that politicians will be paid an increase in January which is totally unnecessary and, begrudgingly, pensioners will not see their increase, a mere €5, until March, leaving them without the increase for three of the hardest months of the year. It is not worth a damn for Ministers to say they will send back their increases; as we all know they can be claimed back in the future.

It is no secret to anyone that there is a major housing emergency and this budget will only add to the crisis with an ill-judged and irresponsible first-time buyer's scheme. A major component contributing to the housing shortage is the plight of renters. There is no direct intervention to help renters in this budget. Sinn Féin brought forward a Bill that would have provided rent certainty for landlords and tenants alike, but Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael colluded in stopping it. That Bill would have linked rent increases and decreases to the consumer price index, which would have provided some stability for the market. We have people tonight paying rents which, in some cases, are nearly twice what a mortgage would cost and wondering how they will manage.

New research by Savills Ireland, using CSO data, shows that the private rented sector has increased in recent years. This increase in the private rented sector is also a consequence of this and the previous Government's actions. A good proportion of private renters have not been able to get into the housing market due to house price inflation, austerity budgets that affected wages, the increased cost of living and additional taxes such as water charges and local property taxes. At the same time there is an increase in demand for private rented accommodation. Social housing tenants are increasingly being housed in the private sector due to the decision by previous Governments to stop building social and local authority housing. The Government knows the scale of the problem and still did not include any measures in the budget, apart from giving developers a nice little bailout. In regard to water charges, there is no mention or provision in this budget for scrapping them, so this will be another bill for hard-pressed householders next year.

In addition to the lack of investment in solving the housing crisis, when we look at the health budget we can see that in terms of investment, we are at a standstill. The real increase for health in this budget is €147 million but that will not reduce waiting lists or go anywhere near to solving the trolley crisis. There is also no mention of funding for the much needed 24-7 mental health services. The budget will not go anywhere near solving the staffing crisis in hospitals. For example, I would point to the joint replacement procedures in Cappagh hospital. I have dealt with the case of a man who underwent an operation on his arm in August 2015 and is waiting on a further operation in Cappagh hospital. Due to his absence from work while waiting for the operation, he is in grave danger of losing his job as it is more than a year since he had the original operation. At the end of September, 258 people were waiting for a year or more on the inpatient-day case surgery waiting list for orthopaedics in Cappagh National Orthopaedic Hospital. It is a scandal that four out of the six theatres in Cappagh are out of action due to lack of staff, consultants and equipment such as artificial limbs and other necessary parts. How can waiting lists be reduced if this is the case? Each person on those waiting lists is in pain and putting their life on hold waiting for this important surgery. There is nothing in this budget that will increase resources and staffing levels to cut the waiting lists. Even the schemes already implemented will not by themselves cut the waiting lists. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael had the chance to support an increase in staffing levels in this budget but instead decided to give tax

breaks for landlords and the wealthy.

This budget delivered next to nothing for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, including essential capital investment. I am not sure if it is now Government policy to ignore our crumbling infrastructure. It certainly has been Fine Gael policy in recent years. It could of course just be the case that the Minister, Deputy Ross, failed to secure anything for his Department. He has delivered nothing in this budget for his brief and it is shocking that no new projects are planned and that only €72 million in additional funding is to be made available. There are serious questions to be raised about the levels of funding for public transport. Our public transport system receives the least subvention of all public transport networks throughout Europe. Ordinary people have had to cover this shortfall through the fare box but the numbers do not add up. A generous estimate, from looking at the numbers in the budget, tells us that €17 million in additional funding has been made available. In a statement released by the Minister, Deputy Ross, last Tuesday night, the figure was €31 million. His Department informed me this was a clerical error to the tune of €15 million. I hope this discrepancy can be explained to me. It seems the Government is determined to run public transport into the ground. A couple of weeks ago we learned that the Minister, Deputy Ross, sat like a dummy - incapable or unwilling to offer an opinion - when he was told by CIE management of its plans to essentially privatise or, to use its word, “separate”, the Expressway service from the other CIE services. The obvious privatisation agenda of the Government is alarming. This year 10% of routes are being privatised. It looks as though Expressway will be the next victim the Government will attempt to target. We all know full well that once these routes and services are privatised, the private contractor can amend the contract, cut back the service and leave areas completely stranded by opting only to service the most profitable routes. Clearly, the Minister, Deputy Ross, and the Government have very little interest in investing in the public transport system. Instead they have prioritised the increasing of the inheritance tax and capital acquisitions tax reliefs that will cost €20 million and will only benefit 2,000 people. They do not see the value in a well-funded, first-class public transport network. This is a fatal mistake for economic growth, rural communities, business and social inclusion, and the list goes on.

We also have the issue of accessibility on public transport for people who use wheelchairs or have reduced mobility. Accessibility on public transport has been ignored once again. Many people with disabilities are on a low income and rely on public transport. If a person using a wheelchair outside the Dublin area needs to go somewhere, the chances are he or she cannot travel. If he or she can travel, an enormous amount of forward planning is a hassle that has to be endured.

Other obvious omissions include the complete and total lack of a capital expenditure plan for transport. Instead we are being treated to a review next year. No new projects have been announced and there are no cross-Border projects either. I am furious that projects such as Narrow Water bridge and the A5 have not been prioritised, especially given the new challenges Brexit will present to the people on this island, North and South.

Road maintenance is one of the few areas to receive an allocation under the regional and local roads programme. An additional €25 million has been allocated, bringing the total amount available for 2017 to €275 million. By the Minister’s own admission, we need €3 billion to bring regional and local roads up to a reasonable standard. Thereafter we need €580 million annually to keep the network in a steady condition. The Minister has been making jokes about being the Minister for potholes but this is not something to make light of. Our road network has been allowed to disintegrate in the past eight years or so. This affects road safety and economic

growth, especially in regional areas. Deaths on the roads have been increasing and rural Ireland continues to be left behind in terms of business, jobs and economic growth. The level of funding provided will not make a dent in those figures. The current allocation will ensure our roads will continue to deteriorate. Tá deis caillte leis an mbuiséad seo. Is mór an náire é.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: This budget has been a joint venture. It has been a play acted out by Fine Gael with scripting by Fianna Fáil. This has been a show intended to create the image of action, justice and of being a budget for all people in society. Behind the acting, the people know exactly what they face. The manner in which increases have been extended to social protection payments lends itself to headlines and soundbites but rings hollow in everyday life. We all see the difficulties people face. While any rise in social welfare rates is welcome, this across the board, flat-rate rise does not address the major inequalities in our society. Ministers stated that everyone in society is better off under this budget and that it is fair and socially just but some are more prosperous than others. We define the meaning of fair and just clearly and differently from the Government parties. Ireland has one of the youngest populations in Europe. Would these young people see this budget as fair and just? For young people in receipt of social welfare this increase is pitiful to say the least. They seem to have been singled out for punishment and insult by the budget. For the young people in my constituency of Dublin Bay North, the increase provided for in the budget will get their bus fare into town once a week. They have to wait some months for this payment.

Alongside these issues, one in four children in a one-parent family lives in poverty. This group turns for help to bodies like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. This group disputes how it has benefited from this budget as it continues to suffer from previous cuts. How just and fair will the future be for these families? The Government parties knew the figures going into the budget. They knew the poverty rates. It is essential we ask what direction the child poverty rate will go under the current budget? We know the financial pressures people face with motor insurance hikes, property tax and the possibility of water charges next year. These increases in living expenses have been presided over by Fine Gael. How far will a €5 rise in the pension go to counter these expenses? What is needed is to analyse the requirements of our people rather than taking a broad sweep to satisfy political ends.

With the closing credits of this performance, Fianna Fáil needs to be acknowledged. As this is being acted out, Fianna Fáil can fall back behind its abstention cloak, which is serving it well. There has been a lack of vision in the proposals in this budget and unfortunately the most vulnerable suffer from it.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This budget did little to make life easier for working families and was a disappointment in the measures it brought forward to deal with the housing crisis and our health services, which have many difficulties and many inadequacies. While it was a disappointment, it was probably an inevitable conclusion of the alliance we have here between two very right-wing parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. While many of us could see it coming, it was a sight to behold to see Fianna Fail pretending it was not propping up the Government of the Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, and that it was going to produce its own alternative budget.

There was a time when Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's finance spokesperson used to come into the House and talk about Sinn Féin's costings not bearing up to scrutiny. They seem to have given up that talk now and recognise what the people have come to know over the past five years, that when Deputy Pearse Doherty comes here to speak about budgets, he stands up for the ordinary people and represents fairness and common sense. It is impossible to improve

public services, provide houses, build adequate schools and at the same time cut the taxes of the very richest in this society, which is what this budget continues to do. The capital acquisitions tax cut is an example of where we see a very small handful of people at the very top getting this cut while at the same time adequate provision is not made for our schools, hospitals and other services. The reality is that it makes common sense to have capital investment. It not only provides services but creates jobs and puts money back into our local economy.

It was ironic that Fianna Fáil came with its four-page excuse for a budget document that had no figures in it at all. It showed that it has at last given up the pretence it is an independent party. It has admitted that it is just here, on this occasion at least, to prop up Fine Gael and is the buttress to keep Deputy Enda Kenny in his Taoiseach's seat. It is doing exactly what it told voters in the previous general election it would not do. All the talk has been about holding the centre. What that means, when one thinks about it, is making sure the *status quo* is maintained, that the old traditional centre parties stay there and hold Ireland for them and theirs. Over the past century, politics in Ireland has become a culture of favour givers and seekers and it is this kind of thing that has brought Ireland to its knees so many times. We need to change it. There is no sign of a change in this budget. The housing measures are little more than a present to the big developers to ensure they get a higher price for their houses. It will not help anyone starting off trying to buy a house.

We also see it in our health services. They have been underfunded for years. In Sligo University Hospital and our mental health services in Sligo, the Mental Health Commission and the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, are doing inspections. At the end of it all, the reality is the service has been depleted because of the absence of staff. There is little or nothing in the budget to ensure we get those staff replaced in those services.

There are also the home-help services for elderly people who wish to stay in their homes. The funding for those has only been increased by the tiniest amount, which will go nowhere near meeting the demand for the services required by a growing and ageing population. There is tinkering with the waiting lists, as mentioned by my colleague earlier in the context of Cap-pagh hospital. That is one example. The waiting lists throughout the country, even for minor operations, are growing extensively all of the time.

Another issue I must mention is rural Ireland. For some parts of rural Ireland, farm assist has been restored. That is welcome and I acknowledge that. I also welcome and acknowledge the sheep scheme as good and positive. However, there are many other matters which could have been dealt with in the budget and would not have cost much. One example is the forgotten farmers. These are the young farmers who have been farming for too long to qualify for the schemes and have been left to one side. It is not that it would have cost any money to deal with them. Usually, budgets are an opportunity for Governments to resolve issues such as this, but that was not done in this budget. There is also the issue of broadband. Fibre optic broadband would revolutionise rural Ireland if it could be brought to those areas, yet the amount of money provided for it in the budget is absolutely measly.

Finally, there is the issue of Horse Racing Ireland, whose members appeared before the agriculture committee last week. Horse Racing Ireland has been given an additional €6 million in this budget. That is a total of €66 million for the organisation. No other sector is given money in the same way. Basically, it is given €66 million and told, "That's grand, lads, spend it how you like". Horse Racing Ireland puts most of that money towards providing prize money for the richest people in our society. Consider what happens in every other sector. Take the example

of the sheep grants that will be provided. The person who applies for those grants must have particular animal husbandry standards and fulfil certain measurable outcomes. There are no such outcomes for people in the equine industry. However, small breeders at the very bottom of the horse industry, who could do with some money and a helping hand, get nothing. The people who breed Connemara ponies and the harness racers get nothing. This money is ring-fenced for the wealthiest in our society. It is absolutely ridiculous and wrong. It is a bizarre way for the Government to handle that huge amount of money. It is something that will have to be dealt with in the coming year. While the appointment of the chief executive officer of Horse Racing Ireland was the issue, it has certainly shone a strong light on something that needs to be sorted out in our society.

What we in rural Ireland call blue-light services - namely, the ambulance and fire services - are in dire straits. They are stretched beyond the limits across the length and breadth of Ireland, but this budget has done little or nothing to help them. In the next 12 months, before we return here to discuss another budget, I hope the two parties of the right will realise that the ordinary people, particularly those in rural Ireland, must be looked after and that the budget is not just about looking after those at the top, who are often tax exiles.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I never expected, with the new politics, that I would find myself here on the graveyard shift.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Deputy is still here. That is the main thing.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Old politics are back. However, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the budget. Listening to some of the contributions, one would think that some of the contributors never had an opportunity to be part of the Government, to shape policy and to make a difference, which is what I always believed we were all elected to do. I have said many things about Fianna Fáil over the years but at least its members had the bottle to ensure that the country has a Government. Others sat on the fence or ran a mile when the opportunity of having some level of responsibility arose. Those same people are now pontificating about what should or could be done. When they had the chance to act, however, they did not take it. I hope the people will remember that the next time they go to the ballot box and that they will recall those who stood up to be counted when the chips were down.

All budgets in the history of the State have been far from perfect. However, we have come a long way from where we were in 2008, 2009, 2011 and 2012. The first budget when I became a Member of the House was that introduced in 2012. Some of the measures it contained were extremely difficult. Desperate hardships were endured by the people of this country for a number of years as a result of the crisis in which we found ourselves. If I had been asked in 2011 if I would accept a budget such as that which will apply in 2017, I absolutely would have done so. We have come a long way in a relatively short period. Five or six years ago, people thought it would take us ten or 20 years to reach our current position. We have a long way to go but the progress that has been made must be acknowledged. Thankfully, the country is going in the right direction. It is far from perfect. We face huge issues and a huge amount of catching up must be done - we probably have to catch up on a decade of under-investment - but we have come a long way and hopefully we can continue on that trajectory and build on the progress made in recent years to ensure that every citizen feels the benefits of that progress.

I consider a number of measures contained in the budget to be positive. One is the retention of the 9% VAT rate for tourism and hospitality businesses. Its introduction was one of

the most proactive and positive measures by a Government in the history of the State. When it was introduced in 2011 it drew a great deal of criticism and opposition. It is a measure that reached every rural community in the country. It was one of the most pro-rural measures ever from a Government. The benefits are clear to see. It was largely responsible for kick starting the tourism industry in 2011 when it was going through a terrible time. Other measures, such as the development of the Wild Atlantic Way, The Gathering and the scrapping of the airport tax, were very helpful. However, the 9% VAT rate was effectively a cut of one third in the VAT rate businesses had to pay. Other labour intensive industries benefited from it, such as hairdressers whose jobs are in every community in the country, but it was primarily tourism and hospitality businesses that benefited.

It has been under scrutiny in recent years and there was much pressure from certain quarters to abolish it. Much of that pressure came from people who cannot see beyond the M50 and Dublin. It was a lifeline for businesses in the regions, and particularly those in rural areas. While competitiveness problems might be creeping back into the tourism industry, with many of the problems in respect of our competitiveness in tourism that killed the golden goose in the early 2000s being seen again, punishing people in a nationwide business for the sins of a few is not the way to go. I welcome the retention of the 9% VAT rate and reiterate my call to have it extended to residential construction activity. That would be proactive and help increase supply on the market, which is one of the big problems. I would also welcome an acceleration of the implementation of the renovation scheme, which I proposed to the Government over a year ago. I believe it would be a positive measure and would bring extra supply to the market, which is crucial.

I warmly welcome the increases in social welfare payments, particularly the €5 increase in weekly payments across the board. Again, a number of years ago it was probably unthinkable that we would be in a position to do the like in a few short years. I particularly welcome the fact that the money is being spread across the board and that a large number of people will benefit from it. There is also the increase of 10% in the Christmas bonus, which brings the payment to 85%. It is a massive help for people at a difficult time of the year. With prudent management of the economy and further progress, I hope there will be a further increase in forthcoming budgets for those recipients.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 12 midnight until 12 noon on Wednesday, 19 October 2016.