



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 27 Meán Fómhair 2017

Wednesday, 27 September 2017

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 12 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: I want to raise with the Taoiseach the scandalous issue of the capacity of young teenagers to access child and adolescent mental health services and the enormous stress that their families have to endure because of what is an appalling situation - I am not exaggerating - across the country. Waiting lists to access services have jumped by 28% to 2,908 people. The number of people waiting for longer than one year has increased by 78%. There are 6,000 children waiting for primary care psychology appointments, 1,784 of whom have been waiting for longer than a year. These are the HSE's own data on the services in question. For some reason, the Cork-Kerry region is extraordinarily bad in terms of the numbers waiting longer than a year at 158 out of 324.

The capacity of the Department of Health, the Minister and the system to respond seems very poor. One in three posts has been filled in mental health services from 2015 to 2016. In that time, 520 approved positions were allocated, but it was nowhere near what was required. Some 2,000 extra staff were required, yet only 93 additional staff have been recruited in 2017. In child and adolescent services alone, people say that close to 600 staff are required before we can get those services to where they need to be.

I have a caseload of children and young teenagers that is quite shocking. In one case, there was a June 2016 assessment of need, a complaint was made that November and, eventually, a solicitor had to write a letter. In May 2017, the assessment was carried through. I have a list, as I am sure every Deputy does, of young children who have been unable to access mental health services.

The Roscommon report, published on 1 September, illustrates more dysfunctionality. There is also the incredible situation of the loss of a significant number of nursing staff. The report estimated a shortage of 50 nurses in Roscommon and about 100 in Galway while money was being handed back. For two years, Deputy James Browne and I have been going to both the Taoiseach's predecessor and the former Minister of State with responsibility, Deputy McEntee. Who is in charge? Where is the Government oversight? Where is the ministerial oversight?

There is an incredible inertia in our mental health services, an incredible lack of joined-up operations and of people working together as they should. Nobody is in charge. Ministers seem to be conduits receiving information and passing information on. No one is drilling down in terms of what is going on on the ground. Ministers for Health and Ministers of State with responsibility for mental health seem to be in that position to get promoted out of it. The lack of achievement over the past number of years in this area is truly shocking and unacceptable for the young children and teenagers and their families.

The Taoiseach: Everyone in the House understands the need to improve our mental health services, particularly for young people. Everyone in this House understands how important mental health is. One of the positive things that has happened in the past number of years and decade is a much greater willingness by people to talk about mental health, to treat it seriously as an issue and to improve services. The question the Deputy asks is quite a valid one. It is not simply a case of resources. If the Deputy looks at the budget for mental health in 2012, the year after his party left office, he will see it was €711 million. This year it will be €853 million. In a period when budgets were very tight, the mental health budget increased by €140 million. The question we need to ask ourselves is why we are not getting better value for that investment and why we are not seeing significant improvements in services. The HSE has statutory responsibility for mental health services. There is a national director of mental health and a director general above the national director. Political responsibility rests with the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, who is relatively newly appointed. He reports to the Minister, Deputy Harris, who reports to me. It is important to acknowledge there are unacceptable delays in people receiving the appointments they need. It is also equally important to acknowledge some of the progress that has been made. As I mentioned, there has been an increase in funding of €140 million a year since the Deputy's party left office. We now have the national forensic mental health hospital under construction in Portrane, which will allow us to close a very old facility in Dundrum. There have been improvements to counselling services, including new Jigsaw sites - one in Cork, which the Deputy will be familiar with, two in Dublin and one in Limerick. We are also seeing the continued development of community health teams and the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS. Specifically on the issue the Deputy raised on psychology, approval has now been granted for additional staffing resources and this will include 114 additional assistant psychology posts. There has also been an increase in the intake of undergraduate nursing from 60 last year to 130 this year, which will more than double the number of undergraduate psychiatric nurses being recruited. It raises the fundamental question that we always run into when it comes to health, which is that more staff, resources and funding do not necessarily result in better services and outcomes. It is an area on which we will need to really focus in the years ahead.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have been hearing this for the past four years. The Taoiseach's reply is somewhat similar to what Deputy Enda Kenny or the former Minister of State with responsibility, Deputy McEntee, would have given us. If the Taoiseach talked to the parents he would know they will not be satisfied with the idea we all have a better understanding of mental health services. Neither will they be satisfied with the passing of the buck and the sort of detached commentary that suggests it is somebody else's job to do this. It is the Government's job to drill down and make sure that things get done. The extraordinary waiting times that people have to experience must end. We have made suggestions to the Government on this such as utilising non-governmental organisations far more effectively than it has and to do things differently in respect of the private sector. We have met with resistance, inertia and have received no answers from either the former Minister or the Government on this crucial question. Last

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Monday, I met a family with a six and a half year old child. They have been contacting the services since the child was three and a half years old and still cannot get an overall assessment of need. It is about time we stopped all the language and spin and got on top of this for the sake of the families concerned.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Micheál Martin: These families are listening to language such as, “We’re going to create a republic of opportunities.”

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta. Tá an t-am caite.

Deputy Micheál Martin: These children and young people have been denied opportunities and will continue to be denied them-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: An Taoiseach.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----until somebody assumes political responsibility and takes charge of this specific area-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----of child and adolescent mental health-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá an t-am caite.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----and ensures that people can get timely access-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá an t-am caite.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----to the services that they so desperately require.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Caithfidh mé bheith féaráilte. Tá am an Teachta caite. Tá a fhios agam gur ceist phráinneach agus tábhachtach í seo. Tá bomaite amháin ag an Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy asked me a straight factual question and I gave him a straight factual answer. Statutory responsibility lies with the Health Service Executive. That is what the Health Act stipulates. The Health Act was passed by the Houses of the Oireachtas and it was brought into the Houses by the Deputy when he was Minister for Health and Children.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, it was not actually.

The Taoiseach: That is where the statutory responsibility lies.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is a silly point.

The Taoiseach: However, I fully accept-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach should just deal with the issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: An Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----that, of course, political responsibility lies with the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, Deputy Jim Daly, who reports to the Minister, Deputy Harris, who reports to me. I fully accept political responsibility for dealing with these problems

and I fully accept that there are problems that need to be dealt with.

The Deputy will be aware that today the CSO will produce provisional figures on suicide, indicating a decrease in the number of suicides by 11.5%. Of course, any death by suicide is one too many. Almost all of us in this House, including me, have been affected by the issue of suicide. Suicide is not just about the person who takes his or her life.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

The Taoiseach: It is also about the impact on their families and friends, and people who think about what might have been done and whether they could have done more. However-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat, a Thaoisigh.

The Taoiseach: -----it is welcome to see that reduction.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: An Teachta-----

The Taoiseach: Part of it is down to the work that was done in previous years, with a tripling of the funding for the National Office for Suicide Prevention and the suicide prevention strategy introduced by the former Minister of State, Kathleen Lynch, and I when we were in the Department of Health. We will continue to work on these issues and-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----continue to ensure we have better outcomes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If the relevant committee decides to extend the time for this from three to four minutes or whatever, that is a matter for it. However, I have to abide by the Standing Orders that are in place. I call Deputy McDonald, who I know will adhere to the three minutes. I simply remind her.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Absolutely.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The clock has started.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yesterday, the Taoiseach told us that his primary aim in budget 2018 is to balance the books. He expressed this as a priority - indeed almost as a virtue - in response to my question about the need to provide real investment in order to slash the crippling cost of child care in the State. Meanwhile, at yesterday's meeting of the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, representatives from AIB told my colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, that it will not pay any corporation tax for the next 20 years. A bank that is now profitable will pay no corporation tax - zip, zero, zilch. As the Taoiseach knows, AIB made a pre-tax profit of €814 million in the first six months of this year. The tax that is due on these profits is money that is badly needed to deal with the crises in our crumbling public services, not least those relating to health and mental health. However, we have a golden arrangement with the banks as a result of a legislative change introduced in 2014 under a previous Fine Gael-led Government with the assistance of the Labour Party and yet the Taoiseach talks about a tight fiscal space.

Is it any wonder that we have a tight fiscal space? After all the austerity, the cuts and the hardship that the Taoiseach's party visited on ordinary people, the banks are back in profit and are told that they are scot-free regarding their corporation tax obligations. This is happening at

a time when families still struggle to keep the wolf from the door to pay their bills. I find this a very strange way to go about balancing the books. I can only imagine what the 8,000 people deprived of a place to live will make of this or what the 494 patients who were on trolleys yesterday might make of this. This cosy tax-free deal for the banks really amounts to another bailout for them. Much like the Apple tax debacle, it emerges again that the Taoiseach's message to the corporate world is that it can keep the people's money and that he is prepared to tolerate citizens living in doorways and being sick and going without treatment. The Taoiseach's talk of a republic of opportunity is once again exposed as a sham. It is in reality a republic of opportunism where his Government dances to the tune of opportunistic bankers. I ask the Taoiseach to do the sums for us. I want him to tell us how much tax this State is forgoing from AIB under this sweetheart deal. I also want him to tell us how much this State will forgo over the next 20 years. Could he also inform us of the similar figures in the case of Bank of Ireland and other banks for this year and over the 20-year period?

The Taoiseach: I compliment Deputy McDonald on a flawless delivery of her script. Pauses, intonation, everything was absolutely perfect as always. I hope she did not spend too much time practising it this morning.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The clock is ticking.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He is a great observer.

The Taoiseach: It is absolutely the case that our first priority for the budget in a few weeks' time is to balance the books and to do so for the first time in ten years. Why is that important? I spoke to a student audience this morning in Merrion Square about why it is important. This country currently carries a debt of approximately €200 billion a year. Contrary to some of the narrative out there, that is not because of bank bailouts. About €30 billion of that is as a consequence of bailouts. The vast majority of it is a consequence of deficit spending. There has been a huge amount of deficit spending by Governments since the foundation of the State. Because of that deficit spending, it costs us approximately €6 billion a year to service our debt. If Governments throughout Irish history had balanced the books we would have an extra €5 billion or €6 billion a year to spend on health, housing, education and everything else. That is why I intend to ensure that the first budget that I bring through as Taoiseach - the first budget brought through by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe - is one that balances the books, so we do not saddle children of the future with additional debt and we do not require politicians of the future to have to choose between debt service costs and improvements in services. There will be additional funding for public services in the budget. As I mentioned already, public spending will increase next year by about 3.5%.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I wonder if the Taoiseach could answer my question.

The Taoiseach: I am coming to it. I did not interrupt Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is not a flawless answer.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is certainly not. He clearly needs a bit more practice.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has one minute.

The Taoiseach: Public spending will increase next year by about 3.5%. That is an increase

in spending of almost €2 billion. That is only possible because we did not implement the economic policies of Sinn Féin in the years gone by; we implemented policies that allowed jobs to be created and incomes to rise again.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: And people to become homeless.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach should be allowed to respond.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: It sounds a lot like Enda's script. The Taoiseach should get a script of his own.

The Taoiseach: That is exactly why it will be possible to increase spending on public services. I am happy to organise a briefing for Deputy McDonald and Deputy Pearse Doherty. The way tax works is that if one is a self-employed person, a farmer or a business and one has made losses in a previous year one can off-set them against future tax liabilities. The same thing applies to banks, for example. However, in order to ensure that we do get some revenues from banks we have introduced a specific bank levy, which is only applied to banks in order that we get revenues from them. Between now and 2021 the bank levy will bring in €750 million.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: To reassure the Taoiseach, our pre-budget submission also balances the books.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Like the party's election one.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: But it makes different choices and those choices are about supporting communities and families and building public services. The Taoiseach's set of choices is very different to that. I asked him about tax forgone or lost this year and over the coming years and he did not answer that question. I will try something novel here. I will answer the question for the Taoiseach if that is of assistance.

Deputy David Stanton: Is that in the Deputy's script as well?

Deputy Colm Brophy: It must be in the script.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: AIB is carrying losses of €3 billion. Calculated out over 20 years, that is €150 million in tax forgone at a time when we desperately need more revenue. The reason the banks have this arrangement is that a Fine Gael Government decided to allow them to carry 100% of their losses and to write it off in that way. While that is the technicality of it, what matters here is the consequence. The consequence is that it is tax forgone. At the same time, the Taoiseach stands in the Chamber day in and day out, sheds crocodile tears and tells us how sorry he is, that he understands how awful it is but that he is terribly sorry because he does not have the resources.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Can the Taoiseach respond and give us the figures for the Bank of Ireland please? How much are we forgoing for it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will ask him. The Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: To answer the Deputy's question, and as I have explained, there is no tax forgone. Businesses that made losses in the past can offset those losses against future tax liabilities.

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Deputy Pearse Doherty: Not the banks. Brian Lenihan introduced a law not to allow the banks to do that.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The Taoiseach will have to read the script.

The Taoiseach: This pattern is extraordinary. It happens every day. The people on these benches listen attentively to the questions, scripted or unscripted. We try to answer and we get-----

Deputy John Brady: The Taoiseach and his Deputies do not answer.

Deputy Seán Crowe: They have to get on with misleading the Dáil.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: If the Taoiseach were completely truthful-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will do my utmost to ensure that there are no interruptions. The Deputies might not like the answers but I have no control over that.

The Taoiseach: It shows an innate contempt for democracy and free speech and it indicates the kind of society we might have if Sinn Féin ever got into power. In light of this type of behaviour, those in Sinn Féin would try to restrict free speech and restrict democracy if they were in power.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We would actually answer questions.

The Taoiseach: As I said, there is not tax forgone because businesses can offset previous losses against future tax liabilities. A change was made in 2014 for a good public policy reason. Banks were allowed to use those tax credits as part of their tier 1 capital ratio. That then allowed us to spend less money recapitalising the banks. It would have cost us another €3 billion at that time to recapitalise them otherwise. In order to ensure that we get revenues from banks, a levy was introduced.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I hope I am not treated to the same patronising and condescending response that the Taoiseach just gave to the previous female Deputy.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Alan Farrell: Oh my God.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Tens of thousands of people will take to the streets of the capital this Saturday in what may well be the largest march for choice we have seen in this country. It begins at 2 p.m. at Parnell Square. Yesterday, the Taoiseach announced that a referendum on the eighth amendment will be held in May or June 2018. After all the campaigning and marching, and after years of being told there was no appetite for it, at last we have got this important and basic first step from the current Government. However, the question most vital to the thousands marching for this social change is what kind of referendum it will be. Will it finally deal with the reality of the situation in this country and will it respect the type of recommendations that the Citizens' Assembly put forward? Or, left in the hands of establishment politicians, will it be another cowardly fudge whereby most pregnant women seeking abortions will continue to be obliged to travel?

Based on comments the Taoiseach reportedly made overnight, we need to warn all those marching that the next three months are critical. They need to be very vigilant for the type of

referendum that we will get. The Taoiseach said that he is not even sure how he will vote and that he will not direct his party members. He has had more positions on abortion than he has had different coloured socks. Unlike the colour of his socks, however, this is not a PR issue. When he was Minister for Health and 12 people a day were leaving the country, he did not see a need for a referendum at all. At one point, he thought rape victims should not have the right to abortion and, at another, that women should have the right abortion in cases where there is a threat of long-term damage to their health. The Taoiseach has said his views are evolving. While people are allowed to have evolving views, I think we might expect a person who has served as a Minister, who is a doctor, who has been in politics for a long time and who is now Taoiseach to have a more developed view on such a key issue.

Most recently, the Taoiseach and other Ministers speculated that they are not sure the public would vote for the Citizens' Assembly proposals. Was that not why the Citizens' Assembly was set up in the first place - to test the public mood? If he cannot make up his mind, would he not be guided by the public forum that he apparently played a big role in setting up? Are the Taoiseach and his party on the committee going to respect those recommendations or are they going to try to quietly bury them? I am not as worried as he might be about the population supporting a referendum that would pave the way for abortion rights up to 12 weeks at the request of the pregnant person. The big hurdle to allowing what is needed is not the public; the big hurdle is here, this Dáil.

The recommendation the Citizens' Assembly put forward will cater for 92% of abortions that take place in the UK.

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

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Is it not time we grasped the nettle and faced reality?

The Taoiseach: The decision made by Government during the week was to indicate that we are now making plans for a referendum on the eighth amendment in May or June of next year. I will decide, as I hope everyone in this House will, how I will vote when I actually see the question. I am not the kind of person who will give a "Yes" or "No" answer to a question I have not yet seen. Perhaps Deputy Coppinger has committed to vote "Yes" to a referendum the wording of which she has not yet seen but I would be disappointed if she has done so because I respect her intellect and I think she has probably not done so. We will all need to see the question before we decide whether we are going to vote "Yes" or "No" to it.

An all-party committee has been established and has held its first meetings. I think it will hold another meeting this week, maybe tomorrow, and I understand Deputy Coppinger is on the committee. I would like the committee to develop a consensus, to the extent that it is possible, around a wording that we can put to the people and the best way the Deputy can play a part in advancing the process is to play a constructive role on that committee, to be respectful to other views that she does not hold and not to shout at people but persuade the other people on the committee to put a question on which she would like the people to vote.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Does the Taoiseach agree that the timing of this will be very important? He said May or June but for young people, who will be most affected by the outcome of the referendum, May would be the optimal time as it was in the marriage equality referendum, rather than a time when students are on the move.

We await what comes out of the Dáil committee, of which I am a member. I have heard

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some people on the committee say it is not their job to deal with this or that but to find something that will be passed, to rustle up something which we think will get passed. The Citizens' Assembly handed the ball over to the Dáil. Is the Dáil committee going to take up the ball and run with it or kick it to touch? Are we going to have another committee to look into this committee? The way things are going, that could emerge. For the people campaigning and yearning for social change, it is very important they can let the members of this committee know that they must get with where public opinion is at and to catch up with it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have another 16 seconds.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, she is over time and I have been too lenient.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They must be able to focus on the committee as a critical way to get the change we need.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy should not patronise the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

The Taoiseach: A timeline is required for any referendum. One needs legislation and that legislation needs to go through the Oireachtas - Dáil and Seanad. One also needs to establish a referendum commission and give it some time to do its work, as well as a period for a campaign. In that context, May is actually the earliest that this could possibly be done. I accept the view that it would be better to have it in May than June because turnout would be higher for a number of reasons, not least the fact that many students travel abroad over the summer period. Having said that, we have had referendums in June and July, and we had an election in August a long time ago so it is not impossible to have it in the summer period. However, we would all prefer May to June.

Key to achieving the deadline will be the all-party committee, of which Deputy Coppinger is a member, coming to a conclusion, finishing its deliberations before Christmas and meeting the 20 December deadline which has been set for them. Key to that is the members of that committee working very hard, giving it their full attention and trying to approach this issue in a way that is respectful to all views, even those one does not agree with, that is measured and is not personalised. The Deputy has a particular responsibility in that regard.

Deputy Clare Daly: Last Friday evening, a young woman died in Athlone. She was 27 years of age, a sister, a daughter and a friend. She was the second death from heroin in Athlone in the past two years, the same two years it has been since Garda whistleblower Nick Kehoe went to the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, to complain about the manner in which the investigation into his protected disclosure about Garda involvement in that very same heroin trade was being handled by the now acting Commissioner, Dónall Ó Cualáin. Two years, two deaths. If that was not bad enough, it is three and a half years since he made his original complaint yet not a single person has been arrested or charged and not a single person has been questioned under caution. While the print media were able to report a year ago that the investigation actually upheld the garda's complaint about Garda collusion in the heroin trade, the whistleblower heard nothing.

This decorated garda is out of work sick. He is about to go on substantially reduced wages. His absence was first recorded as influenza, then as sick - other and now as mental health even

though his medical certificates clearly state that he is absent on work-related stress, which is a violation of his rights. GSOC has told him it cannot give him the findings of its investigation because the Garda is still investigating. Meanwhile, he has had to put in a bullying and harassment complaint against his superior officer, a complaint that was handed in by an assistant Commissioner for the attention of John Barrett, which has never been received.

One could not make this stuff up. This is An Garda Síochána now, in 2017, and the consequence of the failure to relinquish political control of policing by not installing a genuinely independent policing authority. It is the consequence of appointing Nóirín O'Sullivan and leaving her in the position for so long. That is not personal because the problems in the Garda are systemic and the reform will not come from those who were spawned by the system.

We have the spectacle this morning of a further delay and a holding off of the appointment of the new Commissioner until 2018. Of course, we want to do the job right this time around but there are enormous concerns around any type of delay. Perhaps Kathleen O'Toole is positioning herself. Perhaps she is responding to the resignation of Conor Brady and the very valid points he raised about the lack of genuine political will to undertake serious Garda reform. Perhaps that is what her move was about. What is needed now, however, is not just moves but change being delivered. Today, as people continue to suffer because of our failure to implement proper policing reform, what is the Taoiseach going to do to protect the whistleblowers and address the deficiencies in the system I have highlighted while we wait for that change to be delivered?

The Taoiseach: First, I am very sorry to hear about the death the Deputy mentioned. I do not know the details of the individual case but I am sorry to hear about it and extend my condolences to the individual's family and their loved ones.

On the specific allegations the Deputy makes, I am not at liberty to say whether they are true or not or to what extent they are true. It is not my role, and cannot be my role, to carry out judicial or quasi-judicial investigations.

I have the letter that Kathleen O'Toole, the chairperson of the commission on future policing, wrote to the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan. In the letter she expresses the view that it would be a serious mistake to proceed now to select a new Garda Commissioner until the commission has produced its report on the transformation of the national policing arrangements, and of course we will give full consideration to her views on this matter. She also says that she is struck by the large backlog of sensible recommendations from the inspectorate and others and the very slow pace of action on them. The Government shares her concern that the pace of Garda reform and cultural reform within the Garda has not been adequate to date. The Minister, Deputy Flanagan, will certainly drive that forward with the new acting Commissioner. It is important, though, to acknowledge the very hard and very good work done across the country by our gardaí, who keep us safe from crime and prevent terrorism. We live in a low-crime society, and that is in no small part because of the men and women of An Garda Síochána.

The Deputy will be aware that we are increasing the size of the Garda force. It is already at 13,500; now it will increase to 15,000. More civilians are being appointed to the Garda, including to senior positions, which is a very important reform. The Policing Authority was established by the former Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Fitzgerald. The powers of the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, have been increased. We have appointed the Commission on the Future of Policing under Kathleen O'Toole to make further

recommendations as to how we can reform the Garda. A major investment programme is also under way in IT, vehicles and stations. We have also agreed a pay settlement with gardaí, which will bring average salaries to €70,000 a year, which is a very good salary but one that they very much deserve. Of course, in return for all these measures, we are right to expect the very highest standards of probity and professionalism.

Deputy Clare Daly: We live in a society with a dysfunctional police service. For years Fine Gael was supposedly the party of law and order. When the Taoiseach was a mere Cabinet Minister, twice he distinguished himself on policing issues, and we were never shy to recognise as much: getting the penalty points issues onto the record of the Dáil and supporting whistleblowers, whom he called “distinguished”. Now that he is no longer one of the herd but the leader of the pack, his tone and demeanour in respect of this issue have changed, and I say that not lightly but with some cause for concern. That has not been the way he has conducted himself before now, and it would be regrettable if he were to go down that road now. The Garda Inspectorate report has all the answers to what we need for a modern policing service. The Patten commission cleared out the old guard not just at the top, but also throughout the middle ranks in order that a new broom and a new culture could be developed. That is and has been the job on hand, and none of the bodies the Taoiseach mentions - GSOC, the Policing Authority and so on - have been fit for purpose. His own Government has identified as much. I therefore genuinely appeal to the old Deputy Varadkar, when he was a Minister, to go back and look at these cases. There are distinguished whistleblowers there now. I ask him to listen to the points I am making about the deficiencies in the investigations and to come and ask us for more information.

The Taoiseach: I do not discount the seriousness of allegations that are made and I assure the Deputy that, if I have anything to do with them, they will be taken seriously. At the same time, we have a duty in this House not to assume that any allegation made is necessarily true. Allegations need to be investigated, and people are entitled to their good name and to due process, but I am very much committed to driving long-overdue Garda reform. It is a priority of the Government and a priority for the Minister, Deputy Flanagan. I do not take the view that one can suddenly engage in some sort of de-Ba’athification process overnight whereby every senior officer in the Garda is removed. That would be neither right nor fair because at least some of them must be good individuals who are doing the best job they can. The Commission on the Future of Policing certainly creates an opportunity to bring about real reform, and the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, and I will take into full consideration the advice of Kathleen O’Toole on the timing of the appointment of a new Commissioner.

Questions on Promised Legislation

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I first call the party leaders, as per custom and practice, I will read out the names of the 15 Deputies due to speak in order that there is no ambiguity about the matter. In order of those who indicated to me, they are: Deputies Brassil, Murphy O’Mahony, Buckley, MacSharry, Martin Kenny, McLoughlin, Danny Healy-Rae, Eugene Murphy, Mattie McGrath, Aylward, Mick Barry, Troy, Lawless, Fitzpatrick and Ryan. I now call Deputy Micheál Martin.

Deputy Micheál Martin: In the programme for Government there is a firm commitment to “guarantee the delivery of next-generation broadband to every household and business in the country. No town, village or parish will be left behind.”

Deputy Denis Naughten: They will not.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There is even mention of the tender process being completed by June 2017. We are now past that deadline. Of course, the tender process is still ongoing, and yesterday SIRO announced its withdrawal from the process. SIRO is a joint venture between the ESB and Vodafone. There is some speculation in the media that the recent deal between Eir and the Government influenced its decision to withdraw, and it did raise a lot of questions at that time.

Given that high quality broadband access is essential to businesses and households across the country, particularly in the regions and in rural Ireland, when will the tendering process be completed? Is there now a question mark overhanging the tender process because of both the Minister's decision and the decision of SIRO to withdraw? Has the credibility of that tendering process been undermined? Can the Minister reassure us that it has not? When can people expect broadband in their homes?

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten): First, this does not compromise the tendering process. The procurement team has received two very detailed bids from two very credible and competitive operators, one a consortium led by Granahan McCourt, Enet, SSE and John Laing, the other being Eir. The reality is that it is a very competitive process involving a very complex procurement process. It is the first time in the world that we have done anything like this. This is a 25 year contract and the commitment is that we will provide high-speed broadband to every single premises in Ireland, no matter how isolated it is, that will meet their needs not just today and tomorrow, but for the next 25 years. Therefore, it is important that we get this right and that it does not end up like the e-voting machines or mistakes that were made in the past in regard to the national broadband scheme.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is silly stuff.

Deputy Denis Naughten: As Deputy Martin knows in regard to the national broadband scheme, and this is not an accusation-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have to intervene-----

Deputy Denis Naughten: Let me finish this point. That scheme was obsolete the day it went live. This will not be.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Everything the Minister has said is what we were told two years ago.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Some 900,000 homes are to get fibre.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In May the Supreme Court ruled that the absolute prohibition on asylum seekers pursuing employment, as provided for in section 9(4) of the Refugee Act 1996, is unconstitutional and the Government has until 30 November to respond to the court-imposed deadline. In addition, last week retired judge Mr. Brian MacMahon, who produced a Government report on direct provision two years ago, urged the Government to act on its recommendations at a conference marking the second anniversary of its publication. Mr. MacMahon told the conference, which was hosted by the Children's Rights Alliance, that the Government had to address asylum seekers' right to work and, indeed, the length of time people

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spend in direct provision. Will the Taoiseach tell the Dáil when the Government will respond to the Supreme Court? What is the status of the interdepartmental task force? Will it produce a report, will that be published and when will it be published?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is there promised legislation?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): It is not so much promised legislation as that we are awaiting the interdepartmental task force report. This is quite a complex issue but, rest assured, we will have that report available on time and we will have action proposed on this issue to meet the Supreme Court deadline.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call whoever is leader of the Rural Independent Group.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Notwithstanding the Taoiseach's earlier remarks, which I appreciate-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Has it been decided that Deputy McGrath is the acting leader?

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Active leader.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Active service. Go raibh maith agat.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go on. Many colleagues wish to speak.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I will. It is you who is delaying me, not myself. The question of referendums is under decision this week in the Cabinet and also the eighth amendment committee, which the Taoiseach mentioned. Will he support me and call on People Before Profit - maybe the Taoiseach did not know this before he answered - to condemn the actions of the Trinity College branch, which publicly destroyed 32 posters last night advertising-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is questions on promised legislation.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is promised legislation. We have a referendum coming up. Unbroken Ireland is a group of rape survivors who have chosen to proceed with their pregnancies and who campaign to remove the stigma and taboo surrounding the debate on this issue. That other group wants to shut down free speech. Unbroken Ireland is making an address in the AV room tomorrow.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If there is promised legislation, the Taoiseach should answer.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They tore down the posters and pictures on Facebook-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Give the Taoiseach an opportunity.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Will the Taoiseach ask the Garda Síochána to deal with it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Do not take advantage. If there is promised legislation, the Taoiseach should give a short answer.

The Taoiseach: There is no promised legislation.

Deputy John Brassil: I want to raise the programme for Government with the Minister, Deputy Naughten. The draft guidelines on wind farm policy were published in June. What is

the timescale for receiving submissions on these guidelines and for the drawing up of the actual guidelines? In the meantime, will the Minister provide assurances that all council planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála are bound to implement, at the very least, what is in the draft guidelines until such time as formal guidelines are introduced by way of legislation?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This comes under promises in the programme for Government.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The guidelines are out for consultation. A formal public consultation will take place next month and we are looking forward to seeing the submissions on that. The guidelines will become official in the new year. We have moved away from the set-back issue, which only deals with the distance to the nearest turbine, to that of noise. This has an impact in respect of the scale of wind farms in particular communities. This is a far broader definition and meets World Health Organization standards. We are looking forward to seeing the submissions. I understand that the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, has issued a letter to each local authority on the guidelines.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: Will the Taoiseach provide an update on the health (transport support) Bill, the aim of which is to facilitate financial contributions to people with disabilities who are unable to access public transport? People's lives have been put on hold while they wait for news of this legislation. It would enhance their well-being if it enabled them to get out of their homes.

The Taoiseach: There are ongoing discussions between the Departments of Health and Public Expenditure and Reform regarding the cost of introducing a new scheme. I have politely encouraged both Departments and their respective Ministers to progress this matter with a view to having legislation enacted next year.

Deputy John Brady: Last year, when the Taoiseach was the Minister for Social Protection, I secured an amendment to the Social Welfare Act to have a report compiled on the impact of changes made to the lone parent family payment in 2012 in order to see exactly how those changes were panning out and affecting lone-parent families across the State. A commitment was given that the report would be published well in advance of the budget. It was indicated that it would be published in June but it has not yet seen the light of day. Where is this report? Has the Minister seen it or have its findings been mentioned in the discussions relating to the budget? When will this critical report be published?

The Taoiseach: I understand it has been compiled but I have not seen a draft or final copy. I will ask the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, to respond to the Deputy directly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I invite Deputy MacSharry to ask a question on promised legislation.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: On pages 65 and 66 of A Programme for a Partnership Government, specific reference is made to mental health and, in particular, the strategic plan for suicide prevention, namely, Connecting for Life. There has been positive coverage in the media today in respect of the reduction in the number of deaths by suicide. This news is certainly welcome but, unfortunately, we are far better at preparing reports and plans than we are at providing appropriate resources. We have seen this with A Vision for Change and we are certainly seeing it with Connecting for Life, the national policy for prevention of suicide in Ireland.

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I shall provide two sets of figures that are significant. In 2016, the Government gave €11.8 million to the National Office for Suicide Prevention. The suicide figure for 2016 was 399, not including those deaths the causes of which were undetermined. In the same year, during which there were 187 road death fatalities, the Government gave €74 million to the Road Safety Authority. That is approximately €375,000 per fatality. For half the number of deaths, the Government is giving 12 times the funding towards needed resources. When will the Government embrace the issue of mental health, particularly as it relates to reducing the loss of life through suicide, and provide appropriate resources?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: What we are giving is pitiful, especially when the biggest and most worrying figure out of the results-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy's colleagues are waiting.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: -----that were announced today relates to 8,900 cases of self-harm. This is a 19% increase in recent years. Could the Taoiseach answer my questions?

The Taoiseach: I join Deputy MacSharry in welcoming the reduction in the number of people taking their lives by suicide. As I said earlier, one death is one too many and we must continue to work towards reducing the number of deaths by suicide further into the future. Tackling suicide is, of course, about a great deal more than the National Office of Suicide Prevention. Funding for mental health has increased from €711 million in 2012 to €853 million now, which is an increase of €140 million. That increase in the last five or six years dwarfs any annual budget of the Road Safety Authority. Specifically, the National Office of Suicide Prevention has seen its budget increase from €4 million in 2012, when the Deputy's party left office, to €11.6 million today, which is a trebling of the budget since my party came to office, initially with the Labour Party and now with Independents. I do not necessarily agree with the mathematical approach the Deputy takes and would not advocate the funding of any agency on a kind of per-death basis. That would not be the right approach.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Following yesterday's question to the Taoiseach on the programme for Government commitment on people with disabilities, he gave a very warm response on the Government's embracing of respite care. I have been following this very carefully as a huge number of parents are screaming out for respite care. In the discussions I have had with people in the sector and officials within the HSE, I am still being told there is a huge reluctance in the Department of Finance to commit money to respite care. I am told the amount of money being offered for respite care in 2018 is a pittance having regard to what is needed. I ask the Taoiseach for a firm commitment because officials are telling me there is no priority within the Department of Finance to fund respite care for 2018 notwithstanding the crying need for it. I meet parents every day who are in dire straits and need respite care. As I said yesterday, they were promised one week in every quarter but they got four full days in 2017. That is simply unacceptable.

Deputy Martin Kenny: On page 74 of the programme for Government document, there is a short paragraph which refers to "a stronger voice for carers". It states the Government supports the first ever carers' strategy, which was published in 2012, and is fully committed to implementing it. There are a number of things in the strategy, including respite care. However, respite care is in absolute disarray in my constituency, as it is in many areas nationally as Dep-

uty Michael Moynihan said. Solas House in Sligo was built a number of years ago to provide respite services to people in the region, but it is now being closed. It is being suggested that people hire private carers to come to the home to look after the person in exchange for respite. That is completely inappropriate. Is the Government going to put money into the budget for the direct provision of respite by the HSE to these people?

The programme for Government also states that the Government supports an increase in carer's allowance and carer's benefit. Will both of those payments be increased in the upcoming budget?

The Taoiseach: I cannot provide the House with any specific budgetary commitments today and, for reasons Members understand, will be unable to do so until the Estimates and budget are published. Health budget priorities are, ultimately, not decisions for the Department of Finance. They are decisions for the Department of Health and the HSE, which have the largest budget in the history of the State for health and social care. Ultimately, prioritisation within any budget is not a matter for the Department of Finance, rather it is a matter for the line Department and, in this case, the HSE.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: Special consideration is given in the programme for Government to the creation of new jobs in rural areas nationally. Is the Taoiseach aware that the Border region, which includes my constituency of Sligo-Leitrim and south Donegal, has unfortunately witnessed the slowest level of job growth of any region? Can he advise the House of the efforts the Government is making to rebalance job creation growth, in particular in the face of Brexit and the weakening of sterling which has already resulted in job losses in my region?

The Taoiseach: It is very encouraging that we have seen a fall in unemployment and an increase in the number of jobs in every county in the past couple of years. Obviously, it is happening at a different pace in Sligo. Job creation was only at approximately 2% between 2011 and 2016, which is a much lower rate than in other places. Leitrim did a little bit better at about 6%. Some Border areas saw significant increases in employment, however. For example, it was 12% in Cavan, 11% in Monaghan and 10% in Donegal. Even within the Border region, one sees considerable variation.

Key to the Government's efforts in improving the environment for job creation is the implementation of the Action Plan for Jobs. This involves several different measures including supporting business to create jobs, increasing the budget for local enterprise offices, and providing a better infrastructure to all parts of the country, not least the north west and Border areas, in terms of road and broadband.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Just for clarification, the Taoiseach referred to Fianna Fáil leaving government in 2012 on several occasions. To the best of my recollection, we left in February 2011 as a result of an unfortunate general election, which did not enable us to stay around any longer.

I introduced the Nursing Home Support Scheme (Amendment) Bill 2016 in this House earlier this year. It passed Second Stage and I got a firm commitment from the Government that it would go to committee in six months. The six-month period expired on 26 July 2017. Is the Government going to adhere to its commitment to send this Bill to committee? If so, when?

The Taoiseach: I understand this was discussed at the Business Committee during the week. It agreed that it would go back to the sponsors. The sponsor would have to make contact

with the Bills Office to have the Bill ordered. I am not sure if the Deputy has had a chance to get back to the Bills Office yet, but that is the plan.

The Deputy is quite correct that the change of government happened in 2011. The reason I used 2012 is because that was the first full year we had a new Government and the year in which we determined the budget.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Since I was elected 18 months ago, several reports and many ideas have been put forward to deal with the homeless situation. During the summer, the new Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, suggested something be done around the fair deal scheme, where people in nursing homes would give up their homes to put people into them. The word CPO, compulsory purchase order, was put out there as well, and that people's properties would be CPOed.

Will the Government desist from this notion and leave those in nursing homes alone? Everyone in a nursing home has the ambition to get better and go home. If the Government proposes to take their homes from them, it is very same thing as somebody going in
I o'clock and shooting them. It was a horrible thing to suggest. Will the Government leave these people alone and, instead, give money to the local authorities to build houses? There is no other way round this. If the Government is trying to hurt people in those situations, I, and many other Deputies, will not stand for it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If it is promised legislation, the Taoiseach can answer it.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I want to raise the same issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is it on promised legislation?

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: It is about the fair deal scheme.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It might be the same issue but two wrongs do not make a right.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae is correct. There is another anomaly in the fair deal scheme affecting people in the farming community and businesses. A business person who applies for the scheme will be charged 40% of their income from the business, if it is rented, and 3.75% on the value of the property. The same applies to farmers. They are charged 3.75% of the value of their land, as well as 40% of the income from the land. Many of those may not see that income as it goes to family members. The income may come from European funds, such as headage schemes etc. and it is unfair that these are included in the 40% determination.

The Taoiseach: Vacant homes and properties can be CPOed. We have had confirmation from the Attorney General that this can be done.

In fact, County Louth has led the way in compulsorily purchasing a number of vacant homes and putting them back into use to house people who need them. However, I agree with Deputy Danny Healy-Rae that it would not be appropriate to compulsorily purchase the house of somebody who is in a nursing home. I do not wish to see that happen. I would prefer if more people were encouraged to rent out such homes. While the person is in a nursing home, potentially for the last two or three years of their life, their house could be rented to somebody rather than being left vacant, thus providing an income to that person and his or her family. The way the rules

are currently structured mitigates against that because the rent then becomes an income which is counted against the person in the fair deal calculations. That is one change under consideration. Other changes under consideration relate to fair treatment of farmers and business people. The Deputy's point is well made in that regard. However, any such changes would require legislation and we do not have a date for the legislation yet.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: The Taoiseach partly answered my question in his reply to Deputy McLoughlin earlier. The programme for Government included a welcome section on job creation. It clearly stated that in excess of 200,000 jobs would be created by the Government and that 135,000 of those jobs would be created in the regions. That is not happening in the regions. My constituency colleague, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten, and I can confirm that if one visits a railway station in Carrick-on-Shannon, Roscommon or Longford at 6 a.m. one will see hundreds of people getting the train to travel to Dublin. Yesterday, in reply to a similar question, the Taoiseach spoke about increased employment. That is the case, and there is a drop in unemployment. The Taoiseach referred to Louth, Meath, Carlow, Kilkenny and Galway city, but there was no mention of any town in the midlands or west of Ireland. I have checked the figures. Very little job creation is happening in the midlands and the west. On the basis that there was a clear commitment on this from the Government and that the Government has put huge emphasis on balanced regional development, can the Taoiseach give an update on the current position in that regard?

The Taoiseach: The commitment is to continue to create an environment in which jobs are created and unemployment falls. That is happening. Unemployment continues to fall and is close to 6% at present. Long-term unemployment is approximately 3%. I doubt anybody thought five or six years ago that we would get long-term unemployment as low as 3% to 3.5%. Over 70% of jobs being created are outside Dublin, which is very positive. In Roscommon, specifically, since 2011 the unemployment rate has fallen by 34%, which is considerable.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: They are leaving the county.

The Taoiseach: There has been an increase of 6% in employment within the county. I am also advised by the Minister, Deputy Naughten, that in the past ten days six investors have visited Roscommon with a view to considering the county as a place to locate further employment. That is very welcome.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Some of them are near enough to Deputy Eugene Murphy.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: Under A Programme for a Partnership Government, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government gave a commitment to address all relevant issues arising from the report of the Waterford local boundary review group and from other recent and forthcoming reports on local government arrangements. Will the Taoiseach confirm that there will be no change to the administrative boundary between counties Waterford and Kilkenny and put this issue to bed, once and for all? I notice the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government is leaving the House-----

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): No, I am here.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: He will be directly affected by this and he is the Minister of State with responsibility for this issue. A former Minister already ruled out a boundary extension. Will the Taoiseach confirm that there will be no administrative border extensions between

Kilkenny and Waterford? It is time this was put to bed.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: There are six reports on boundaries, four of them concerning county boundaries between neighbouring local authorities, the Cork city and county boundary review and the Galway city and county review, on which a report has been completed. It is the Government's intention that the six reports would be dealt with in the middle of next month, around the time the boundary review committees for the local authority areas for the local elections commence.

Deputy Mick Barry: My question is about the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill. We were told the aim of this Bill is to amend the 1990 Act to give the Garda representative associations access to the State's industrial relations institutions. Yesterday, however, we read about a working group report produced in advance of the legislation, which advises against trade union status. Interestingly, the report indicated that it recommended against such status to assist in keeping the Garda as a force that can be used against protests and strikes. The report states that trade union status would "generate conflicts with the ability of gardaí to carry out policing duties, particularly in relation to the policing of public protests or trade disputes by unions". We are informed that a memorandum was brought to Cabinet yesterday regarding this report. Does the Government intend to propose legislation that would deny trade union status to the Garda representative associations and, if so, when will it come before the House?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy's questions would be more appropriately addressed to the Minister for Justice and Equality. The Cabinet considered and accepted the report yesterday and the Minister for Justice and Equality has been authorised to prepare legislation to allow the Garda representative associations to access the Workplace Relations Commission and Labour Court. It is already the case that the Garda representative bodies are not trade unions.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Taoiseach's predecessor gave a firm commitment that one of the Government's top priorities would be to introduce new legislation to deal with how commercial rates are calculated and charged. Addressing a public meeting in my constituency, a Government member reassured worried retailers that such legislation would be in place by the end of this year on the basis that the new revaluation process is due to kick in on 1 January 2018. In Longford-Westmeath, 54% of retail businesses have experienced increases in rates, some in excess of 400%. Changes in shopping patterns, including online shopping and out-of-town shopping centres, are presenting serious challenges to retailers. The Government speaks about sustainable job creation in rural areas. When will it introduce legislation to ensure we have a fair and equitable way of charging commercial rates? Rates are a major burden on many small retailers and businesses, not only in Longford-Westmeath but throughout the jurisdiction.

The Taoiseach: The heads of the Bill have been agreed and it is intended that they will go to pre-legislative scrutiny in committee during this session. While I cannot predetermine the outcome of the committee's deliberations, the legislation will go to committee for consideration in this session.

Deputy James Lawless: The programme for Government refers to partnership and democracy and engagement across key groups such as the public, media and other stakeholders. It sets out such lofty goals as greater accountability, reform of freedom of information legislation and more open governance. I raised previously the practice of Government agencies and Departments corresponding in hard copy rather than in electronic format. I suggest this may be a form of obfuscation at times.

I refer to a recent development when ten years of video footage of Oireachtas debates disappeared from the Oireachtas website. Apparently, a policy decision was made to take down the footage and various technical reasons, which did not stack up, were advanced for doing so. Journalists were told that, to access this material in future, they would have to submit a written request and wait for some weeks to be furnished with it. This caused a justifiable storm on social media, which I understand led to the decision being reversed in the past 24 hours. This was not an auspicious start for open and transparent government. Was this incident an aberration or the start of a pattern? Will the Taoiseach give a commitment to provide timely, relevant, accurate and digitally accessible information on the proceedings of the House?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: While this is a matter for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, the Taoiseach may respond if he wishes.

The Taoiseach: This is not a matter for the Government. I assure the Deputy and any conspiracy theorists online that I had no knowledge of and no hand, act or part in this. This is entirely a matter for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: On the insurance (amendment) Bill, among the issues raised in the Supreme Court ruling on the Setanta case was that it provided for an increase from 65% to 100% in the level of coverage provided by the insurance compensation fund, ICF, for third party motorist claims. This increase will be funded by the insurance industry and a mechanism will be put in place to protect the industry should a motor insurer be liquidated. When can we expect the legislation to come before the House?

The Taoiseach: I understand that it is expected to publish this legislation this session, so before Christmas. The legislation is being piloted by the Minister of State, Deputy D'Arcy.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The child care (amendment) Bill is promised legislation, its heads were approved last January and pre-legislative scrutiny has occurred. When might we expect it to come before the House? The Bill relates to guardian *ad litem* arrangements in child care proceedings.

The Taoiseach: It is expected that the legislation in question will be published in the next session.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Taoiseach.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Under the heading of climate change, the programme for Government states, "As a matter of urgency the new Government will update the wind farm planning guidelines, within 3 to 6 months, to offer a better balance between the concerns of local communities and the need to invest in indigenous energy projects." This matter is still causing chaos in communities. What is the Government going to do to address this important issue?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is a question for the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, but the Taoiseach may address it if he wishes.

The Taoiseach: The Minister provided an answer in respect of a question on that issue some moments ago. I do not remember the exact detail of his answer, but it was comprehensive.

Vacant Housing Refurbishment Bill 2017: First Stage

Deputy Barry Cowen: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to establish a special planning and building control approval process in each planning authority, which will enable the expedited development of certain classes of residential developments including those requiring change of use from commercial or industrial to residential and residential refurbishment in upper floors and in older structures, and to provide for related matters.

I wish to give an overview of the Bill, the methodology behind it and the reasons for tabling it in the hope that the Government might accept it and that we might see progress in this matter.

As all Members know, we need to expand the provision of social, affordable and private housing. That is obvious in light of our current crisis. It is also obvious that the Government has failed to meet its own targets, not only those set in the Coveney plan, but also those in Deputy Kelly's plan, which was introduced during the term of office of the previous Administration. Refurbishment of vacant residential and commercial units, especially in the case of older buildings, can be key. Despite its strategy to deal with the significant barriers for local authorities, approved housing bodies and the private sector in their efforts to refurbish vacant properties, however, the Department has sat on its hands as usual. We are still waiting for the Housing Agency to publish its vacant housing document.

As has been well documented in recent months, for example, in Census 2016, almost 260,000 homes - 15% of the housing stock - throughout the country are vacant. While that is shamefully wasteful, it might even be a significant underestimate of the actual figure. There are thousands of square feet of livable space in what are known as above-the-shop units, which anyone walking around our towns and cities can see. A vacant building study carried out recently by planners at UCC estimates that if this issue were provided for as it should be we would increase residential populations in urban centres by more than 260%. Dublin City Council estimates that 4,000 vacant spaces above commercial units in this city alone have the potential to serve as residential dwellings.

Most vacant spaces that can be converted for residential use are in older buildings, which makes any conversion next to impossible to sign off on because the standards set out in the current building regulations are designed for new builds. The building control and regulation process must be changed if we are to make a dent in the levels of building vacancy and dereliction.

The Bill seeks to establish an expedited process for building control and planning administration in each local authority. This could increase the supply of dwellings in existing buildings where there are changes in use and-or limited building works in certain classes of development. It could also ensure compliance with safety standards in existing multi-occupancy residential buildings and regulate unauthorised developments.

We are seeking to reduce the costs associated with converting such buildings and accelerate the process in terms of planning permission, building certification and fire safety certification while keeping it in line with best international practice. We have spoken to and worked with builders, architects and all relevant stakeholders in order to draw on their experience and make a realistic effort to improve the current process, which does not allow the units in question to enter into use. This is a sustainable Bill that would facilitate the use of exiting units and ac-

celerate the process to allow such units to enter into use in the short term, effecting the sort of change that is required if the situation is to be addressed.

It is disappointing that we still do not have the vacant housing initiative that was promised more than a year ago. If nothing else, I hope that this Bill will force the Government to move forward with much of what it contains. Such a development would receive the backing of many Deputies. In the absence of that, I ask that the Bill be allowed to move to the next Stage so that it can achieve the effect that, based on our consultations with relevant stakeholders, everyone wants to see.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Barry Coven: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

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) Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony - supervision for children using the ferry from Sherkin Island to attend school on the mainland; (2) Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin - the issue of the day care centre in Monasterevin, County Kildare; (3) Deputies James Browne and Mick Wallace - the position regarding the application for the new special school at St. Patrick's in Drumgoold, Enniscorthy; (4) Deputies Michael Healy-Rae, Danny Healy-Rae and Martin Ferris - the availability of treatment for Lyme disease patients; (5) Deputy Tom Neville - the need to extend drawdown deadlines under the local improvement scheme; (6) Deputy Imelda Munster - the charges on patients for venesections and the inclusion of haemochromatosis on the long-term illness scheme; (7) Deputy Thomas P. Broughan - the need to tackle joyriding and criminal anti-social behaviour in Dublin Bay North; (8) Deputy Niamh Smyth - the purchase of the Yeats family collection; (9) Deputy Carol Nolan - to discuss the cuts to home help hours in County Offaly; (10) Deputy Jackie Cahill - the Bord na Móna plans to build a plant in the US; (11) Deputies Pat Buckley, Martin Kenny and Eugene Murphy - the underspend in mental health services in Roscommon; (12) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the McKinnon report on local government structures in Cork; (13) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the impact of the withdrawal of SIRO from the national broadband bidding process; (14) Deputy Noel Rock - the status of the primary care centre in Finglas; (15) Deputy Clare Daly - to discuss the controversial allocation of the Aer Lingus supplementary B scheme; (16) Deputy Eamon Scanlon - withdrawal of OcuVite Lutein from the General Medical Services scheme; (17) Deputy Frank O'Rourke - the urgent need for a drug treatment centre in Kildare; (18) Deputy Shane Cassells - the rise in crime statistics in Meath; (19) Deputy Michael McGrath - the status of the provision of the Educate Together school in Rochestown, County Cork; and (20) Deputy Richard Boyd

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Barrett - the escalation of tensions between the United States and North Korea.

The matters raised by Deputies Margaret Murphy O'Mahony, Tom Neville, Pat Buckley, Martin Kenny and Eugene Murphy, and Michael Healy-Rae, Danny Healy-Rae and Martin Ferris have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committee Meetings

1. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, will next meet. [39620/17]

2. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, last met. [39628/17]

3. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, last met; and when it is scheduled to meet again. [40412/17]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, together.

Cabinet committee E met on 12 September. A date for the next meeting is not yet confirmed. Cabinet committee E covers issues relating to the health service. As well as addressing current issues and challenges faced by the health service, the Cabinet committee will oversee the development of the Government's response to the Sláintecare report.

As I have previously stated, the Government agrees with the broad principles of the Sláintecare report, which align well with current policy direction in many cases. However, as recognised by the Oireachtas joint committee, further work is required on the costings and practical implementation challenges. In addition, the Government needs to consider the phasing and sequencing of the recommendations, given budgetary and capacity constraints.

The Minister for Health is developing a reform roadmap in response to the Sláintecare report by the end of the year and, in parallel, is establishing a programme office and recruiting a lead executive as recommended by the committee. The work will be taken forward under the auspices of the Cabinet committee.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I wish to ask the Taoiseach again about the Cannabis for Medicinal Use Regulation Bill 2016, whether it was discussed at the health committee meeting and the decision of the Government and its representatives on the Joint Committee on Health to support stopping the Bill even though it had passed Second Stage. As a doctor, how can the Taoiseach stand over a report that is essentially determined by a report from the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, which does not comprise doctors or experts in the field of medicinal cannabis, is 77% funded through fees from the pharmaceutical industry and led the committee to make a statement to the effect that "there is still a shortage of peer-reviewed evidence for the efficacy and safety of cannabinoid treatment for many conditions" while, at the same time, refusing even to take testimony from, for example, Professor Mike Barnes, honorary professor of neurological rehabilitation at Newcastle University, who wrote the authoritative report on

medicinal cannabis for the British Parliament and said the exact opposite to what our committee said? According to Professor Barnes, while it is certainly true that more peer-reviewed work is always needed, it is untrue to imply that current evidence is inadequate, particularly given that there is considerable evidence of efficacy in the context of chronic pain and spasticity - both indications having licences in different jurisdictions - as well as nausea, vomiting, anxiety and childhood epilepsy. That is just one example - I could quote more but I do not have time - of where the actual medical experts have given evidence, although ignored by the health committee, directly counter to the recommendations essentially inspired by the HPRA. I mentioned the IMO to the Taoiseach last week and he dismissed it as a trade union. It is a trade union of doctors compared with members of the HPRA, who are not doctors or experts. Will the Taoiseach continue to allow Fine Gael or, for that matter, Deputy Micheál Martin and Fianna Fáil, to block legislation which is backed up by medical and scientific evidence on medicinal cannabis?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Joan Burton in place of Deputy Brendan Howlin.

Deputy Joan Burton: I want to raise a very pressing issue which involves relatively small amounts of money. It is the situation of hospices in Ireland, in our area of Dublin West, which serves Dublin 15, Dublin 7, much of County Meath and the rest of Dublin, and also the sister service in Raheny under the auspices of St. Joseph's hospice service. When the country was in financial collapse, the staff of the hospices, which are designated section 39 organisations, voluntarily took the parallel FEMPI pay cuts. Staff in hospices are qualified nurses, doctors and physicians and therapists of various kinds and are paid on HSE scales. The Taoiseach's Government is batting this back and forward. The amounts of money are relatively small. The Taoiseach's Government is refusing to fund the hospices to provide for the reinstatement of the FEMPI cuts that the doctors, nurses and home care teams, who we all praise, took. I do not think there is anybody in this Chamber who does not have personal experience of a hospice. Why has the Taoiseach and his Government failed to respond? He is passing the buck from himself to the Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, who has a level of responsibility, and now onto the HSE with the Minister for Health not really being accountable on this. The hospice in Milford is affected by this. The general system of people dying, often in noisy wards in public hospitals, is completely replaced by the hospice movement providing for people in the terminal stages of illness with dignity and grace and with their families around them. I do not understand the Taoiseach's attitude. He is personally aware of the work of the hospices. I do not understand where his Government is coming from.

Given his former role as Minister for Health, I do not understand why the Taoiseach has cut €50,000 from the healthy babies initiative in Ireland which was used to promote breastfeeding. That is another issue.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am struck by the almost *laissez-faire* approach of the Taoiseach and Government in the area of health. Did I hear correctly we were given a date for the last meeting but no date for the next? The number of people on hospital waiting lists in August increased for the month by 3,500 so we now have almost half a million people awaiting outpatient treatment. The Minister for Health tried to bury this bad news by releasing it late on a Friday evening. Trolley numbers are also up. August saw 7,781 admitted patients on trolleys. That is an increase of 27% on 2016. I do not know about anybody else but that fills me with fear and trepidation as we head through the autumn and into the winter time. The reality is the level of overcrowding now in our emergency departments remains at a record high. In the first eight months of 2017, 65,455 people admitted for care were on trolleys. That is up 7%. It is

absolutely shocking. I have no sense of any plan emerging to deal with it. Yesterday there were 494 people on trolleys. In Cork, there were 50 patients in the ED and 51 in Limerick. It is very clear these people are being failed. What will the Taoiseach's commitment be in respect of the budget? I have heard him time and again offsetting his responsibilities to the HSE. We are all aware of the statutory function of the HSE but the Taoiseach is in charge. What plans does he have in the budget to recognise these crises?

Three weeks ago, my colleague, an Teachta Louise O'Reilly, published a proposal to establish Comhliosta, an integrated hospital waiting list management system, to try to tackle the waiting lists more efficiently and reduce waiting times. This would create a new model to maximise the capacity of the public hospital system. I recommend that initiative to Government.

Deputy Micheál Martin: As I will be discussing in a later question, the Taoiseach has a very well deserved reputation for believing in spinning every situation. I thought his performance yesterday was particularly good in terms of the question on health.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy very much.

Deputy Micheál Martin: During Leaders' Questions, the Taoiseach cited the National Treatment Purchase Fund as an initiative that was delivering improvements. What he did not say was it was he and his Government that abolished and fought against its retention. James Reilly mothballed it in terms of waiting lists. Does the Taoiseach accept the policy of diverting money from the National Treatment Purchase Fund was wrong and that waiting times just went too long and that people are waiting far too long?

In terms of health policy in general, there is a bit of confusion. I will hear the Taoiseach's reply on it. The Taoiseach has clearly abandoned the compulsory insurance policy and White Paper, which we were promised in 2011. We were promised it up to about 2015 to 2016. Now we have the Sláintecare report. Other Deputies have mentioned the 645,000 people on waiting lists, emergency department overcrowding, huge problems across the board, 459 people on trolleys yesterday, the hospice situation and the situation of section 39 staff. We raised it with the Taoiseach and he has been very dismissive of it. They are in a really tough situation now. They took a cut at the time and they have not got the allocation from the pay award. They are meant to compete with the other hospitals and everybody else for staff on lower wages. It is not sustainable and it is wrong to put our hospices in that situation. I thought there would be big plans on health following the Taoiseach's election but I have not seen any. Is the Sláintecare report Government policy now or not? The Taoiseach used the phrase "the Government's response to Sláintecare" as if to say the Oireachtas had produced Sláintecare. What is Government policy or Fine Gael health policy because I cannot find it anywhere? Perhaps the Taoiseach will clarify that particular point for me.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has four minutes to respond to all the questions.

The Taoiseach: I should point out that most of these were not issues that were discussed at Cabinet committee E but I will try to answer some of them if I can. The medical cannabis regulation Bill was not discussed at the committee. The Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, formerly known as the Irish Medicines Board, has access to experts in pharmacology, medical staff and medical advice and the committee decided not to proceed with the Bill based on that advice.

On the pay question-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: And ignored all the other advice.

The Taoiseach: -----as relates to section 39, I understand it relates to bodies that are funded in the main, although not entirely, by Government, in which staff are not considered to be public servants. As a result of that, these bodies were given a block budget from which to pay their staff salaries but also to pay for other things and are not therefore bound by FEMPI, either on the way up or on the way down.

Deputy Micheál Martin: They were bound on the way down.

Deputy Joan Burton: They did take the FEMPI cut on the way down.

Deputy Micheál Martin: They took the FEMPI cut.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has one minute left.

The Taoiseach: Regarding people awaiting outpatient appointments, it is important to have a fuller understanding of what waiting lists and waiting times mean. More than half of those who are now waiting either for an outpatient appointment or for surgery wait less than six months. By the way, I do not think six months is anything to be proud of, but it is important to point that out. About a third of them wait less than three months. Therefore, even if everyone waited less than six months or less than three months, 500,000 people would still be on waiting lists. What is crucial-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is waiting time.

The Taoiseach: -----for individuals is how long they wait.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Of course.

The Taoiseach: It would actually be possible to have greater numbers on waiting lists, but people waiting less time.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We all know that.

The Taoiseach: The key thing to look at is the number of people who have been waiting more than three months or more than six months as the case may be.

It is encouraging that in August we saw a fall of 2,000 in the number of people waiting for inpatient operations and day-case procedures. It appears that traditional funding for the HSE and the dedicated funding for the NTPF had an impact on that. I acknowledge that was something Fianna Fáil sought in the confidence and supply agreement and it appears to be having some success. We need to consider whether additional funding will be required for that next year.

In response to the question on budget announcements, as I have said previously, the budget will be announced on budget day.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand the Taoiseach is taking Questions Nos. 4 to 6, inclusive, in the names of Deputies Adams, who is being substituted by Deputy McDonald, Deputy Howlin, who is being substituted by Deputy Burton, and Deputy Micheál Martin, to-

gether.

Government Information Service

4. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach when the strategic communications unit in his Department will be established; the number of staff that will be assigned to the unit; and the cost associated with its establishment. [39624/17]

5. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the establishment of a strategic communications unit in his Department. [39626/17]

6. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the new strategic communications unit in his Department. [39659/17]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 4 to 6, inclusive, together.

Communications is an essential part of effectiveness of any modern organisation. That is particularly true of Departments and public service bodies in all countries, given the impact of their activities on the lives of citizens. That is why communications should be treated as a strategic, whole-of-government activity which should be conducted to the same level of professionalism as any other activity, such as human resource management or financial management.

Ireland should aspire to meeting best international practice and we are seeking to draw on the experience of other countries in this regard.

The new strategic communications unit aims to help achieve that over time. It will be integrated entirely within the Civil Service structures in my Department, with the director of the unit reporting to the Secretary General of the Department. Needless to say, no political or party political work can be carried out by the unit.

A high-level working group, chaired by the Secretary General, will be established to ensure successful oversight and delivery of the work plan of the unit. Further cross-departmental oversight will be provided by the Civil Service management board.

The operating principles for the unit, as I mentioned, will ensure that it does not engage in any party political work.

The unit will convene briefings and consultations across Government, including with Ministers and wider stakeholders, as appropriate. A network of communications professionals from across Government will be developed to share best practice and develop continuing professional development for the communication function.

The unit has commenced work but further organisational change will be required before it is fully operational.

The current staff of the unit is made up of six serving public and civil servants, assigned on secondment or through reallocation of internal resources within the Department of the Taoiseach. It is headed by a director, on secondment from a State agency, at assistant secretary level. The other five staff have been reassigned from within the Department.

Further staff will be recruited, including through the assignment of three media and com-

munications assistants, who were already in the process of recruitment, to fill existing vacancies through an open competition run by the Public Appointments Service. Staffing decisions on the unit will be made by the Department's senior management.

Every effort will be made to avoid duplication with existing functions, both within the Department and across the public service. Indeed, one of the principal purposes of this initiative is to reduce duplication and increase whole-of-Government co-ordination.

As well as increasing the effectiveness and quality of communications, this will also lead to greater value for money and reduced expenditure overall.

As an initial step in the modernisation of communications, my Department conducted some research on existing communications activities, including the range of campaigns, brands and channels of communication used by different agencies, which have built up over many years under successive governments. The results of that research will be used by Civil Service management to help frame the workplan for the new unit.

Of course, most of the existing communication activities are an essential part of the work of State agencies, in areas such as transport, tourism, trade and investment promotion, food, energy and public health. Nevertheless, there are significant opportunities for building the effectiveness of that existing capacity, as well as for rationalisation.

This will ensure that the new approach to strategic communications will be cost neutral. In fact, it is likely to give rise to a significant increase in value for money and a reduction in overall expenditure over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Given that there would be no change of policy or direction from this Government on the Taoiseach's watch, it was probably inevitable that he would dedicate his efforts instead to a change of tack in terms of spin, presentation, the look of the thing and how it sounds to the public.

From the Taoiseach's response I have no sense as to the relationship between this strategic communications unit and him, as Taoiseach. What function does it serve for him as he goes about his business? Is this a souped-up PR function for him as Head of Government? He has not made that clear.

How can the Taoiseach claim this is cost neutral? The Taoiseach has gone further in saying that it will yield savings. I believe he said that six civil servants had been moved on secondment. Presumably those positions have not been backfilled. Presumably whatever work these individuals were doing within the system previously is left undone or else new folks have been recruited to do it. I ask the Taoiseach to clarify that for us.

Can the Taoiseach confirm that two members of the communications strategic unit travelled to London recently to meet officials in the office of the British Prime Minister? If they made that trip, what was its purpose? While I accept the absolute commonality of position between Fine Gael and the Tories, I wonder if that is the model the Taoiseach wishes to imitate or ape given the absolute mess his friends across the water are making of the negotiations and the communications on Brexit.

What are the implications of this unit for the established infrastructure of the Government press office and so on? Who does what?

Deputy Joan Burton: The Taoiseach would want to expand on what he envisages as the role for this strategic communications unit. As he spoke, I actually felt he was really talking about something like a political propaganda unit because he indicated that the purpose of the unit was to get the good news to the people. Are we going to see the Taoiseach's photo on the side of a bus, announcing to the plain people of Ireland, "Be happy"?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy can rest assured that there will not be anything like that.

Deputy Joan Burton: It all sounds like this is PR and spin.

The Taoiseach: I think I have seen her on a bus though.

Deputy Joan Burton: He has confessed on many occasions to his particular love of the media and, I think, their corresponding appreciation of him. That is well known about him. It is a very good and important attribute in politics; many of us probably wish we had his skill in that regard.

The Taoiseach spoke about six people being employed. The head of the agency is a very fine public servant. His salary is quoted as being approximately €120,000. If their average salary is €70,000, it tops out at €420,000 just on salaries. Admittedly these are public servants moving from other jobs. However, presumably someone on a salary of €120,000 was not doing nothing previously and must have been doing something.

A story appeared in one of those media outlets he admires, the *Irish Examiner*. I am sure Deputy Micheál Martin admires it; I certainly admire it, given that it contains some of the best journalism in Ireland. It reported a potential €160,000 tender to find out the public's perception of the Government and to inform its work. This was a long story published last week. How is this not political research? How can asking about any government in any country at any time not be political research? I think that is wrong. Will the Taoiseach clarify whether he is proposing to divert money to this project at a time when we have just heard sad stories about the health service?

Deputy Micheál Martin: Since he established this unit the Taoiseach has continued to change his story on what it is to do. Originally, it was supposed to be completely separate from the Government Information Service. He said that in the House but now he is claiming it will integrate fully with the Government Information Service. Originally, he admitted that it was his personal initiative. Now he claims that it is a standard Civil Service unit. He said in August it would employ two people and be cost neutral. Last week, in response to a parliamentary question, he outlined how it will have six staff and will save money into the future. Which is it? Could the Taoiseach clarify for us whether it is he who personally decided that the head and deputy head of the unit should take up their roles, and that neither of them is a permanent member of the staff of the Department of the Taoiseach? Did the civil servants come up with this proposal? Why were the positions not advertised? That is best international practice, which the Taoiseach has told us is behind all of this in the first place. Could he clarify why they are represented at meetings of political advisers if they are not political? If they are appointed to their role by the Taoiseach and not by the Secretary General, then they are political staff. The Taoiseach can dress it up any way he wants but that is the simple fact. That he keeps denying it just confirms in my view that he has been caught installing the largest political spin operation in the history of Irish Government. Could he explain, as Deputy Burton asked, the €150,000 that is to be spent on researching public attitudes to Government? Which subheads have been

reduced in order to fund the staff of the unit and measures such as the market research, which is political by definition? There is no way one can demarcate that exercise from the political dimension. Could the Taoiseach also explain if there are changes being made to his Department's website and, if so, if that went to tender or if it is being done internally?

The Taoiseach: It is a little bizarre to hear Deputy McDonald talk about the absolute commonality between my party and the British Conservatives and then to talk about Brexit. My party is and has always been a very pro-European party that is committed to European integration. Up until very recently Sinn Féin wanted Ireland to leave the European Union. It opposed our entry into it and has consistently opposed every single European treaty.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: 1973.

The Taoiseach: At least when it comes to issues such as European affairs the Euroscepticism of the Sinn Féin Party very much mirrors the Euroscepticism of the British Conservative Party.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We are Eurocritical.

The Taoiseach: I am also a little bit amused to hear Deputy Burton refer to my love of the media and their love of me. On the rare occasion that I open the Sunday newspapers and flick through them I do not feel that they love me or that I love them for that matter.

Deputy Joan Burton: Maybe not enough.

Deputy Micheál Martin: They are not that bad to the Taoiseach now.

The Taoiseach: I will move on and answer some of the questions. My view is that communication is a virtue. Citizens have a right to know what their Government is doing. They have a right to know the full story about what is going on and they also have a right to know how taxpayers' money is spent. There is huge fragmentation out there. One needs to just think of the number of different Departments and Government agencies and all the different logos and identities they have. If one asks people which bodies are Government bodies there is confusion as to whether it is a public body, an NGO or private body. There is confusion as to whether it is part of central government or if it is part of local government because we have seen such a massive proliferation of government in recent years

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: So it is an educational initiative for the public.

The Taoiseach: That is the kind of thing that we want to change; we want to move away from that fragmentation. It is something that has been done in Holland, where they took 200 different logos and identities and moved them into one so that people knew what was part of central government and what was not. It is something as well that they have done in Britain where they have saved money overall in having a single central government identity.

Deputy Joan Burton: This is very strange.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Could the Taoiseach come back to Brexit? I think he is sinking.

The Taoiseach: In terms of the kind of information that may be of interest to Members, if they look at the total communication and marketing spend across Government it runs to about €170 million a year. A lot of that is totally legitimate. It includes the tourism marketing fund

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for Tourism Ireland. It also includes Bord Bia promoting Irish food abroad. It further includes public health messages encouraging people to avail of BreastCheck and other such measures. However, a lot of it is Departments and agencies promoting their own existence and to me that is wasteful and is not in the public interest.

Deputy Joan Burton: Could the Taoiseach give us some examples?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Irish Water.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach should be allowed to speak without interruption.

The Taoiseach: I would like us to have a single central government identity so that people know what central government is and what it is not, what it is doing and what it is not, and what it is responsible for. I believe there is a deficit there and that deficit can be best addressed by being much more strategic in the way that we let people know what we are doing as a Government.

It was absolutely my idea to establish it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was.

The Taoiseach: Yes, absolutely it was my idea to establish it but, obviously, it is a Civil Service unit so the staffing was done by the Secretary General.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Did the Taoiseach suggest the head of staff?

The Taoiseach: I suggested the head.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Taoiseach said-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach did suggest a head. Are they attending-----

The Taoiseach: Yes, but I did not suggest any other staff and I have not been involved in tenders for research or making any particular decisions on staffing. In terms of the question on the subhead, the subhead is obviously the administration subhead of the Department.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Why were the positions not advertised?

The Taoiseach: It is not my role to decide how units are staffed within the public and Civil Service.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It most certainly is.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach should be allowed to speak.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On a point of order, the Government has made it clear that all positions in public bodies are to be publicly advertised and the Government made a big song and dance about it for the past five years.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: And then broke it.

Deputy Joan Burton: On a point of order.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, hold on.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is it the case that the staff attend political advisers' meetings?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call on the Taoiseach to answer the question.

Deputy Joan Burton: On a point of order.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could Deputy Burton put her point of order?

Deputy Joan Burton: There is a Public Appointments Service, which the previous Government indicated would be responsible for filling all staffing positions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will answer the question.

The Taoiseach: Those are not points of order, by that way.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I realise that but it was only afterwards that I realised it. I cannot think for them.

The Taoiseach: I will not be so presumptuous as to tell you how to do your job, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, but it is of course within your authority to rule them out of order.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Hold on. What the Taoiseach is saying to me is that I knew what Deputy Martin and Deputy Burton wanted to raise as a point of order. I cannot think for them.

The Taoiseach: That is fair enough.

Deputy Finian McGrath: It is out of order.

The Taoiseach: I stand corrected, again. I have forgotten the questions now. They are so much more obsessed with my public relations than I am interested in them.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We are asking why the positions were not publicly advertised.

The Taoiseach: I do not know why.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will leave it to the Taoiseach. There are no more points of order.

Deputy Micheál Martin: They are supplementary questions.

The Taoiseach: It is pretty normal for people within Departments to be reassigned to different roles.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes, but the Taoiseach appointed those people to this unit.

The Taoiseach: That has been the practice since the foundation of the State. Every role within a Department is not advertised.

Deputy Joan Burton: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, on a point of order.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, we are moving on to the next question.

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Deputy Micheál Martin: I asked a supplementary question about whether the communications staff attend meetings of political advisers.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: And if they were in London?

The Taoiseach: Not that I am aware of.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Could the Taoiseach check it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach is not aware of it.

British-Irish Co-operation

7. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his engagement with the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr Philip Hammond, on 31 August 2017. [39625/17]

8. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his latest conversations or meetings or both with Prime Minister May and the topics they discussed, in particular regarding the Border between the State and the Northern Ireland. [39657/17]

9. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Taoiseach the talks he has had with the British Prime Minister on Brexit over the course of the summer recess. [39688/17]

10. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will clarify his comments on not bringing forward proposals on the Border here in the event of a hard Brexit, in view of the fact that he informed Prime Minister May regarding his intentions on this; and the nature of her response to same. [40404/17]

11. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has recently spoken to Prime Minister May regarding the ongoing negotiations in Northern Ireland to enable the Northern Assembly to be reconvened. [40407/17]

12. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meeting with Prime Minister May on 25 September 2017; and the issues that were discussed. [40673/17]

13. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if devolved responsibilities in Northern Ireland were discussed with Prime Minister May; and if there was concern regarding these responsibilities being put on hold in view of the fact that the Northern Irish Executive has not been established yet. [40674/17]

14. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if he has had engagement with the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Theresa May, since 26 July 2017; if so, the issues discussed; and if the efforts to restore the political institutions in Northern Ireland was one of these. [40535/17]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 to 14, inclusive, together.

I met Prime Minister May in London on Monday last. We discussed the political situation in Northern Ireland and both the Prime Minister and I agreed on the need to have the power-sharing institutions restored as soon as possible. We repeated our strong message to the Northern Ireland parties to redouble their efforts to reach an agreement to re-establish the Executive. We reaffirmed our two Governments' commitment to protecting the peace process and the progress

made in Northern Ireland in recent years.

During the meeting we also discussed the ongoing Brexit negotiations and the Prime Minister's speech in Florence last Friday. I indicated that my Government wanted to make sure that the close relationship built up between the two countries in recent years is maintained into the future, although Brexit is clearly an enormous challenge to that.

While the Florence speech contained some welcome elements we need to see more detail and, in particular, we need to see greater clarity on how we are going to avoid a border between North and South. In this context, I welcomed the Prime Minister's clear statement that physical infrastructure would be unacceptable.

Our meeting in Downing Street followed my meeting with the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond, in Dublin on 31 August, when we also spoke about the serious issues arising from Brexit. During that meeting I underlined to the Chancellor the importance of making sufficient progress on the phase 1 issues currently under discussion. They are citizens' rights, financial matters, and, of course, the unique Irish issues. I also made clear the Government's objective that there should be no new impediments to the all-island economy that has been able to develop over the past two decades and which is a gain of the peace process that benefits communities across the island. The Prime Minister's speech in Florence contained some welcome elements. I believe greater progress on the phase one issues is needed. I hope that the round of negotiations under way in Brussels can help move things forward and I look forward to meeting with other EU presidents and prime ministers in Tallinn tomorrow.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In respect of the Taoiseach's exhortation to all and sundry that the power-sharing institutions be re-established, it is the absolute intention and resolve of Sinn Féin to see precisely this happen. For it to happen, the issues of contention which had been agreed upon previously have to be addressed. We have set these issues out for the Taoiseach and his colleague, the Minister, Deputy Simon Coveney, in the clearest possible terms. I respectfully suggest that, rather than endlessly restating his desire for this to happen, the Taoiseach might set out for us what precisely he is doing to ensure that commitments are met around Acht na Gaeilge, a bill of rights, and funding for legacy inquests. As the Taoiseach knows, there are families that have waited decades simply for an inquest into the death, shooting or killing of a loved one. Not all of these families are republican or nationalist, lest there be any misunderstanding. Those issues need to be resolved. It is as clear as the nose on anybody's face that this is the case. When they are resolved, we will move forward with the institutions. The Taoiseach and others here like to play the game of saying Sinn Féin does not want the institutions. We want them. I would go so far as to say that the institutions are a necessary part of our journey as Irish republicans, committed to an equal society and a united Ireland.

On the issue of Theresa May and Brexit, the Prime Minister's speech in Florence clarified precisely nothing. What we have from Theresa May and the British system is lots of words and noise but no meaning. We need to move to a position where the British set out not some meaningless formula around "no return to borders of the past", but concrete propositions as to how we will protect the interests of Ireland, North and South. We must make absolutely sure that there is no border. It is not a case of highlighting the technology that might manage or ameliorate a border. We cannot afford a border, economic or otherwise, on our island.

Deputy Micheál Martin: In August, the Taoiseach unveiled his new Brexit policy in Belfast which, in spite of the enormous spin, amounted to saying that he was not going to propose

anything until London had proposed something. After nearly a year and a half, he could have come up with something better than that. Without question, the Brexit debacle and mess is 100% the fault of the British Government. However, the lack of specifics in our position is becoming ominous. That is particularly dangerous in the context of Northern Ireland, where the Assembly and Executive are not running. Northern Ireland essentially has no coherent voice in respect of the Brexit negotiations.

I have been very critical of the collapse of the Executive and believe Sinn Féin was instrumental in contriving it. Given the enormity of Brexit and the extraordinary negative consequences emanating from Brexit for this island, it is incredible that the Executive and Assembly are still not up and running. While all parties have to contribute, including the Democratic Unionist Party, I do not buy what has been happening for the past nine months. This periodic, serial creation of crises in the Good Friday institutions and framework is not acceptable.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Deputy Martin's words demonstrate remarkable ignorance.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have been there. I have been in negotiations with all parties.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have been there with the Deputy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Deputy McDonald was not. She was never in negotiations.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have, and I have seen Deputy Martin at close quarters.

Deputy Micheál Martin: When I was Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy McDonald, was nowhere. What tended to happen was that certain people came out for the photo calls. The Deputy was never at negotiations with me or Shaun Woodward. Commitments that were given then were not dealt with or seen through. Every now and again it suits to create a crisis. There is a media acceptance of this which, at times, we all get a bit tired of. The endless crises, the suspension of judgment-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Deputy should get on the field and puck the ball.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have the same sort of choreography going on there all the time, and the same drama and melodrama of meetings, and will the crisis be resolved?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This is really beyond stupid.

Deputy Micheál Martin: At the heart of it, there is a cynicism at play.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have to put that on the record of the House. That said, it is particularly serious in the context of Brexit. That is the most serious issue facing jobs and the quality of life of people on this island. It should trump every other issue facing this island right now. Has the Taoiseach put it directly to the British Government that Northern Ireland needs special treatment in the context of Brexit? Has he raised the issue of a special economic zone? We have put forward the idea that Northern Ireland should have a special economic zone post-Brexit. That would respect the constitutional framework as laid out in the Good Friday Agreement.

The British Government has said it will implement the Good Friday Agreement in full. Has the Taoiseach asked it how it sees the agreement's provisions relating to the European Union

operating into the future and particularly the fact that the largest cohort of EU citizens outside of the EU border will be in Northern Ireland post-Brexit?

In its recent position paper, Britain effectively tried to use Ireland as a hostage to win free access to the Single Market. Has the Taoiseach put it to the British Government that a failure to recognise the unique position of Northern Ireland is a departure from nearly 30 years of policy which secured and implemented the peace settlement?

Deputy Joan Burton: It would be helpful if the Taoiseach would outline Ireland's strategy in respect of the continuing fallout from and discussion around Brexit. The British position now seems to be that they will leave, hard or whatever way, but that they will leave and will then seek to renegotiate on a single-country basis those arrangements that they had before. It is a version of having one's cake and eating it.

The sooner there is an Executive in Northern Ireland the better not just for the North, but for the whole island of Ireland. As we speak, Scotland and Wales have a voice in British constitutional and devolved government arrangements. Northern Ireland, which is likely to be the worst affected, has no voice at all. We get long lectures from Sinn Féin about its detailed positions.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are the positions of nationalist communities and progressives in the North.

Deputy Joan Burton: The real position is that there is a serious risk of the Northern economy suffering across the political divide. It does not matter which section of the community is in question. The Northern economy will be suffering.

Does the Taoiseach see merit in what was suggested by former MP, Mr. Mark Durkan, namely, using the various mechanisms and structure of the Good Friday Agreement to provide for North-South issues? This has received a very wide welcome across Northern Ireland, and on east-west issues also.

Could the Taoiseach also tell us, in the context of discussions we had earlier, why his strategic communications staff were in Downing Street? This was widely reported in the Irish media and it was tagged onto the Taoiseach's visit. What was happening there? Were they with the Taoiseach or were they an advance team for him?

The Taoiseach: There were not any staff of the strategic communications unit in Downing Street with me. If Members of this House do not know it already, they should not believe everything they read in the papers. That simply was not the case. Obviously, if there is a role for people to communicate what the Government is doing, it might be appropriate for them to be there. I am not saying it would not be appropriate. I am saying it did not happen. The Deputy should not believe everything she reads in the papers.

The strategic communications unit did have a role in producing a very good video about Ireland's Rugby World Cup bid, which was seen by about half a million people. It is entirely appropriate and right that the Irish people should know this bid is happening and that it is being backed by the Irish Government. It is not just an IRFU bid, but a national effort involving the GAA, the Government and the Administration in Northern Ireland. It was disappointing that the Northern Ireland Administration had to be represented by its chief civil servant, David Sterling, rather than by Arlene Foster and Michelle O'Neill, who

2 o'clock

should have been there.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Why is it only up to Sinn Féin to represent the people in the North? Is there not a responsibility on the part of the Taoiseach's party to do so?

The Taoiseach: I mentioned Arlene Foster as well. It is the strong view of Government that the Northern Ireland Executive should be functioning. People in Northern Ireland want and expect devolved government and it is important that Northern Ireland should have a unique voice. As Deputy Burton pointed out, there is a Scottish First Minister and a Welsh First Minister. There is a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly and they have a role in the constitutional process. There is somebody one can ring if one wants to talk to Scotland or Wales. The fact that Sinn Féin and the DUP have not come together to form a Government is letting down the people of Northern Ireland.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach should run in an election, put it to the people there and see how he gets on.

The Taoiseach: It is not good enough always to be asking others to make compromises. Politics is about compromise and Sinn Féin will have to make compromises to allow an Executive to be established.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On what, Taoiseach? On which element - legacy funding, an Ghaeilge? I ask the Taoiseach to set out where the compromises should be made.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The Taoiseach without interruption.

The Taoiseach: This is the constant pattern of the debate we have in this Parliament.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: At least it is not scripted.

The Taoiseach: The only time the Deputy is not scripted is when she is interrupting.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is so clever he does not need a script. He should set out the ways we should compromise.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Without interruption please, Deputy, or I will have to ask you to leave the House.

The Taoiseach: Is it any small wonder the people of Northern Ireland-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Vote for us in massive numbers? No, it is not.

The Taoiseach: Is it any small wonder that the people of Northern Ireland do not have a First Minister or a deputy First Minister?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is because we do not like corruption in Government.

The Taoiseach: Is it any small wonder the people of Northern Ireland do not have an Executive or an Assembly? It is because this is the attitude of Sinn Féin. They are constantly hectoring and making smart aleck remarks. There is a lack of temperance, a lack of respect for other people and an inability to listen or to compromise.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tell us what we should compromise on. Is it the bill of rights?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I expect the Deputy to adhere to the Standing Orders of the House.

The Taoiseach: It should be of no wonder whatsoever that the people of Northern Ireland have no government and have no voice. The style of politics, debate and negotiation favoured by Sinn Féin is to interrupt people and shout them down-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach would be an expert in that.

The Taoiseach: They shout them down and show total disrespect for anyone who does not share their views.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): We will now move on to Priority Question No. 34 in the name of Deputy Ó Cuív. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is present.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What are we to compromise on? I will write to the Taoiseach and he can write back in reply. It is not a laughing matter.

The Taoiseach: I am laughing at the Deputy, not the issue.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am not laughing at the Taoiseach. I do not find him funny at all.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is very cranky today.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am not cranky at all. I find the Taoiseach facile and dismissive on important issues.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Can the Members please stop? The Deputy is on her feet; she may as well leave.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Are the Taoiseach's questions over?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): If the Deputy was listening, she would have ascertained that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I assume the Taoiseach is leaving as well. Gabh mo leithscéal, Deputy Ó Cuív.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá fáilte roimh an Teachta.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): What the Deputy is doing is very unusual and I find it wholly unacceptable.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am not disturbing the House.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Deputy McDonald is disturbing the House. Please leave.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am leaving.

27 September 2017

Priority Questions

An Clár Rialtais

34. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta céard iad na tosaíochtaí atá aici don Ghaeilge agus don Ghaeltacht do 2018; an mbeidh breis airgid ar fáil don réimse seo oibre i gcomhréir leis na gealltanais atá tugtha ag an Rialtas seo; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [40464/17]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom fáilte go dtí an Teach a chur roimh an Aire Stáit. Ar ndóigh, tá ceisteanna móra tromchúiseacha le réiteach anois againn agus muid ag teannadh ar an gcáinainéis. Tháinig laghdú beagnach €4 milliún ar an mhéid airgid a bhí ar fáil don Ghaeilge, don Ghaeltacht agus do na hoileáin idir 2016 agus 2017 in ainneoin geallúintí a tugadh d'Fhianna Fáil agus geallúintí a tugadh i gclár an Rialtais go mbeadh meadú ar an infheistíocht. Tá iarratas déanta ar €5 mhilliún breise don earnáil sin don bhliain seo chugainn. An mbeidh an tAire Stáit in ann é sin a chur ar fáil?

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Joe McHugh): I gcomhréir leis na spriocanna sonracha atá leagtha síos i gClár an Rialtais Comhpháirtíochta agus i ráiteas straitéise na Roinne, is iad na príomhthosaíochtaí atá agam dom Ghaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht do 2018 ná forfheidhmhiú na Straitéise 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn; an próiseas pleanála teanga a bhrú ar aghaidh; tacú le fostaíocht a chruthú agus a chur chun cinn sa Ghaeltacht trí Údarás na Gaeltachta; tacú leis an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn ar fud oileán na hÉireann trí Fhoras na Gaeilge, tacú leis an bpróiseas chun deireadh a chuir leis an maolú ar úsáid na Gaeilge san Aontas Eorpach; agus Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2017 a achtú.

Ar ndóigh, tá an Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge fite fuaite le gníomhaíochtaí mo Roinne thar na réimsí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta go léir agus beidh sé mar chéad tosaíocht agamsa an straitéis sin a chur i bhfeidhm i gcomhar leis na páirtithe leasmhara. Ní gá a rá go bhfuil an próiseas pleanála teanga agus feidhmiú pleananna teanga sa Ghaeltacht mar chuid lárnach d'fheidhmiú na straitéise.

Maidir le feidhmiú na straitéise, ní miste dom a mheabhrú don Teachta go bhfuil i gceist ag mo Roinn plean gníomhaíochta don tréimhse 2017-2022 a fhoilsiú faoi dheireadh an fhómhair. Le foilsiú an phlean seo, beifear ag súil go dtabharfaí aghaidh ar na rudaí is tábhachtaí mar a aithneofar iad sa phlean cúig bliana agus go nglacfaidh gach páirtí go fonnmar leis an deis a gcionn a dhéanamh ar son na straitéise.

Maidir le cúrsaí buiséid, ní miste dom a mheabhrú don Teachta gur tríd an phróiseas Meastacháin agus cáinainéise a dhéantar leithdháileadh ar an soláthar airgid a chuirtear ar fáil ar bhonn bliantúil do mo Roinn agus, go deimhin, do na Ranna Rialtais go léir. Sa chomhthéacs sin, tuigfidh an Teachta go ndéanfar an soláthar airgid don Ghaeilge agus don Ghaeltacht ón Státhiste don bhliain 2018 a mheas i gcomhthéacs an phróisis sin níos déanaí i mbliana.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Anois tiocfaimid ag an mbuncheist arís. Tá pleananna ag an Aire Stáit. Tá geallúint tugtha - ní cheist cháinainéise í seo - ag an Rialtas d'Fhianna Fáil agus chomh maith leis sin tá geallúint i gclár an Rialtais. Is é an rud atá ráite ná méadú a dhéanamh ar an infheistíocht sa teanga Ghaeilge. Tá sé dubh

agus bán. Cuireadh laghdú beagnach €4 mhilliún ar sin anuraidh. Nílím ag iarraidh an tsuim airgid, tar éis €5 mhilliún a bheith iarrtha ag pobal na Gaeilge don bhliain seo chugainn agus €18 milliún ar fad. Is í an cheist atá orm ná an gcloífear leis an ngeallúint a thug an Rialtas go mbeadh breis infheistíochta á déanamh sa Ghaeilge nó nach gcloífear? Ní cheist cáinainéise í sin, is ceist geallúint Rialtais í.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Maidir leis an ngeallúint ar dtús, rinneadh comhoibriú ar an bplean idir Fhianna Fáil agus Fhine Gael. Ag an am sin, nuair a bhí an cómhra ag dul ar aghaidh, rinneadh gealltanais maidir le méadú a dhéanamh ar an infheistíocht ag dul isteach in Údarás na Gaeltachta, mar shampla. Mar atá a fhios ag an Teachta, thar na blianta bhí go leor airgid ar fáil faoi choinne Údarás na Gaeltachta ó thaobh caipitil, suas le €26 milliún ag an am nuair a bhí an Teachta Ó Cuív freagrach as an Roinn. Ach tá an saol difriúil anois. Níl an t-airgead sin ar fáil. Nuair atáim ag caint le mo chomhghleacaithe ar an dá taobh den Teach tá siad i gcónaí ag rá go bhfuil infheistíocht de dhíth faoi choinne na coláistí samhraidh nó caipiteal d'Údarás na Gaeltachta agus go bhfuil airgead breise faoi choinne pleanála teanga, cúntóirí teanga agus araile de dhíth freisin. Tá sé mar a chéile in achan Roinn, ach níl an buiséad déanta faoi láthair. Bhí comhra agam leis an Aire, an Teachta Donohoe, agus beidh comhra agam leis roimh an bhuiséad. Ní bheidh aon rud déanta maidir leis sin. Feicim na féidearthachtaí, áfach, maidir leis an airgead breise fá choinne fostaíocht a chruthú agus an teanga a chur chun cinn.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Tiocfaimid ar ais ar an ngeallúint. Geallúint go mbeidh breis infheistíochta déanta sa Ghaeilge a bhí ann ach laghdú a bhí ann anuraidh. An bhfuil i gceist ag an Rialtas seasamh lena gheallúint? Nílím ag iarraidh an figiúir inniu. Tá muid chun é a fháil ag am na cáinainéise. Tá geallúint tugtha, áfach. An bhfuil an tAire Stáit ag rá go bhfuil contúirt nó seans maith ann go loicfead ar an ngeallúint, go dtarraingeofar siar air agus nach gcomhlíonfar an geallúint sin? An bhfuil sé sin curtha in iúl d'Fhianna Fáil?

Deputy Joe McHugh: Aontaím nach mbeidh an Teachta ag fáil an figiúir inniu. Cuirim fáilte roimh an chóras sin. Ceapadh mise i mo Aire Stáit in 2014 agus sin an chéad am a bhí airgead breise ar fáil fá choinne an bhuiséad caipitil d'Údarás na Gaeltachta. Tá mé ag súil leis an lá a bheidh airgead breise ann achan bhliain. Níl mise chun figiúir a rá inniu ach tá mé ag bogadh ar aghaidh le hacmhainní breise a fháil fá choinne poist a chruthú sna ceantair iargúlta Gaeltachta i gContae Chiarraí, Contae Chorcaí, Contae na Gaillimhe - ceantar an Teachta féin - Contae Dhún na nGall agus ceantair éagsúla eile Gaeltachta. Ar leibhéal amháin, feicim na deacrachtaí ach feicim na deiseanna agus na féidearthachtaí fosta. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas agus m'aitheantas leis na daoine a bhíonn ag obair ar son na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta. Rud dearfach é sin, ach, cinnte, tá acmhainní de dhíth amach anseo.

Scéimeanna Teanga

35. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** den Aire Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta an ndéanfaidh sí an maoiniú atá á lorg ag na ceanneagraíochtaí i gcúram pleanála teanga a thabhairt dóibh ina iomláine ionas go mbeidh siad in ann na pleananna teanga a chur i bhfeidhm. [40762/17]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Cúpla bliain ó shin bhí Dinny McGinley anseo. Dar le daoine go mbeadh na pleananna teanga ina slánaitheoir don Ghaeltacht. Bhí a fhios aige go raibh an Ghaeltacht faoi bhrú uafásach agus sheol sé an plean i mBille na Gaeltachta go mbeadh na pleananna seo ag dul ar aghaidh. Tá mise tar éis dul thart timpeall na tíre agus cuairt a thab-

hairt ar na Gaeltachtaí. Tá siad in ísealbhrí mar gheall ar an ngiota beag airgid atá an Rialtas ag tabhairt don jab seo. Guím gach rath ar an Aire Stáit sa phost nua atá aige. Seo an chéad dúshlán atá aige. Má tá an Rialtas chun €100,000 a thabhairt dóibh, beidh teip air maidir leis an dúshlán sin.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Teachta as an cheist. Chun cabhrú le feidhmiú an phróisis pleanála teanga sa bhliain reatha, d'fhógair mo Roinn i mí Aibreáin na bliana seo go bhfuil allúntas ar fiú €850,000 in iomlán á chur ar fáil ag an Roinn chun cabhrú le feidhmiú an phróisis pleanála teanga i mbliana. Den allúntas seo, tá €735,000 curtha ar fáil d'Údarás na Gaeltachta agus €115,000 curtha ar fáil d'Fhoras na Gaeilge le gur féidir leo cuidiú leis na heagraíochtaí pleanála teanga atá faoina gcúram lena gcuid pleananna a ullmhú agus a fheidhmiú. Mar chuid den allúntas sin, tá ciste ar fiú suas le €100,000 thar tréimhse 12 mhí iomlán le bheith ar fáil i leith gach limistéir ina cheadaítear plean teanga chun tús a chur le feidhmiú na bpleananna sin.

Ag brath ar mhianta agus riachtanais an limistéir i gceist, beidh sé curtha ar chumas na gceanneagraíochtaí oifigeach pleanála teanga a fhostú ón gciste seo chun cabhrú le feidhmiú a bpleananna. Ina theannta sin, beifear in ann leas a bhaint as an gciste chun cúram a dhéanamh de bhearta na bpleananna féin, i gcomthéacs na dtosaíochtaí mar a aithnítear iad go háitiúil. Beidh Údarás na Gaeltachta ag déanamh teagmhála leis na ceanneagraíochtaí i gceist go luath chun na socrúithe cuí a dhéanamh agus tús a chur dá réir le feidhmiú pleananna sa Ghaeltacht.

Ós rud é go mbeidh gá cúram a dhéanamh de 26 limistéar pleanála teanga, suas le 16 de bhailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta agus trí líonra Gaeilge mar a sheasann rudaí faoi láthair, tuigfidh an Teachta go mbeidh gá an soláthair airgid a bheidh curtha ar fáil ón Státchiste a bhainistiú mar is cuí le go mbeifear ag obair i dtreo an toradh is fearr is féidir a bhaint amach don Ghaeilge. Comhthromhar leis an infheistíocht phleanála teanga, cuimhnimis chomh maith go bhfuil infheistíocht shuntasach á déanamh i gcaitheamh an ama ag an Roinn, ag an údarás agus ag an bhforas araon i réimse leathan clár, scéimeanna, tionscnaimh agus bearta atá agus a bheidh ag tacú leis an nGaeilge agus go rachaidh sé seo chun sochair an phróisis sna ceantair i gceist.

Is féidir leis an Teachta a bheith cinnte de go leanfaidh mé orm mar Aire Stáit ag déanamh mo sheacht ndícheall chun an cion is fearr is féidir a fháil ón Státchiste chun tacú le chur chun cinn na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta a bhfuil an próiseas pleanála mar chuid lárnach de.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Níl ach cúpla bliain fágtha ag an nGaeilge mar theanga pobail sa Ghaeltacht ag an bomaite. Faoi chúram Fhine Gael le seacht mbliana anuas, tá titim uafásach tar éis teacht agus é sin le feiceáil sa daonáireamh. Thart timpeall na tíre, bhí daoine ag obair go dian sna Gaeltachtaí. I nGaoth Dobhair, Dáilcheantar an Aire Stáit, bhí an pobal ag obair le chéile go dian ar seo. I gCorca Dhuibhne, bhí an rud céanna ann. Bhí siad chun rudaí iontacha a dhéanamh agus naisc nua a chruthú idir na heagraíochtaí spóirt agus pobail go léir ina gceantair. An fhadhb atá ann anois ná, sular léadh na pleananna, rinneadh cinneadh €100,000 a chur ar fáil. Bhí na heagraíochtaí ag iarraidh ceathrar nó seisear, b'fhéidir, a earcú chun an rud seo a chur i bhfeidhm ach tá an Roinn ag rá nach bhfuil cead ach duine amháin a earcú chun an rud seo a dhéanamh. An rud atá an Roinn ag rá do na comharchumainn anois ná gur orthu atá an obair as seo amach agus, fiú go bhfuil siad uafásach gnóthach ag an bomaite, go gcaithfidh siad i bhfad níos mó oibre a dhéanamh mar ní fheiceann an Roinn an luach atá sna pleananna nó luach a gcuid oibre go dtí seo. Tá sé sin maslach. Impím ar an Aire Stáit níos mó airgid - an t-airgead cuí - a thabhairt dóibh.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Airgead breise i gcónaí. Sin an scéal agus sin an díospóireacht i gcónaí maidir leis an teanga. In 2012, bhí an gealltanas ann maidir leis an reachtaíocht agus na pleananna teanga. Rinne Dinny McGinley fíor-iarracht fá dtaobh den reachtaíocht ansin. Sin an fhís. Rinne an Teachta tagairt do na ceantair: Ghaath Dobhair, Anagaire, Loch an Iúir, Rann na Feirste, Cloich Chionnaola, An Fál Carrach, Machaire Rabhartaigh agus Gort an Choirce agus, i gContae na Gaillimhe, Cois Fharraige. Seo tús an phróisis. Tá €300,000 ar fáil fá choinne an tús sin a chur i gcrích. Tá na daoine uilig ag fáil suimeanna difriúla. I nGaoth Dobhair, tá siad ag fáil €436,000. I nGaillimh, tá cúpla grúpa ag fáil €200,000 agus €50,000. Tá mise ag amharc ar an bhealach is féarálte dó seo lastigh den tréimhse 12 mhí. Sin an cloch is mó ar mo phaidrín. Amach anseo beidh bealaí difriúla agus buiséid difriúla ann agus beidh airgead breise ann ó na Ranna difriúla fosta. Níl Roinn na Gaeltachta an t-aon Roinn atá freagrach as an teanga. Tá a fhios ag an Teachta é sin.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Tá pleananna difriúla ann. Má tá pleananna difriúla ann, an loighic atá ann ná go gcaithfidh suimeanna airgid difriúla a bheith ann. Má tá plean ann le níos mó béime ar dhaoine a bheith ag obair, caithfear níos mó airgid a thabhairt dó. Níor tharla an laghdú a bhí ann san airgead don Ghaeilge agus don Ghaeltacht faoi Rialtas an Aire le seacht mbliana anuas in aon Roinn eile. Bhí titim de 80% sa bhuiséad. Faigheann rannán na Gaeltachta i Roinn an Aire Stáit - tá sé tábhachtach go gcloisfeadh an tAire sinsearach é seo freisin - níos lú ná aon trian den airgead a fhaigheann an Roinn ina iomláine. Faigheann rannán na n-ealaíon 50% den airgead sa Roinn agus faigheann rannán na hoidhreachta agus na rudaí eile, b'fhéidir, aon cheathrú den airgead. Ní fhaigheann rannán na Gaeltachta ach aon trian den airgead. Is suim íseal airgid atá i gceist. Caitheann an Taoiseach níos mó airgid ar a phoiblíocht agus a bholscaireacht. Nílimid ag caint ach ar b'fhéidir €200,000 sa bhliain a thabhairt do na Gaeltachtaí chun go mbeadh siad in ann an oidhreacht saibhir seo a choiméad beo.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The next question is-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is an answer to come.

Deputy Joe McHugh: An bealach is féarálte ná bealach ina bheidh achan dream clúdaithe. Tá ceart ag an Teachta maidir leis na pleananna difriúla. Oibríonn na pleananna ón mbun aníos agus tá na daoine agus na dreamanna uilig sna ceantair freagrach as na pleananna. Tá sé sin tábhachtach. Níl a fhios agam cad a tharlóidh amach anseo maidir leis an tacaíocht nó an cuidiú a bheidh ar fáil. É sin ráite, in 2014 nuair a tháinig an tAire sinsearach, an Teachta Humphreys, agus mé féin isteach sa Roinn, ní raibh aon laghdú ann. Táimid ag dul ar aghaidh agus ó neart go neart leis an airgead breise atá ar fáil. Ní haontaím go bhfuil an tír ina ceart anois. Ní bheidh breis airgead ar fáil sa bhuiséad seo. Achan cheist a fuair mise nuair a tháinig mé ar ais i mí Mheán Fómhair, bhí na daoine uilig ag iarraidh airgid agus acmhainní breise. Tá sé sin tábhachtach agus is é sin mo jab, agus tá dualgas mór orm maidir le hairgead a fháil. Déanfaidh mé mo sheacht ndícheall fá dtaobh de sin. Leis na pleananna teanga, áfach, is é an príomhrud ná an tús atá leo. Tá siad tosaithe anois agus is iad na dreamanna áitiúla atá freagrach as na pleananna sin.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Tá an Rialtas ag smaoineamh íoc as as an mbosca bruscair airgeadais.

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Creative Ireland Programme

36. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the status of each of her actions for the first year of the implementation programme of Creative Ireland. [40938/17]

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I welcome the Minister and the Minister of State back to the new term. I ask the Minister to outline to the House the status and the implementation of each pillar in the first year of Creative Ireland.

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I know she has a keen interest in this programme.

On 8 December 2016 the Creative Ireland programme was launched as the Government's legacy programme arising out of the Ireland 2016 centenary programme as the main implementation vehicle for the priorities identified in Culture 2025 - Éire Ildánach. The Creative Ireland programme is a high-level, high-ambition five-year initiative from 2017 to 2022 building up to the centenary of the foundation of the State, which aims to place creativity at the centre of public policy. The programme is being led by my Department in partnership with other Departments and agencies, local authorities, the third level sector, arts and culture organisations, including the national cultural institutions, media organisations and relevant non-governmental organisations. The launch document for the programme identified ten actions for 2017 under the five specific pillars, namely, enabling the creative potential of every child, enabling creativity in every community, investing in our creative and cultural infrastructure, Ireland as a centre of excellence in media production and unifying our global reputation. I am glad to report that there has been significant progress regarding the delivery of the ten actions identified for 2017. Briefly, the position is as follows.

Under pillar 1, my Department is drawing up a five-year creative children plan for the period 2018-22 in conjunction with the Departments of Education and Skills and Children and Youth Affairs and the Arts Council, and this will be launched later this year.

Regarding pillar 2, a culture team has been established in each of the 31 local authorities, and each local authority has produced a 2017 Creative Ireland plan and is in the process of drawing up a more detailed 2018 creative plan setting out a five-year plan for local creativity. The first Cruinniú na Cásca, Ireland's new national culture day, was launched on Easter Monday with the theme "Inclusion and Diversity", and consideration is now being given to the approach to the cruinniú in 2018. Following consultation with my Department, a pilot scheme to assist self-employed artists who have applied for jobseeker's allowance has been put in place by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

Regarding pillar 3, work is progressing on the preparation of plans for the development of each national cultural institution to 2022, as well as a five-year capital investment programme for the culture and heritage sector.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I thank the Minister. We will come back to her.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I am sure the Minister will appreciate it is my job on the Opposition benches to interrogate and investigate how progress is being made. My biggest concern, as it would be for anyone in the artistic community, is implementation. It would be fair to say the Creative Ireland programme was launched in the glitziest way possible. The Department held a

roadshow that possibly hit every county in the country, and I had the pleasure of attending it in Cavan and Monaghan. To me, it was very much a marketing and public relations exercise and many of the related statements were quite vague. I want to see the exact actions we are talking about. I know the Minister has touched on some of them. Perhaps we could talk a little about the arts in education pillar. One of the Minister's commitments is that every child in Ireland will be able to access music, drama and the visual arts. Most of our local authorities in this day and age are already doing that. Our ETBs are already doing so. It is nice to see that being brought together in a coherent way but much of that work was already being done. We have the arts in education charter, which was launched in 2013. There was a commitment in it to the local arts in education partnerships. Perhaps the Minister could talk to us a little about the actual implementation of that charter.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I am glad to say a lot of progress has been made, especially on pillar 1, which concerns enabling the creative potential of every child. We have had the teacher-artist training programme, which has been rolled out and extended to provide training for the largest number of teachers this year. Six centres in 2013 rolled out that arts in education training. It has now gone right across to all 21 education training centres. I was in Scoil Éanna in Ballybay only a couple of weeks ago and two teachers there had availed of the training and they are very much looking forward now to the next stage of it, which is the implementation of the creative children plan. That will be launched very shortly. We are working with the Departments of Education and Skills and Children and Youth Affairs in developing this further. This is the first time three Departments, the Arts Council and the national cultural institutions have all come together to develop and implement the plan. It is very important. Many things happened as part of Culture Night, which is getting very popular right across the country. There were loads of events in every single county this year. We are continuing to expand what we have but it is also very important that we all work together. It is a matter of engaging more children and more communities in the arts, and that is what this plan, Creative Ireland, is about. It is about working on a collaborative basis.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: One thing I feel very strongly about, and which I have seen in the arts, is duplication. I would not want to see any duplication through what the Minister proposes to do in Creative Ireland of anything already in existence. For example, there are cultural teams and a cultural director of each local authority. I question whether there is a difference between them and what the arts officer already in place is doing. It is important to have a coherent approach to library services, museums and visual arts officers. However, is there a duplication between cultural teams and cultural officers of what arts officers were already doing in their county development plans and in their own jobs? I would have assumed it would have been part of their remit to feed in with the heritage officer, the librarians and so on as well.

The Minister mentioned her proposal and plan for the development of each national cultural institution and its plan for 2022. Again, I would be very surprised if all the national cultural institutions were not already doing that and I would be surprised to think that was something new that they had to think about, not something that was already part of their role and remit and already implemented.

Finally, I ask the Minister in all her endeavours to ensure that arts education is made a priority. Is any progress being made on the local arts and education partnerships, particularly as they are hugely important? We must not have duplication of schemes that already exist and are up and running.

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Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy is absolutely right that we do not want to see duplication. That is why, in 2016, many of the different arms of local authorities came together for the first time. We had the 2016 commemorative co-ordinators, an initiative that worked extremely well. I went back out to meet the different stakeholders in the local authorities and what they said to me was that they - the arts officers, the museum curators, the heritage officers and the different sections within the authorities - had worked together for the first time. This is a legacy programme from 2016. We have the creative co-ordinators working within the local authorities, working with communities and working with all of the different officers. They are all working together and the creative co-ordinator may at times be the arts officer, the museum curator or the heritage officer.

I met them all yesterday. They were meeting over two days at the National Concert Hall to consider their plans going forward. They are all very excited about this and they think it is the right way in terms of getting more engagement with the arts, first, through enabling the creative potential of children and, second, through community. They are all working collaboratively. The Deputy is exactly right when she says she does not want to see duplication, and that is why they are doing this together. We are, of course, working very closely with the Arts Council as well.

Cruinnithe an Aire

37. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** den Aire Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta an bhfuil sé ar intinn aici bualadh le haon eagraíocht Ghaeltachta sa todhchaí agus cathain go díreach a dhéanfaidh sí é seo. [40763/17]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I will take this question in English because I want the senior Minister to answer, if possible. Irish is a massive part of our heritage. It is rich in vibrant history, literature and thought, and it is as rich as the language of any country in Europe. It is a key part of the diversity of this planet. Language is a structure of thought and if we lose those structures of thought, the world is a poorer place as a result. Irish can be part of our future. Thousands of families are struggling to raise their families through Irish but they are meeting a State that enforces compulsory English on them. In other words, it does not allow them to fulfil their everyday lives in their chosen language. That language, Irish, and the Gaeltacht are key elements of the Minister's political responsibility in her Department. To date, as I understand it from a reply to a parliamentary question to the Department, the Minister has met just two Gaeltacht organisations, one of them at a drop-in event in Buswells Hotel, which was a half-hour meeting. Unless the senior Minister responsible for an issue is fully enveloped in all of the complexities of the issue, it is impossible for that senior Minister to make those arguments at the Cabinet table and to fight for the funding that is necessary - the funding that the Minister of State, Deputy McHugh, and I have discussed. What steps will the Minister take to envelop herself in the work of those community organisations, which are just waiting to engage with her?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I wish to assure the Deputy that, during my years as Minister with responsibility for the Gaeltacht, I have met various Gaeltacht organisations on numerous occasions. I work very closely with the Minister of State, Deputy McHugh, and he meets them on a regular basis, which is part of his delegated responsibility.

In terms of the budget, of course we will be making the case for funding. The Minister of State, Deputy McHugh, and I work as a team on that and we will both go together to make the

case for increased funding for the entire Department.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Conradh na Gaeilge, which will be celebrating its heritage in the coming years, has stated that it has asked for a meeting with the Minister and, so far, it has been refused a meeting. I received a reply to a parliamentary question which states that the Minister has only met two Gaeltacht organisations since coming to office. One of those was a meeting with Údarás na Gaeltachta and the other was a drop-in event with Conradh na Gaeilge in Buswells Hotel.

I was in Gaoth Dobhair a couple of weeks ago and met with a comharchumann there and I also met with a comhar cumann in Corca Dhuibhne in the west Kerry Gaeltacht. They could outline to the Minister in 15 minutes the infrastructure of the language networks that exist in the Gaeltacht. They could very quickly tell her where policy could be changed and where the funding that would make all the difference could be focused.

We mentioned, in the previous debate, the issues relating to the Irish language plans for the Gaeltacht. The former Minister of State, Dinny McGinley, told us this was going to be the saviour of the language in the Gaeltacht. Yet, after the massive amount of work they have done on the matter, the relevant people in the Gaeltacht are telling me that they are so depressed by the Government's devaluing of their work, they are willing to throw the plans in question into the bin. I am not exaggerating. They are so disappointed by the effort on the part of, and level of funding provided by, the Government in respect of these language plans that they are demotivated from taking the plans any further.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Chuir an Teachta an ceist trí Ghaeilge. Bhí a fhios aige go mbeadh an freagra trí-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Chuir mé an ceist ar an Aire sinsearach.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Táimse freagrach as an teanga, as an Ghaeltacht agus as na hoileáin.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Is í sin an fhadhb.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Bhí an ceist agam, agus tá sí agamsa.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Is í sin an fhadhb.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Ní fadhb í.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Is fadhb í mar chuir mé ar an Aire í.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Ní fadhb í. D'éist mé leis an Teachta agus tá mise ag caint anois. Tá rudaí dearfacha i gceantair na Gaeltachta agus tá rudaí dearfacha taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht agus sa Tuaisceart fosta. Tháinig suas le 100 duine go dtí mo pharóiste féin i rith an tsamhraidh chun ranganna Gaeilge a dhéanamh. Tá rudaí thar a bheith dearfach ann. Bhí mise i Sord ar maidin agus chas mé leis na daoine óga agus na leanaí istigh i mbunscoil i Sord. Tá suas le 600 leanaí sa scoil ag labhairt Gaeilge. Chomh maith leis sin, tá dualgais ollmhóra orm maidir leis an Ghaeilge agus an teanga. Chas mise le Conradh na Gaeilge nuair a tháinig mé isteach sa phost úr i mbliana. Beidh mé ag casadh leis na daoine uilig. Bhí cúpla cruinnithe agam an tseachtain atá thart i nGaillimh. Tá mé i gcónaí ag casadh le daoine timpeall na tíre agus istigh sa Ghaeltacht. Níl sé ceart bheith ag caint fadúda na gnéithe diúltacha faoin teanga i gcónaí. Ní fheicim na rudaí diúltacha. Feicim na rudaí dearfacha. Feicim na deiseanna. Feicim na

féidearachtaí sa Ghaeltacht. Tá muidne sa tír in áit difriúil faoin teanga. Tá na rudaí dearfacha ann. Tá an spreagadh ag dul ar aghaidh fosta. Níl an tiomantas i gceist fosta maidir leis na tuismitheoirí. Cinnte, tá acmhainní i gceist i gcónaí agus feicim an díospóireacht sin, ach tá an Roinn Oideachas agus Scileanna agus mo Roinn féin freagrach as an teanga, Tá mé ag obair go cóngarach le mo chomhghleacaí, an tAire, an Teachta Heather Humphreys. Bhí cruinniú againn i gContae Mhuineacháin cúpla seachtain ó shin agus bhíomar ag caint faoin teanga agus faoi Éire Ildánach. Beidh an teanga fite fuaite sa chúig pháirt den togra sin an bhliain seo chugainn. Tá mise ag leanúint ar aghaidh le bliain na Gaeilge 2018. Bhí comhrá dearfach agam leis na heagraíochtaí maidir leis sin cúpla seachtain ó shin agus b'fhéidir go mbeidh comhpháirtíocht agus comhráite dearfacha de dhíth maidir leis sin. I gconaí, tá rudaí dearfacha ann agus tá an teanga ag dul ó neart go neart.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am going to continue in English in view of the fact that I addressed this question to the senior Minister. The answer is in the words “senior” and “junior”. Irish is not a junior issue; it is a senior issue. The Minister of State mentioned there are many wonderful things happening in respect of the Irish language throughout the country and I agree with him. However, the critical indicator of success is the number of people who stated on their census forms that they speak the language in the Gaeltacht and outside of the Gaeltacht. According to the figures, that number is crumbling.

I spoke to an Irish language education expert. She told me that there are 800 children in the primary education sector who come from Irish-speaking families in the whole of the Gaeltacht. That shows the thread on which language as a community language exists. Unless we have the Irish language spoken as a community language, it loses all its richness and it is not a daily experience.

The Minister of State mentioned Gaelscoileanna. Some 25% of the parents of this country want Gaelscoil education for their children yet just 5% currently receive it. Within the Department of Education and Skills there is no mechanism for an English language school to flip to become an Irish language school. If it is a Catholic school, the Department would help it become a secular school, which is fine, but there is no mechanism within the Department to allow an English language school to become a Gaelscoil, despite the fact 20% of parents are being refused the type of education they would select for their children.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: There is a number of schemes, as the Minister of State has outlined, for promoting the Irish language. I am particularly interested in promoting the Irish language in areas that are not Gaeltacht areas, which the Deputy will appreciate, as well as giving supports to the Gaeltacht areas. For example, we were able to support an Irish scheme which was a two week summer school for young people and it was all done as Gaeilge. I visited them in my county. It is a great initiative. The children were engaging in culture, games and all through Irish. It was wonderful. I believe that we need to have more of those types of initiatives, especially the Gaelbhhratach programme in schools. This is where people use Irish every day in normal school life. This is important.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: How many schools are involved in that?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I do not have the figures to hand but I know that it is very much promoted and that Members have all attended events in our local schools where the schools have achieved that standard. This is important. I feel strongly that it is about integrating Irish language throughout our everyday lives. That is what we want to do and we want to

see more of that. Through the Creative Ireland programme we will have Irish right across it because it is so much part of our culture and our heritage. Deputy Tóibín can rest assured that the Irish language is very much considered such an important part of my Department's work. We will continue to work to promote the language, to encourage more people to use it and to engage in it.

Cultural Property Inventory

38. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the action she has taken to secure a collection (details supplied) and prevent some or all of it going abroad; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40764/17]

Deputy Joan Burton: What has the Minister done to preserve this important collection for the Irish people?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank Deputy Burton for raising this. I know the Deputy has the written reply to her question. I understand that the auction in London is about to conclude, or has just concluded, in respect of the W.B. Yeats collection. The Deputy will appreciate that I have been constrained in what I could say up until now as it is the long-standing policy of the State not to comment one way or another on items that may be coming up for auction.

I am now happy to confirm that I was able to support the National Library of Ireland and the National Museum of Ireland in acquiring a number of items in advance of the auction in London today. In July this year I agreed to provide funding of up to €500,000 to the National Library of Ireland to assist in the acquisition of more than 500 letters between W.B. Yeats and his wife, George Yeats. These letters were withdrawn from auction as a result.

I also provided €150,000 to the National Museum of Ireland to assist in the acquisition of such items as the National Museum of Ireland deemed appropriate, including furniture and other artifacts. This support is in addition to the €518,000 I provided in December 2016 to the National Library of Ireland to assist in the purchase of ten signed letters from James Joyce to W.B. Yeats, the Dream Diary of W.B. Yeats's wife George and the Yeats family library.

Alongside these purchases the National Library of Ireland will also announce the forthcoming donation by the Yeats family of the remaining Yeats family archive and items that are currently on loan to the National Library of Ireland for its W.B. Yeats exhibition. These donations will be made under section 1003 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. This refers to the tax relief available for donors of important national heritage items to the Irish national collections. The donation by the family in 2016 of W.B. Yeats's Nobel prize medal and certificate, along with a further donation of material that is currently being finalised, will have a total value of almost €2.5 million. It will mean that over the last few years the State has acquired material from the Yeats family collection amounting to a total of more than €4 million.

Deputy Joan Burton: Does the Minister not feel regret and embarrassment at the fact that a key part of Ireland's literary, artistic and cultural history has been sold off to the highest bidder through a London auction room? I recognise the enormous generosity of the Yeats family to Ireland and especially to the National Library of Ireland next door, where Yeats spent a lot of his time.

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Yeats spoke of the “fumble in a greasy till”. The Minister has thrown out €500,000 here and so on, and there is the value of donations given to the State by the Yeats family. From listening to the Minister’s earlier replies she has said she is interested in promoting creativity in the arts. There is no one in the pantheon of Irish writers who speaks more to the whole world than W.B. Yeats. Yet the Minister has presided over a situation where the shameful auction in London is just about to conclude, and for lack of €2 million, which was the reserve price put on the auction contents, the Minister did little or nothing. We can thank her for the bits and pieces she has managed to save but could she not be moved by people such as Michael Longley, Marie Heaney and others who asked the Minister to think again and do this? As Minister she is responsible.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Thanks to the €4 million investment by the State, all of which is taxpayers’ money be it in tax concessions or direct purchase, Ireland has the single biggest Yeats collection in the world, and rightly so. By any standards €4 million is a very significant investment. The National Library of Ireland and the National Museum of Ireland have the expertise to ensure that the most significant items were purchased. These items will now form part of the national collection of our cultural institutions so that future generations will be able to enjoy them. It is important to remember that this is taxpayers’ money we are talking about. As much as I would like it I do not have an endless pot of gold in my Department. The Deputy is aware that there are competing pressures and there are a lot of very worthy cases for funding. We must prioritise them to ensure we can support as many of them as possible. This is very good news today because Ireland has acquired some very important items to add to our existing W.B. Yeats collection.

Deputy Joan Burton: Did the Minister discuss this or raise it with the Taoiseach or her colleagues around the Cabinet table? The Minister speaks of not having a pot of gold, but I am sure she is very well versed in W.B. Yeats’s contribution to Ireland. The Minister wants to be so crude as to measure in money the value of W.B. Yeats to practically every man, woman and child in Ireland, along with other distinguished writers, but it is part of what we are as Irish people. The Minister has presided over the collection being scattered to the four winds with respect to our national patrimony and our legacy from W.B. Yeats, who was a Member of the Oireachtas as was his son who was a distinguished Member on behalf of the Fianna Fáil for a long period of time. Did the Minister discuss this with her Cabinet colleagues? Did the Minister have a face to face discussion with the Taoiseach? The Minister spoke earlier, and she will again, of promoting Ireland’s creativity. What country would have allowed this? In 100 years’ time people around the world will still know the name and the work of W.B. Yeats. A very distinguished list of people who have given a vast amount to the arts in Ireland wrote an open letter to the Minister. Was she not moved by any of that or does it all just come down, as Yeats himself said, to the “fumble in a greasy till”?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy is well aware that I have responsibility in this Department and it is my job to make these decisions. Over the past nine months I have been working with the National Library of Ireland and the National Museum of Ireland to ensure the purchase of significant items from the Yeats family collection. Those items are of research and exhibition value. The items acquired were identified by both institutions, which are expert in this field. I worked with them. They identified the items they wanted to purchase and we were able to provide funding directly and via the tax incentive. This is a wonderful day given that we were able to acquire this.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister should be ashamed, actually.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: We have the largest Yeats collection in the world. As I know the Deputy is well aware, there is a wonderful exhibition on Yeats in the National Library to which it will be possible to add from today. The National Museum has also acquired pieces and the OPW was looking at others. We have all been working together. An investment of €4 million over the past two years is not insignificant by any measure.

Other Questions

Departmental Staff Recruitment

39. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht how she plans to fill the vacancy created by the departure of the communications chief of Creative Ireland; the timetable for that person's replacement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40518/17]

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I intend to fill the position of director of the Creative Ireland programme through an open competition managed by the Public Appointments Service, PAS. The position will be for a five-year fixed-term contract and I am advised that applications will be sought shortly.

A key element underpinning the success of the Ireland 2016 centenary programme was the extent to which it was embraced by the Irish people at home and abroad. My Department's Creative Ireland programme is the Government's legacy programme for Ireland 2016 and the main implementation vehicle for the priorities identified in the draft framework policy, Culture 2025-Éire Ildánach, published by my Department in July last year. Through Creative Ireland, we want to build on the huge level of collaboration we experienced throughout the centenary year between central and local government, across embassies and consulates, between universities and State agencies and between creative artists and industry.

The five-year initiative from 2017 to 2022 places creativity at the centre of public policy and its core proposition is that participation in cultural activity drives personal and collective creativity with significant implications for individual and societal well-being and achievement. To advance the implementation of this ambition programme, I have established a dedicated project office within my Department.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister has spoken about the importance of Creative Ireland. I understand its leader was Mr. John Concannon. Is that correct?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Yes.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister emphasised that this person was recruited by the Department in respect of a very important job relating to the five-year Creative Ireland programme. When was she approached with the news that the person was going to leave the Department and be transferred to another post? Was a written request submitted to her? The then Taoiseach announced the appointment of this person. Can the Minister talk the House through this? When was he originally appointed to the post? He is a very fine civil servant and I have experience of his work myself. I am not in any way being critical of him. However, this is important. The Minister told our colleague how important Creative Ireland is and she got a person of some

standing to lead it. However, when the new Taoiseach came to office, that person was plucked away. Was there any correspondence with the Minister's Department? Was a request made and was the Secretary General of the Department consulted before this person left a job to which he had only recently been appointed and in which he seemed very happy? I met him, as did lots of other people, at different functions before he was spirited away to head a Government political communications unit. Can the Minister advise the House of her role in this matter?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Mr. John Concannon did wonderful work as programme director for the 2016 commemorations, on which we worked very closely together as a team. We then developed the Creative Ireland initiative, which is a legacy initiative on foot of the success of the commemorative events that took place. I want it to be clear that the commemorative programme was very much a team effort in which many people were involved. The first I heard of this was when Mr. Concannon came to me to state that he had another job opportunity. I was delighted for him.

Deputy Joan Burton: Did he tell the Minister what it was?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: He told me he was moving to a new job and I said that was fair enough. That happens in all organisations. People get opportunities and move on and I wish them well. It is now my job to look for a new director. The job specification has been drawn up and the position will be advertised shortly through the PAS system. I encourage people to apply for it. It is an exciting job with many different facets. Creative Ireland is a new and exciting initiative and I believe there will be great interest in it given the many great things that are happening in the Department. We have a very good team and we have strong working relationships with all of the other organisations involved, including the Arts Council, the Irish Film Board and the cultural institutions. A great deal is happening in this space. I wish John well in his new position. A lot is happening in Creative Ireland and it is an exciting time for somebody to join the team.

Deputy Joan Burton: Is the Minister saying there was a transfer and appointment to the Department of the Taoiseach in respect of which she received no correspondence and in the context of which there was no public appointments process? Is she stating that there was no communication between the Secretary General of the Minister's Department and the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach in the context of effecting this transfer? From my experience as a Minister, there is a public appointments process embedded into Civil Service regulation and into the understanding given to people who become members of Government. However, there are also contractual and transfer issues involved. The Minister is saying that this man came to her and said he was delighted with a new job offer, which is fair enough. Surely, however, that left her and her Department in a bit of a hole. The Department had made its plans. Is the Minister really telling the House that she heard nothing from the Department of the Taoiseach and the civil servants there about this appointment? Is she saying that this was a purely political agreement between her and the Taoiseach to pluck a civil servant from one place and plonk him somewhere else? That is not done and it is totally wrong.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy is absolutely off the mark there.

Deputy Joan Burton: Then tell us what happened.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I told the Deputy exactly what happened.

Deputy Joan Burton: Where is the paperwork?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Please, Deputy Burton.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Can I finish?

Deputy Joan Burton: Sure.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The programme director of Creative Ireland was seconded to my Department from Fáilte Ireland and that is the arrangement to which he was working. He told me he had another job opportunity, we spoke about it and I wished him well. I had no contact with the Taoiseach in respect of the matter. He told me about his job. There are other people who move on to different jobs all the time, as the Deputy knows, and it happens even within my own Department. There are promotions and all sorts of different moves and I am not aware of each one of them.

Deputy Joan Burton: They obey the public appointments structures, which is what I am asking the Minister about.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Deputy Burton has had plenty of replies from the Minister on this.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Creative Ireland is bigger than any one person. My priority is to implement the Creative Ireland plan and engage and deliver on each of the five pillars. It is a very important initiative. As I said, I wish John well. The Creative Ireland team is in place within my Department and it is working extremely well to coordinate all of the relevant agencies within and outside the Department's remit. It is my job to ensure that the Creative Ireland initiative is delivered and that is my focus.

3 o'clock

National Monuments

40. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the steps that can be taken regarding the national monument, Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street, in the interim before the court case; if she will request the Office of Public Works to carry out safety and maintenance work deemed necessary; and if she will provide the additional funding for these works. [40693/17]

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: My question relates to what can be done with the national monument of Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street before the resolution of the court case about the site. Has the Office of Public Works, OPW, the necessary resources to carry out whatever remedial work may be needed in the meantime?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for her work on both the forum and the advisory group on Moore Street.

The original schemes of works to fully conserve the national monument buildings at Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street were suspended early last year on foot of a High Court ruling. As an interim measure, and pending a permanent solution being found for the future development of the national monument, a limited scheme of essential protective and stabilisation works was completed last July. These works were specifically approved by the High Court and have been carried out to the highest possible standard by an expert contractor under the supervision of one of Ireland's pre-eminent conservation architects. They have been monitored all along by the

Department's archaeological and architectural personnel, including the acting chief archaeologist.

The essential works completed were confined to preserving and protecting the buildings for the time being. They were limited to re-roofing, essential structural stabilisation, urgent works to the external fabric and necessary measures to secure the boundaries of the State-owned buildings. Progress on the works was charted in a fortnightly published report with photographs. Several representatives from the Moore Street consultative group visited the site while the works were under way. The works were endorsed by a highly experienced independent architect appointed by the Moore Street consultative group. The OPW is responsible for the day-to-day maintenance and management of all national monuments in State care, with some 1,000 monuments at approximately 750 locations around the country.

The OPW assumed responsibility for the maintenance and security of Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street buildings when the site was vacated by the contractor in July. On foot of the recommendations of the Moore Street consultative group, a follow-up Moore Street advisory group has been set up and is independently chaired by Dr. Tom Collins. This group has met on several occasions. I understand the Deputy attended at its most recent meeting on 19 September at which a full and detailed briefing on the condition of the buildings, as well as the proposed approach to their ongoing maintenance, was given by the senior conservation architect from the OPW.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I noted from the OPW's presentation that there could be a need for it to act or react promptly, that it should not need to have to go through a whole bureaucratic procedure and that it should have the finance to do that.

We know the court case is coming up at the end of the year. Whatever the outcome, there is the possibility of an appeal, meaning we could be looking at a further year in the courts. Meanwhile, Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street are in a fragile state. We are also coming into the winter and these vulnerable buildings could be subject to more damage and disrepair.

In the meantime, can we not start the conversation about the national monument and what is going to be there? One of the recommendations from the consultative group was that we would capture the moment in time approach to the internal restorations of these buildings that were key to the events of 1916. Can we do anything in the interim? It is a national monument and owned by the Government. It is in the Minister's remit to start the conversation to ensure that when a decision is made and the works start, all the preparatory work has been done in the meantime. Does the Minister accept the recommendations in the consultative group's report?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The essential protective works that have been carried out had the aim of safeguarding the fabric of the buildings for the coming years. After this period, it can be expected there will be clarity and agreement on the future development of the buildings in the light of future court decisions and what emanates from the deliberations of the Moore Street advisory group. In these circumstances, and given that there are no further works approved by the courts, it is not envisaged that further interim works will be undertaken by the OPW other than routine maintenance and security.

Funding has always been and will continue to be available. If something urgent should arise, the Deputy can rest assured that I will make funding available. I am constrained by the court's decision. If a matter of urgency arises, we can ask the courts to see if we can carry out further work to safeguard the building. In the end, I want to see that Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street

are restored to the state in which they were in 1916.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: I still believe we need to do more in the interim to start a conversation. We had the Lord Mayor’s forum and consultative group’s reports. There is a common vision as to what we would like to see in Moore Street. We could do more while waiting on the court case. Anyone who has walked the route from the GPO to Moore Street and into the lanes knows the historical significance of so many of the buildings there, not just Nos. 14 to 17. I know hindsight is great, but we could have done more back in the day when the Government was buying Nos. 14 to 17. The historical significance of the other buildings is referred to in the Shaffrey report, commissioned by Dublin City Council, and in the Frank Myles battlefield report, which Chartered Land commissioned.

Will the Minister consider putting a preservation order on these buildings? No. 10 was the point of entry and where the 1916 leaders spent the night. It was the field hospital where the wounded, including James Connolly, were treated by Nurse Elizabeth O’Farrell and Nurse Julia Grenan. When the Minister gave her press release after our report came out, it was rather vague as to what she felt about the recommendations. There is a need to get her commitment to these recommendations and that she will bring this to Cabinet in the near future.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister might feel I do not give her credit for good work she does. However, I agree the ministerial forum on Moore Street was a good initiative by her, as was the advisory group it subsequently created.

We have hit a roadblock, however, with two of the recommendations from the ministerial forum, namely, that there should be an understanding of what the battlefield site should look like and that a planning permission would then be put in with regard to that new vision. As it now stands, the High Court case is having the effect of sterilising the whole Moore Street battlefield site. The traders have done their damndest to create an energy around the enterprises in which they are involved. However, we could be looking at court cases for four, five or six years. In those four to six years, if either side decides to bring it further up to the Supreme Court or to Europe, we are looking at a cultural heritage opportunity being shelved in the centre of our capital city. That would be a major disappointment.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The work of the advisory group is important. I know it is working with the different stakeholders in the area to come forward with proposals on what can be done on working with the new developer and owner.

The issue with the High Court judgment is that it gives rise to much wider concerns for my Department about the administration of national monuments, as well as for other Departments and official bodies about public and social infrastructure provision. The orders of the High Court in all three sets of proceedings have been appealed. The appeals have been lodged on the advice of those other Departments and bodies in accordance with clear and unambiguous advice from the then Attorney General. The appeals are being processed through the courts and, as such, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on them. The High Court decision on what constitutes a national monument has implications for any infrastructural project across the country. This High Court decision had wider implications than Moore Street. One of the reasons the decision had to be appealed was the implications it would have for infrastructure projects across the country.

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Cultural Policy

41. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her plans for the Arts Council and the Irish Film Board in 2018; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40519/17]

Deputy Joan Burton: What are the Minister's plans for the Arts Council and the Irish Film Board for 2018 and afterwards?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Arts Council and the Irish Film Board are independent in their decision making processes and it is a matter for the board of each body to set out its plans. However, both the Arts Council and the Film Board play a central role in delivering the Creative Ireland programme, which is a cross-Government initiative to mainstream culture and creativity in the life of the nation and to promote individual, community and national well-being.

Significant progress has been achieved in the delivery of the ten actions identified for 2017 under the Creative Ireland programme, both at home and abroad. It is my intention to build upon this progress by strengthening all aspects of our arts and cultural infrastructure, including key agencies such the Arts Council and the Irish Film Board, as resources permit.

The Government has already shown its determination to deliver on the commitment in A Programme for a Partnership Government to work to progressively increase funding to the arts, including the Arts Council and the Irish Film Board, as the economy continues to improve.

To this effect in budget 2017, I secured significant additional funding for both the Arts Council and the Irish Film Board.

The increase in the Arts Council's allocation in 2017 was €5 million, or 8%. This will assist the council greatly in implementing its ten-year strategy for 2016-2025, Making Great Art Work, including under its new funding framework.

I also secured an increase of €2 million for the Irish Film Board in budget 2017, bringing the total allocation for 2017 to over €16 million. Budgetary decisions relating to both bodies for 2018 will be made in the context of budget 2018.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister has stressed her commitment to the development of the arts in Ireland. I am at a slight loss at the Minister's references to Creative Ireland. Is Creative Ireland now effectively an oversight body that picks up all the elements of the arts in Ireland? Separately, what is the strategy relating to the Arts Council, with which huge numbers of living, working artists have a connection through funding and other supports? Second, the Minister again referred to Creative Ireland with regard to the Irish Film Board. What is her vision for the Irish Film Board, given that it is hugely responsible for the image Ireland has in the modern world both in terms of the good films that have been coming from Ireland and the image of Ireland conveyed to the wider world? This country will face many difficulties post Brexit. Arts and culture are our main calling point. I understand that Creative Ireland is going around the country and promoting the Government's presence in the arts in each county. However, these are institutions that deal with the work of artists, Ireland's performance in the arts and what we say to the wider world. I wish to know about that aspect.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: On the question about our image to the wider world, pillar 5

of the Creative Ireland programme is about unifying our global message to the world and telling the world that this country is rich in culture and heritage and that Ireland is a good place to come to live, to invest and to study. It is about promoting that image to the world.

Creative Ireland is not an oversight body. It is not about that. It is about enabling people to work collaboratively. The independence of the Arts Council continues, and I absolutely respect that. It is funded and I will make a case for increased funding in the run-up to the budget. We work extremely well with the Arts Council. However, it is not about any single organisation but about how we can all work collaboratively for the benefit of the artists, art and culture in this country.

The Irish Film Board is the national development agency for Irish film making for the film, television and the animation industry. Its statutory remit is to assist and encourage the making of film in the State and the development of a film industry in Ireland. The board supports writers, directors and production companies across three sectors by providing investment loans for the development, production and distribution of film, television and animation projects. Indeed, I met all the stakeholders in that sector a number of months ago and they were able to tell me what the issues are. Creative Ireland is about working collaboratively with all the different stakeholders in the industry for the benefit of the industry and to allow more people to engage with and participate in culture and the arts.

Deputy Joan Burton: Given that the Minister acknowledges the importance of the Arts Council and the Irish Film Board, what demands has she put forward for 2018 to broaden funding to the sector? Many artists struggle financially. Much of their fame arises after they have died and, as the Minister mentioned earlier, their estates can be very valuable. However, that does not help many artists necessarily in their lifetimes. Incidentally, I understand the cnuas has been restored to the artist Patrick Pye. That is a good development. The Minister will recall the debate when there was an attempt to reallocate or reassign money in terms of support for the artist. Support for artists through Aosdána has had strong support from the Oireachtas.

I still do not understand Creative Ireland. What is the separate budget for Creative Ireland at present? To know money was spent on that might be helpful.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I submitted a parliamentary question to the Minister recently on the Irish Film Board. The film board does good work and it is wonderful to see the results of that. However, it is also necessary for Deputies to scrutinise the work of these bodies and to ensure there is value for the level of euro invested. My question simply asked how much in loans was being given out by the Irish Film Board annually, how many of the loans were defaulting and if people who had defaulted on loans received loans subsequent to that. The reply I received basically advised me to look up the information in the annual report of the Irish Film Board, which did not answer my question. I examined the report but I could not find the details I had sought.

I am also slightly concerned about the structure of the tax breaks in the sector. What we must do with those tax breaks is ensure we are left with a growing, deeper infrastructure that produces for the future. I am worried that some of the schemes are just mechanisms whereby foreign firms can partner with local firms without leaving an infrastructure or a human resource behind to develop the industry.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The budget this year for Creative Ireland was €5 million.

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Of that, €1 million was used to facilitate local authorities to set up the Creative Ireland co-ordinators. Some €1.2 million was for Cruinniú na Cásca, which was a very successful cultural day on Easter Monday. We have a website and social media for getting the story out abroad. That is very important. In fact, our website, *Ireland.ie*, has received more than 2 million hits. These are people who are looking at *Ireland.ie* and seeing what we have to offer. It is important that we showcase our great strengths and our rich cultural heritage to the world.

With regard to the Irish Film Board, I will ask the board to write to Deputy Tóibín directly on the figures he has sought. One of the pillars of the Creative Ireland plan is to make Ireland a centre of excellence for media production. I will continue to work closely with the Irish Film Board to ensure that this objective is achieved. There are many opportunities in this area. The Deputy is correct that culture is a wonderful calling card. According to IDA Ireland, it also provides great opportunities to open doors.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): To respond to Deputy Tóibín, if a Deputy does not receive an accurate answer to a parliamentary question, it is entirely within his or her power to refer the matter to the Ceann Comhairle who will have the question answered. I also ask Members, including the Minister, to show respect for the House and the orders of the Dáil by adhering to the limits on speaking time.

Message from Select Committee

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The Select Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation has completed its consideration of the Legal Metrology (Measuring Instruments) Bill 2017 and has made no amendments thereto.

Visit of Czech Delegation

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Before proceeding with business, I wish on behalf of the Members of Dáil Éireann to offer a céad míle fáilte, a most sincere welcome, to a delegation from the Parliament of the Czech Republic led by Mr. Jaroslav Kubera, Vice-President of the Senate, Mr. Miroslav Nenutoil, Chairman of the Standing Senate Commission on Rural Development, and Ambassador Hana Mottlová. I express the hope that they will find their visit enjoyable, successful and to our mutual benefit.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Question No. 42 replied to with Written Answers.

Cultural Property Inventory

43. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the contacts she has had with the auctioneers and owners of the Yeats collection with a view to acquiring this collection; if the State and its cultural institutions has the right of first refusal on the collection; the reason she failed to act in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the

matter. [40515/17]

Deputy Joan Burton: As it was not clear whether my earlier question had been selected as a priority question, I submitted this parallel question on the same issue, namely, the sale of the bulk of the Yeats family collection at an international auction. Notwithstanding the Minister's statement that she has acquired some of the items, many of them will, unfortunately, be lost to Ireland. The Minister celebrated her acquisition of some items but there is not much to celebrate given that Yeats was our most famous writer. One can only imagine what will happen to the estates and artefacts of other writers and artists. The Minister agreed with me on treating arts and culture in a mercenary and businesslike manner. The calling card of Fine Gael on the arts has been to ask whether there is money at stake and, if so, to support whatever the issue is. What precisely occurred in respect of the Yeats collection? I presume the Minister will set this out in the reply.

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In terms of what we have acquired in the most recent sale of Yeats material, I consulted and have worked for the past nine months with the two relevant cultural institutions, namely, the National Library of Ireland and National Museum of Ireland. They identified the items they believed would add to their Yeats collections and my Department has been able to support them through direct funding and tax credits. As I stated, €4 million has been spent on material associated with Yeats in the past two years, which is a wonderful addition to the existing collection.

As Deputy Burton is aware, resources are limited. There are many different facets to my Department and we must try to spread things around as best we can. In this case, the Yeats collection has been added to greatly.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister and I disagree on that point. My question was whether the Government had the right of first refusal on the Yeats collection. It should be borne in mind that W.B. Yeats and his son Michael were distinguished Members of the Oireachtas. Yeats also did a great deal of work and spent a great deal of time in the National Library. Is it true that the State had first refusal on what are essentially priceless artefacts, papers and documents associated with one of the most famous - if not the most famous - artist Ireland has produced?

The Minister noted that the centenary of commemorations was the inspiration for Creative Ireland. While I accept that point, it should also be noted that the creative imagination that led on 1916 was the poetry of Yeats in English.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Yeats family has been very supportive of the National Library of Ireland, donating original manuscripts of poems, the personal library of W.B. Yeats and a substantial collection of editions of the poet's work. In 2016, the Nobel medal won by W.B. Yeats was donated via section 1003 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 to the National Library of Ireland. In 2017, the family again agreed to donate the Yeats family papers, including the correspondence of John Butler Yeats, via section 1003 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, to the National Library of Ireland. Given the family's long relationship with the library, they offered it the opportunity of first refusal to purchase items directly prior to today's auction. The items had all been valued by Sothebys.

In 2016, I approved an additional capital allocation of €518,000 to the National Library of Ireland to purchase the Yeats family library and a set of correspondence between W.B. Yeats and James Joyce. This acquisition complements the W.B. Yeats library.

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The National Library and National Museum examined what was on offer and I made funding available. The question that arises is where I should take money from to buy more items. I have limited resources.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Government is about to spend €150,000 on polling public opinion on a strategic communications unit.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy knows how the machinery of government works. I am responsible for my Department. The money is well spent.

Deputy Joan Burton: Arts and culture are about communication. I suggest the €150,000 would have been much better utilised to secure a priceless part of our history.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I can only account for my budget.

Arts Council Funding

44. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her plans to increase Arts Council core funding by at least 20% in budget 2018, excluding one-off commemorative events or Creative Ireland initiatives, in line with the calls from an organisation (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40531/17]

Deputy Mick Wallace: The national campaign for the arts has called on the Government to begin implementing a commitment to match average GDP spending on the arts and culture in the European Union. Will the Minister commit to increasing Arts Council funding by at least 20% in budget 2018, excluding once-off commemorative events or Creative Ireland initiatives, in line with the request by the national campaign?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy will appreciate that it is not possible for me to comment on the outcome of budgetary negotiations at this stage. However, the Government has already shown its determination to deliver on the commitment in A Programme for a Partnership Government to work to progressively increase funding to the arts, including the Arts Council and Irish Film Board, as the economy continues to improve. To this end, I secured significant additional funding for the Arts Council in budget 2017. The increase in the Arts Council's allocation in 2017 was €5 million or 8%. This will assist the council greatly in implementing its ten-year strategy, Making Great Art Work 2016-2025, including under its new funding framework.

In terms of the Creative Ireland programme, it is important to note that the Arts Council plays a central role in delivering the objectives of this all-of-Government initiative to mainstream creativity in the life of the nation. The programme is being led by my Department in partnership with other Departments and agencies, the national cultural institutions, the Arts Council, the Irish Film Board, local authorities, the third-level sector, arts and culture organisations, media organisations and relevant non-governmental organisations.

Significant progress has been achieved in the delivery of the ten actions identified for 2017, both at home and abroad. It is my intention to build on this progress by strengthening all aspects of our arts and cultural infrastructure, including the Arts Council, as resources permit.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I thank the Minister. As she is well aware, the increases of late

have come from a low base. For seven years, the arts suffered severely. My understanding is that public funding for the arts and culture represents just 0.11% of GDP, which places Ireland at the bottom of the European league table. The average European level of funding is more than four times what we provide. While I am sure the Minister is doing the best with whatever money comes her way and she must work with what she has, is it not time that the Government took a more positive approach to the needs of the arts community? There should be a strong acknowledgment of the importance of the arts and their positive effect on a people. The money being provided to them does not reflect that, however.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: We have been able to increase funding to arts organisations every year for the past three years, for example, the Arts Council, the Irish Film Board and cultural institutions. The arts were impacted upon by the economic downturn and the difficult time that we went through, but I am glad that we have been able to improve funding year on year. Through the Creative Ireland programme, we are putting culture and creativity at the heart of Government policy and Irish society. We have been able to introduce a number of initiatives that will benefit artists.

The Deputy mentioned the statistics. Our national statistics need to be improved if we are to make meaningful comparisons and an accurate input into EUROSTAT. Working on statistics takes resources though, and my focus has been on directing our resources towards supporting arts and cultural activities. I am committed to examining the issue of statistics, however, because Ireland does not have accurate data.

Through Creative Ireland, we are putting culture and creativity at the heart of Irish society. Under the five pillars, we will work with children and communities, work on investing in our cultural institutions, work on investing in and promoting media production, and project our image globally. A great deal is happening in this sector, which the sector welcomes, but there is always more to do. I will be making the case for the arts in the upcoming budget negotiations.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The pilot social welfare initiative has been a good idea, but it is confined to writers and visual artists, which means that it excludes many people. In a place like Dublin, a large number of artists occupy studios that are now closing because of high rents. While the economy is recovering, it is becoming more difficult for artists to survive. This specific issue should be examined. Consider Block T in Smithfield, the Joinery in Stoneybatter, the Exchange in Temple Bar and the Mabos studio on Hanover Quay, which is now occupied by Airbnb, a business that is one of the reasons rents have increased in the city centre. Many people from across the arts are being pushed out of these spaces, which creates difficulties.

Will the Minister consider this matter? Can we help to find spaces for these people, many of whom are being evicted because of rising rents?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I acknowledge that the Deputy has often raised with me the issue of giving artists social protection supports when they are out of work. I was delighted that the Government was able to launch the pilot initiative this year. It will allow self-employed artists who apply to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for jobseeker's allowance to avail of social welfare assistance when they need it. This was welcomed. It does not apply to everyone at the minute, as it is a pilot scheme for visual artists and writers. The initiative's design involved significant work by my Department, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and the Arts Council, which worked closely with us, as well as consultation with artists' representative organisations, specifically Visual Artists Ireland and

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the Irish Writers Centre. I was glad to be able to roll out this pilot initiative. We will review its outcomes at a later stage and, hopefully, improve on it.

I acknowledge that studio space is difficult to locate in the city. We are examining that matter.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Topical Issue Debate

School Transport

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I welcome the Minister. The primary school on Sherkin Island closed last June. Children now attend school on the mainland, which means using the ferry to get there. There is no supervisor on the ferry or on the mainland once the ferry docks. The children must then walk to the school bus, which is some distance away. This poses a significant health and safety risk to the children, some of whom are as young as four years of age while others are 12. I call on the Minister to address this as a matter of urgency.

I will set the scene. Sherkin Island is one of the most southerly points in Ireland, an island approximately one mile off the west Cork coast. Three miles long and one wide, it has a beauty and a variety of landscapes. It epitomises all that is good about island living.

As the Minister is aware, Sherkin Island national school closed its doors for the last time at the end of the most recent school year. This saw the end of 124 years of primary education on the island. From the time that the island community was notified that the school was closing, it did its utmost to work with parents, the patron and the Government to ensure that the children on the island had continued access to education. Those children are now attending school on the mainland and, obviously, must use the ferry to get there.

The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht has provided an extra ferry to ensure that the children can get off the island in the morning. The residents are grateful for this. However, there is an urgent need for a chaperone on the ferry and to escort the children from the pier to the bus in Baltimore on the mainland.

The Department of Education and Skills stopped the grant aid for the school and left the island people with no provision to access education. The island community, working with the patron and the school, requested meetings with the Department and submitted a proposal to ensure continued access to education. The Department of Education and Skills advises that ferry services operating from offshore islands do not come under the education transport scheme and while the island community has successfully negotiated a deal whereby the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht would subsidise an additional ferry for morning travel, it does not go far enough. At present, parents of children between the ages of four and 12 are operating a rota system to chaperone their children on the ferry and thereafter from the ferry to the bus on the mainland. This is a four-hour daily commute for parents wishing to educate their children by the only means open to them. It is unfair. They are working parents who cannot afford to take time off. In essence, this system is not sustainable in the long term. The Department of Education and Skills has a responsibility for the safety of these children. There is a social and

community benefit to the State supporting these children to attend school on the mainland and still live on the island. I therefore call on the Minister to recognise this oversight and provide a chaperone in order that these children may access education as is their right, in line with their peers on the mainland. If we want to keep our island communities vibrant and sustainable, we need to allow young families to keep living on the island. It is time for a bit of common sense and long-term thinking when it comes to supporting our islands. Will the Minister please provide a chaperone for these children for the ferry?

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I thank Deputy Murphy O'Mahony for raising this issue. I am happy to reply on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan. The Department and Government are very aware of the importance of small schools in rural communities. That is why it is in the programme for Government that small schools will not be closed without the consent of parents. The initiative for closing a school may come from a variety of sources, such as parents, staff, boards of management, the patron or the Department. Any proposal to close a school must involve consultation with all of the relevant stakeholders and follow decisions taken at local level. I understand that procedure was followed in this case.

The position with regard to school transport is that it is a huge operation. There are 116,000 children, including almost 12,000 children with special educational needs, who are transported every day in approximately 4,500 vehicles. Such a large programme requires that eligibility criteria are applied nationally on a uniform basis. The scheme only provides support for escorts to accompany children with special educational needs. Escorts are not a feature of the mainstream primary or post-primary school transport services. Many children use ordinary scheduled services which provide that access. Bus Éireann is responsible for the planning and time-tabling of school transport routes. It endeavours, within available resources, to ensure that each eligible child has a reasonable level of school transport service in the context of the scheme nationally. Routes are planned so that, as far as possible, no eligible child will have more than 2.4 km to travel to a pick-up point. Children living off the main route of a service are generally expected to make their own way or to be brought to convenient pick-up points along the main route.

In the case of Sherkin Island there is no charge for the children on the ferry. Bus Éireann has advised that there are two children who are in fourth and sixth class who attend Rathmore national school with an address on Sherkin Island. As these children are collected at the pier where they get off the ferry, a long walk is not involved. Unfortunately the scheme that applies has to apply uniformly and we do not provide chaperones in the sort of circumstances the Deputy describes. They are confined to children with special needs. There are other children who have to adapt to the scheme. There are continual demands for expansion and extension of this scheme. We have had to operate in a situation where rules are applied uniformly in order that we can stand over them on a consistent basis and where every child is treated on the same basis.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I thank the Minister. I acknowledge the parents were consulted about the closure but I also acknowledge that they co-operated and held up their hands and accepted this was an inevitable thing to happen. They were also given the understanding at the time that easy access to the mainland would be provided and a chaperone is part of that. The Minister called out the statistics but one size does not fit all. It is a unique situation. It can be very easily solved. A chaperone is not a huge cost. It beggars belief that the Minister is not in a position to provide something that could be so easily and cheaply solved. The islanders have asked for a meeting with the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy McHugh. I ask the Minister to say he will at least meet them and listen to their points. He is also very welcome

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at any stage to visit Sherkin Island for a weekend and we will look after him very well there.

I will end with a quote from President Michael D. Higgins who said:

Nothing is inevitable. The loss of sustainable island life is not inevitable. The recent decline in many of our islands' populations is a challenge to be addressed.

I am asking the Minister to address this challenge and provide a chaperone for the people of Sherkin Island.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I understand the Deputy's request but chaperones are a very significant cost. We provide chaperones for 12,000 children with special educational needs and they are a very significant cost. Those are a growing area of need.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: There is the remote area grant.

Deputy Richard Bruton: In applying a national scheme, the Department has to decide if it will extend chaperones to children below a certain age in any circumstances where children might be using such services.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: It is water; it is different.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Such an extension of the scheme would be a significant extension; it would not be a minor extension of the scheme. That is the dilemma faced. As I understand it, which the Deputy acknowledged, arrangement was made for support for the ferry so children would be carried free on the ferry and Bus Éireann has arranged that the bus picks the children up at the pier where they land. It is a good accommodation. Within the rules of the scheme, every effort is made to accommodate children.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: It is water.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The 2.4 km that some children are expected to walk does not apply here. A more convenient collection point has been arranged. Unfortunately, with a scheme of this scale, where there are so many children with different ages and needs involved, the Department has to apply a consistent approach and that has been the approach applied in this case.

Local Improvement Scheme

Deputy Tom Neville: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise this issue today. I welcome the allocation of €411,000 for Limerick City and County Council for the local improvement scheme. It demonstrates the Minister's and Government's commitment to the continuing development and improvement of rural Ireland. It was one of the major issues during the crash. Under the previous Fianna Fáil-Green Party Government, discretionary spending on rural and tertiary roads was all wiped. We did not have the money. Now that the economy is in a state of recovery and we are looking to spread that recovery, it should be recognised. I want to put on the record of the House that I recognise the Minister's commitment to it. Given his background, he will excel in the job and he is extremely committed to it. The €411,000 for the local improvement scheme is welcome. It is a rural scheme for the improvement of private roads on which there are two or more landowners. They can avail of the scheme to surface-dress the road as opposed to fully reconstructing it. The landowners try to maintain it as best

they can but the roads can deteriorate over time and it is a period of time before they are resurfaced. There are a number in Limerick City and County Council at the moment. There are 54 on the list. Given the current costs, this €411,000 will do a further 12 roads, up to 20% extra, which is extremely welcome.

They have escalated the issue to me and suggested that the deadline for the uptake of the money might be extended because it can be challenging to surface-dress these roads in the winter months. They are not being reconstructed and are predominantly being surface-dressed. They request extending the deadline for drawing down the money to allow surface-dressing to take place in spring or summer as that is when I have been told the discretionary spending on the local improvement scheme takes place in Limerick. We cannot guarantee the weather, which may be good in November. However, they seek an extension of time to allow the surface-dressing take place in 2018.

As a Deputy for County Limerick, I welcome the allocation of €411,000 for Limerick. It shows a further commitment to the development of rural areas. I look forward to the Minister's reply.

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): I thank the Deputy for raising the issue and I also thank him for his kind comments. He is quite correct in saying that the local improvement scheme, LIS, is a very important scheme for rural areas. As the Deputy will be aware, the Taoiseach and I announced the provision of €10 million for a local improvement scheme for 2017 at the National Ploughing Championships last week. The scheme supports improvement works on private and non-public roads. Often these roads lead to multiple residences, parcels of land that support agricultural activity, or public amenities such as lakes, rivers or beaches.

My Department wrote to local authorities in August to establish the level of demand for a local improvement scheme this year. The local authorities were clearly advised that any requests for funds would be subject to their capacity to complete any proposed works in 2017 and funding availability.

The scheme was launched on 21 September on the basis of the information received back from the local authorities. It was not possible to support fully the level of demand which the local authorities stated they could deliver in 2017, but all eligible local authorities received a minimum of €250,000, with the exception of the three authorities that requested less than that amount. It is now a matter for the local authorities to determine which roads they wish to prioritise from the funding allocated to them.

As Minister for Rural and Community Development, I am very much aware of the importance of the local improvement scheme. The roads covered by the scheme give access to homes, farmyards, agricultural land and business premises, and are often heavily used. However, because they fall outside direct local authority control, many need upgrading. For emergency services too, bad road surfaces can lead to delays in accessing sites and tending to people in need.

We have not been in a position to fund the local improvement scheme adequately in recent years, but we have now honoured the commitment in A Programme for a Partnership Government and in the Action Plan for Rural Development to reinstate the scheme.

Given the consultation which my Department engaged in with the local authorities in deter-

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mining what they could deliver in 2017, I urge local authorities to implement the programme and spend the money allocated to them without delay.

The priority is to fund projects which can be completed during 2017 and I am not in a position to extend the deadline for the drawdown of moneys if we are to achieve this objective. The timeline was highlighted to the local authorities prior to their submission of expressions of interest.

Deputy Tom Neville: I thank the Minister for his reply which provides clarification on the issue. I outlined a suggestion that came through and I take on board the Minister's comments. The message that needs to go out from here today is that the local improvement scheme is back. We are now hitting that list again and 20% of it will be knocked off in County Limerick. We need to build on that and make a case for funding to address tertiary roads in coming years, as was done in the past.

I understand the challenges the Government has regarding funding. There is a commitment to rural areas through the Department of Rural and Community Development. We recently saw what Culture Night did to invigorate certain areas, including Bruree, Rathkeale, Newcastle West, Abbeyfeale and Kildimo in County Limerick. I know the town and village renewal scheme will be coming up. Rathkeale, which has a unique socioeconomic background, would be greatly enhanced by such schemes. I look forward to its roll-out. As late as this week we heard that eir is continuing to roll out rural broadband to 300,000 houses, including in County Limerick. We know we are down to two bidders for the roll-out of the State broadband of the remaining 500,000. The Government is acting on what it is saying. It is putting things in place because the economy is now able to afford it. That is the bottom line. The heavy lifting that was done by the Government and by the people is now starting to make this happen.

Deputy Michael Ring: I again thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue for rural areas. He is correct in saying the LIS is very important for people in rural areas. People pay their taxes, including property tax. In some cases these people provide their own water and pay for it themselves, and they are entitled to have a scheme such as this. I am delighted that this scheme was opened this year. The programme for Government made a commitment to open the scheme. We have honoured that commitment and we will continue with that scheme next year.

We talked to the local authorities. They requested that they could spend the money this year and I hope they will. County Limerick got €411,000; it had sought €1.716 million. I know the local authority will spend that money by the end of the year to address badly needed road repairs. As I said in my reply, these are roads people, in some cases ambulance drivers, doctors and nurses, use on a daily basis. Therefore these schemes are very important and this particular LIS is a very important scheme.

In the past year we have opened up the CLÁR programme. The town and village scheme is up and running as is the rural recreation scheme. Many schemes that assist rural areas are now operating. Next year we will be into a new year. I hope the local authorities will actually spend whatever funding they got this year. Councillors and others are crying out for funding for rural areas; when they get it they should spend it.

Mental Health Services Provision

Deputy Pat Buckley: We are here specifically to discuss the report on Roscommon. The big question, apart from the need to address specifically the localised issues in this report, is to determine just how localised they are. Is Roscommon an exception or the rule, especially when it comes to funding? Some €18 million was returned from mental health funding from 2012 to 2014. We have heard a lot from the Government about its strides in increasing mental health funding from the low base that it was at for many years, but how much of that money is being spent on an annual basis and how much is being returned? A total of €16 million for just one area is huge, particularly when that area is not providing quality care according to the report or at the least is failing in a number of regards.

In response to a recent parliamentary question, the HSE advised that all money for 2017 was allocated and would be used. Can we be sure of that until next year, given the findings here? Are other CHOs returning moneys on this level on a regular basis? Is the Government aware of the problem and, if so, what has been done or is it benefiting from announcing spending figures which do not materialise and recycling that money? Last year the Government announced a measly €15 million increase in mental health funding. Was this decided on the basis that the underspend from 2016 was providing for it?

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am very conscious that many service users in Roscommon and their families have experienced huge problems in accessing services and in the level of service they get.

Generally, the reason given, or the excuse, for all of that, as the Minister of State is well aware, is that we do not have the resources or the funds. Now we find that significant funding was sent back. There were also scandals in some of the services in the area. People are wondering what on earth is going on. For many years the mental health service has been the poor relation in the health service. It has a bit of stigma attached to it and people do not ask too many questions or probe too much. It is time to end that and to probe into the issue to find out exactly what is going on because there is clearly a serious problem given the amount of money that is being returned. As my colleague, Deputy Pat Buckley, asked, is it a reflection of what is happening in other areas around the country? If it is, there are serious questions to be answered in respect of this issue.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I reiterate the points made by my two Oireachtas colleagues this afternoon. I come here with a very heavy heart. As Deputy Martin Kenny is aware, I lost a very close friend. This morning, the Taoiseach said on Leaders' Questions that many people have been affected by suicide. As the two previous Deputies have said, this report is damning in every respect. A total of €17.67 million was returned, €4.57 million in 2012, some €6.91 million in 2013 and €6.19 million in 2014. This report was carried out by three very eminent people from the Northern Ireland health care sector, namely, Mr. Brendan Mullen, Dr. Nial Quigley and Mr. Don Bradley. I am sure the Minister of State has read the report. The language in it is appalling. There are 27 recommendations. I know the Minister of State is a genuine man. The big worry and concern now is whether those recommendations will be implemented. They must be, as it is absolutely necessary that they are. I will have an opportunity to say a few more words in due course.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): I thank the Deputies who have raised the matter and continue to keep the focus on this important issue in what is a

very disturbing period for all of us.

The HSE is committed to ensuring that all aspects of mental health services are delivered in a consistent and timely fashion. In 2015, the mental health division of the executive determined that it was necessary to conduct an independent review of the quality, safety and governance of Roscommon mental health services to support achieving the goals set out in A Vision for Change and other relevant national policies.

Within a short period of being commissioned, it became evident that the initial timeframe proposed to conduct the review was insufficient and the review team requested, and received, extra time to complete its work. I welcome the recently published comprehensive report, which makes 27 recommendations for local service improvement. The report indicates that the review team was impressed by the majority of staff it met or interviewed, and was struck by their commitment to see services improve for service users in Roscommon. The overriding concern of the majority of those interviewed - staff, service users and carers - was that patients and families in Roscommon were not receiving services in line with current best practice that would meet required quality and safety of care standards.

Multidisciplinary team working - the linchpin of modern mental health services - was severely eroded in Roscommon, with fractured relationships within the area management team, within the Roscommon teams and between a number of professionals and key consultant medical staff. Throughout, there were poor line management arrangements. Leadership at a number of levels appeared to be ineffective. The majority of nursing staff interviewed believed, and the team agrees, that the senior nursing leadership critical to representing the professional views of nurses at the executive level was missing. It is the team's view that, in some instances, relationships appear to have broken down irreparably.

Managers in any organisation have a difficult balancing role and they should be allowed to manage without undue interference. However, that can only occur in a working environment that is conducive to mutual respect and understanding. There was clear evidence that this was absent in this instance. The review team pointed to the need for effective application of change management principles as a new entity attempts to merge disparate parts of hitherto separate organisations. The team believes that preparatory work to support the area management team should have been in place, as it embarked on creating a new culture. The team concluded also that there was disproportionate focus, even at a time of straitened financial circumstances, on achieving budget savings at the cost of an adequately staffed and safe service.

The report highlights that approximately €17.6 million of mental health funding for the years 2012 to 2014 was returned by the Galway-Roscommon area, and it details the context surrounding that. The report makes a specific recommendation on the issue, to the effect that the HSE should have greater delegation of budgetary authority to promote greater accountability, better management and more effective service delivery at local level. The HSE has confirmed that funds unspent in a particular area may be reallocated elsewhere within mental health services, and that is the case here.

A team has been formed by the HSE to implement the recommendations of the report. The executive has statutory responsibility for the planning and delivery of health care services at local level, including mental health in Roscommon. Nonetheless, the Deputies can rest assured that I, and the Department of Health, will closely monitor the progress of the HSE implementation team to ensure that all the recommendations are delivered as quickly as possible to address

at local or national level, as appropriate, all concerns raised by this important report.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State for his response. In the very first paragraph it stated: “The HSE is committed to ensuring that all aspects of mental health services are delivered in a consistent and timely fashion.” One of the two key points I raised with An Taoiseach yesterday, which are in the report, is that there was more focus on achieving savings than providing safe and effective services. The second point concerns allegations of conspiracy. I cannot see anything in the report to suggest mental health services are being “delivered in a consistent and timely fashion”. The report refers to corruption, secrecy and acceptance of poor standards. As Deputy Eugene Murphy and my party colleague, Deputy Martin Kenny, said, this is a 43-page document and it is absolutely pathetic in this day and age that we as public representatives have to come in here and fight to represent the people that are trying to use this service when everything in the system is corrupt. Some of the people concerned would not even engage in the review. That is how bad it is. The mental health services in this country upset me so much. My daughter is going to a funeral today of a 15 year old friend because of the failure of the mental health services.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Deputy Eugene Murphy mentioned a case and I am also aware of a young woman who died while in receipt of help from the mental health service in Roscommon. At the time, there was very little come-back from the service for the family or when others tried to find out what was going on and what happened. It is really because of that case that I began to ask what was going on when I saw the report. It flags it to the high heavens that something can happen to a young woman with a family who wanted to get a service and was rejected and pushed away, and ended up in the circumstances that transpired.

The Minister of State has given a response and he said he will do his best but there is a cultural problem there that needs to be addressed. My understanding is that there are people who do not do their job and when they are challenged about it, they have a hissy fit and say they are being bullied and pressurised. We all know it is a difficult balance in the workplace, no matter where one is, but especially in that type of workplace where one is dealing with very vulnerable people. Those who are charged with providing the service need to do it in a much more adequate way than has been the case to date. I accept the Minister of State is new to the job and I wish him God speed to get this issue sorted out because it needs to be sorted out in Roscommon and across the country.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Every time I look at the young family of that woman my heart aches. The family is from down the road. It is no secret. There is also a family that is known to Deputy Martin Kenny as well. In this case the woman was turned away from several hospitals over a five-week period. Her family had done everything to help her, as Deputy Martin Kenny could also confirm in the case he outlined. There was absolute and utter failure within the system. In this review, more than 60 staff were interviewed and a lot of them were very committed, dedicated people. Quite a number of them had expressed concerns to me and to other politicians over a period about what was going on.

I acknowledge the sincerity of the Minister of State. There are 27 recommendations. I do not want to be back here in six months, nine months or 12 months talking about more tragedies and trouble within the system. We need extra money and the money that was taken away from the system. I meet people every day, as do the other Deputies, who really need the services and, as things stand at the moment, the service is not there in Roscommon and we need to rebuild it. There are great staff in many sections but we must ensure we have a top class service for people.

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Deputy Jim Daly: All I can do is provide the Deputies with an assurance that I am well aware of the issue. I have spoken to a number of their colleagues in the other House and to Deputies who are not in the Chamber today. To their credit, I think every Oireachtas Member has reached out to me on the issue of Roscommon. I am travelling there on Monday and intend to meet with Tony Canavan, the chief medical officer there. I intend to get my head around what went wrong. I understand the Deputies are not looking to assign responsibility for the past but for the future, to make sure that the recommendations are adhered to. I accept that responsibility in full. As Minister of State, I have responsibility to oversee the implementation of the recommendations. That is not much but it is the very least we owe to the victims of the wrongdoings that took place. I will take that responsibility as seriously as I can to ensure there are no repetitions. I will also keep an eye to the national picture to ensure issues like this are not going under the radar in other community health care organisations or counties.

Disease Incidence

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I welcome the people who came from around the country today to protest at the Dáil. They had a presentation in the AV room, which was excellent. It was heartbreaking to hear their experiences, particularly those of one farmer whose life was turned upside down when both he and his young sons got Lyme disease. The one point I want to raise is the lack of early diagnosis. People have to get diagnosed themselves. They have to leave Ireland and go to Germany or America, and must raise a fortune if they do not have the money themselves. They have to beg, steal or borrow it. When they get the diagnosis, they come back to Ireland and it is not recognised here. That is wrong. It should be recognised here. The HSE should be doing more for early detection of this problem and should be recognising it.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The figures that are being given out by the HSE are totally wrong. We know they are wrong because for the numbers they are saying that have Lyme disease, we have that many in Kerry already, not to mind the rest of the country. We have people from Rathmore, Killarney, Killorglin, Castleisland, Cordal, Duagh and many other parts of Kerry who are affected with this terrible disease. A young girl, who gave all her years to qualifying in college, is in Germany being treated for Lyme disease. As Deputy Michael Healy-Rae said, they have blood tests here and the tests come back saying they do not have Lyme disease. Every other kind of disease is attributed to these patients rather than Lyme disease. When they go to Germany, it is recognised and accepted that they have Lyme disease. Many of them have to stay in Germany or go to America.

This disease should be recognised. If they have to go for treatment to these countries, let the HSE pay for it. Other diseases are paid for and this disease has to be recognised and treated accordingly.

Deputy Martin Ferris: Lyme disease is currently the fastest-spreading tick infection in the world. Some 50% of Lyme disease cases in Ireland are detected in the south west. What is also very disturbing, as my two colleagues have said, is that there is a lack of standardisation regarding detection. The Government and the State have not adopted the same urgency that Germany has, which is foremost in the world in respect of detection. People have to go to Germany and get their tests done and get the treatment that should be done in this country. They can also go to Portadown in the Six Counties and get it done that way.

I am asking the Minister of State to agree on a form of standardisation within the EU as

regards the treatment and detection of Lyme disease. If that is agreed and done, it will be a way of resolving the problem for so many of the people who travelled here today to try to get this issue addressed.

Deputy Jim Daly: I thank the Deputies from Kerry for giving me the opportunity to update the House on this matter. Lyme disease is an infection caused by a spiral-shaped bacterium called *borrelia burgdorferi*. It is transmitted to humans by bites from ticks infected with the bacteria. The health protection surveillance centre of the HSE has extensive information concerning Lyme disease on its website. The infection is generally mild affecting only the skin, but can occasionally be more severe and highly debilitating. Many infected people have no symptoms at all. The most common noticeable evidence of infection is a rash called *erythema migrans* - a red, raised skin rash, often called a bulls-eye rash. People can also complain of flu-like symptoms such as headache, sore throat, neck stiffness, fever, muscle aches and general fatigue.

Lyme disease is diagnosed by medical history and physical examination. The infection is confirmed by blood tests which look for antibodies produced by an infected person's body in response to the infection. In general, it is accepted clinical practice in Ireland, the UK, Europe and North America that laboratory confirmation is unnecessary for a confidently made, clinical diagnosis of *erythema migrans*.

In Ireland, treatment by most clinicians is based on that laid out in evidence-based guidelines for the management of patients with Lyme disease published by the Infectious Diseases Society of America in 2006. Lyme disease can be very successfully treated using common antibiotics. These antibiotics are effective at clearing the rash and helping to prevent the development of complications. Antibiotics are generally given for up to three weeks. If complications develop, intravenous antibiotics may be considered.

Misinformation concerning the long-term effects of Lyme disease is causing real harm to people who may seek inappropriate treatments. There is no evidence that viable *borrelia burgdorferi* persists in patients following confirmed Lyme disease. I am aware of people travelling to other countries and spending large amounts of money on treatment for so called "chronic Lyme disease". Chronic Lyme disease lacks an accepted clinical definition, and in practice the term has been applied to a wide variety of patients. These symptoms are very common in the general population, and the evidence does not show that they occur any more commonly in patients with a history of Lyme disease. The diverse natures of these symptoms, which can have both physical and psychological causes, are shared by many conditions. The majority of patients referred for chronic Lyme disease have no objective evidence of the infection, and most often have an alternative medical diagnosis or a functional syndrome such as fibromyalgia or chronic fatigue syndrome. As diagnosis and treatment of Lyme disease are available in most of the larger hospitals in Ireland, there is no need for anyone to travel abroad to access them. I advise anyone suffering from these symptoms to seek advice from their family doctor and referral for appropriate evidence-based treatment.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: What I am going to say is in no way a personal attack on the Minister of State, but I am outraged at that response. Telling people who have gone abroad for treatment to Germany - who cannot get a diagnosis here and who are seriously ill - that they have fibromyalgia is outrageous. I thank the people who travelled here today from around the country and particularly my own friends and colleagues who came from County Kerry. If they were in the Chamber to hear the Minister of State say what he just said, they would be outraged

beyond belief. His statement is telling these people they are not really sick.

We heard from patients who were told by their doctors that maybe it was a bit of a problem upstairs they actually had. They then went away and got a diagnosis of Lyme disease. They were treated for Lyme disease. The good gentleman farmer we met today, a lovely man who broke all our hearts when we heard his story, thankfully is on the road to being cured. His child's fingernails had fallen out and his hair was falling out. Now he is cured. If the Minister of State were to tell those people that they had fibromyalgia, they would be outraged.

I am not directing this at the Minister of State personally. I know there would have been people in the HSE who had to okay this and it is their wrong, not that of the man who uttered it today. It is not his fault but this is balderdash. This is nonsense. This is not the answer to the debate that myself and Deputies Danny Healy-Rae and Martin Ferris wanted to bring to the attention of the Minister of State. It is not the answer.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The problem is with the person or people who wrote this reply for the Minister of State. The former Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, in a reply to me, recognised that something had to be done to improve the service, medicine or whatever for these people. It was wrong to suggest there was something wrong in people's minds but this is what many of them were told. It has to be changed. How is it that they can be cured in America and Germany but we cannot cure them here, or even diagnose them? We cannot even accept the results of blood tests from Germany. What is wrong with the HSE and the health service? Why do we have to fight like this to get rights for these people?

It is well known where the ticks are coming from. They are coming from deer and the country is overrun with them. Anyone who has any contact with the national parks or forests are picking them up there and something needs to be done in that regard too. People need to be warned that they may be liable to pick these ticks up if they go into these areas. The HSE needs to wake up.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I thank the Minister of State for a non-response. I do not mean this in a personal way as the response was clearly written by a civil servant to protect the inadequacies of the HSE and the injustices perpetrated by it and the State. Everybody we spoke to today has had a family member with the illness or has had it themselves. Everybody we spoke to told us that the German model is the most efficient and the best to follow to deal with the illness. I did not realise it was so simple but intervention with a treatment of antibiotics at an early stage is a solution. We need to set up specialist centres to deal with it and it is within the power of the Government to do that. The rubbish we have been given by way of a response today, and which the Minister of State was given to come into the House and read out, does not in any way address the issues. It is hiding behind the HSE and a profession that has been discredited by what has happened to the people we met today.

I ask the Minister of State to go back into the system, starting with the setting up of a specialist centre to identify the cause, and work with the German model, which is the most successful in Europe and probably the world, to resolve the issue.

Deputy Jim Daly: I accept that no Deputies are being personal in this matter. I have heard their concerns and know that all three are very genuine. I am not going to get involved in the clinical argument as that is not my role or function. However, I will take the concerns, raised on the floor of the House, back to the Department and discuss them with the senior Minister,

Deputy Harris, to see if I can get further explanatory notes for the Deputies. I will take on board their concerns and I acknowledge they are talking about real people. It is their duty to represent them inside this House and I will do my job to ensure their representation goes all the way back to the Department, where it matters.

Sitting suspended at 4.25 p.m. and resumed at 5.05 p.m.

Housing: Motion [Private Members]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Eoin Ó Broin to move the motion. His group has 20 minutes.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— the social and affordable housing crisis has now reached the level of an emergency;

— growing numbers of people do not have access to affordable, secure and safe homes;

— 8,000 people, including 3,000 children, are being forced to live in emergency accommodation;

— 90,000 households are on council waiting lists, many waiting for more than 10 years for an allocation;

— thousands of people are struggling with high rents, insecurity of tenure and poor standards in the private rental sector;

— thousands more are locked out of the private purchase market by high prices driven up by land speculation;

— the failure to resolve the mortgage distress crisis and keep people in their family home or private rented accommodation continues to push more people into homelessness;

— Rebuilding Ireland does not provide for an adequate level of investment in social or affordable housing;

— Rebuilding Ireland continues to over rely on the private sector to meet social and affordable housing need; and

— Rebuilding Ireland, unless substantially amended, will not address the underlying causes of the housing and homeless crisis; and

calls on the Government to:

— honour the proposal from the Report of the Committee on Housing and Home-

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lessness to increase the stock of social houses owned by local authorities and approved housing bodies by a minimum of 10,000 units a year from 2018;

— introduce a new affordable housing programme in 2018 to enable middle-income households to access private rental and private purchase housing at affordable prices;

— support these housing programmes with a capital investment commitment substantially greater than that outlined in Rebuilding Ireland;

— introduce new measures to stop the flow of people into homelessness by providing greater protections for private renters and greater supports for those in long-term mortgage distress; and

— give a clear commitment that no family with children will be left in emergency accommodation for more than six months and that no person will be forced to sleep rough due to lack of safe and appropriate emergency accommodation.

By almost every single indicator, the housing crisis is getting worse. There are 8,000 people who will tonight sleep in emergency accommodation, 3,000 of whom are children. Many of those families with children will spend more than two years in inappropriate emergency accommodation and as the Minister knows, because we have reminded him repeatedly, those figures do not include adults and children in Department of Children and Youth Affairs-funded domestic violence refuge and step-down accommodation nor do they include the families trapped in direct provision, despite the fact that they have got their leave to remain. We have 90,000 households on council waiting lists as of last September and I am sure those figures are already starting to rise yet again. In many local authority areas, the length of time families are waiting for a local authority allocation is in excess of ten years. Thousands of people and households are stuck in an affordability trap with rising rents, rising house prices and, of course, rising land values.

Increasingly, we have problems with insecure tenure in the private rental sector and, far too often, poor standards despite the high prices. We know the private sector is building nowhere close to what its real capacity is or indeed its planning permissions and its funding. In other key areas, Traveller accommodation budgets are still appallingly underspent by local authorities and people with disabilities, both in the social and private housing sector, by and large continue to be ignored. Every single piece of our housing system is broken in a way that is worse than before.

I have no doubt that when the Minister gets to his feet he will tell Members that he inherited a housing crisis from the last Fianna Fáil Government. He will tell us they did not have the funds to invest in social housing from 2011 to 2014 but since the Kelly plan and then the Coveney plan, things are allegedly getting back on track. The Minister will tell us that the numbers of planning permissions and commencements are up. He may even repeat the mistruth that money is not an object in tackling the housing crisis but in all the indicators I have outlined, the Department's own figures tell a very different story. More importantly, the lived experience of thousands of families contradicts the Minister.

The truth is the Government's housing plan simply is not working and unfortunately, in certain areas it is actually making things worse. When the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, took office I told him that if and when he introduced measures that Sinn Féin believed would start to tackle the causes of the crisis I would support him but if he continued to pursue failed policies

or indeed introduce even worse ones, we would hold him to account.

While in my view it is too early to judge the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, there are some very worrying signs. His predecessor, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, promised much but delivered very little. If he had put as much effort into social housing and affordable housing supply as he did to organising fancy launches and publishing glossy documents, he might have had more success.

However, there are some signs that the Minister is following in his predecessor's footsteps. I have a document to hand, which I am happy to give to him after the debate. In the past two and a half months, he has made either directly or indirectly through leaks from his Department 49 separate policy announcements. I do not know if the Minister has approved all of those but they are 49 different measures and proposed changes to Rebuilding Ireland. We were told there would be a review. We were told there would be a publication of a review document but it seems that what the Minister is doing is launching and half leaking new ideas and proposals to give the impression that he is doing something when I am yet to be convinced that anything is being done at all. Eighteen of these actions were announced after the homeless summit on 8 September. Some of them are not bad ideas. Some were measures that were already announced and some, particularly those that increased the administrative burden on the Residential Tenancies Board and local authorities, will simply make matters worse.

There are 31 different leaks of different policy propositions and either the Minister is consenting to them being leaked by his Department or he is not in control of other members of his party or the Department who are leaking these without his consent. What is crucial, however, is when we look at the picture of those 49 measures, there is no coherence to any of that whatsoever. It smacks of a Minister desperate to give the impression of action when, unfortunately, he is continuing on the same path as his predecessor. The central problem with the plan the Minister inherited from the latter is that it targeted - or planned to target - the social housing needs of 130,000 families over six years but, as he is aware, only 37,000 of these will be housed through real social housing. Some 93,000 families, according to the Minister's plan, will allegedly have their housing needs met in the private rental sector, 83,000 through two-year HAP tenancies and 10,000 through longer-term leases. This means that 72% of the Minister's plan for social housing in the State relies on subsidised private rental accommodation.

Capital investment in real social housing remains - this will continue to be the case under the plan - unacceptably low: €733 million this year and €788 million next year. Throughout the lifetime of the plan, if the Minister meets his targets, it will not go above the level at which it was before Fine Gael took office in 2011. With low investment comes low output: 2,541 real, new additional social units for the system in 2016, not including the voids; 3,684 this year, not including the voids; and next year we are promised somewhere in the region of more than 5,000. This is less than half of the 10,000 real social housing units that the cross-party Committee on Housing and Homelessness, which was supported by members of the Minister's own party, strongly recommended. To make matters worse, the Department continues to impose an 18-to-24-month approval process in local authorities, slowing down the delivery of these much-needed homes. In fact, even for the alleged rapid-builds, the approval process is 12 months before a contractor goes on site. Meanwhile, there is no direct central government investment in the provision of affordable rental or affordable purchase housing, and the current schemes, whether the help-to-buy model or the local infrastructure housing activation fund, are either not having any positive impact on affordability or are making matters worse. The cost-rental model is nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, good projects such as Ó Cualann project in Poppintree,

which the Minister visited to have his photograph taken, are not getting any significant backing from central government funds, despite the fact that good-quality family homes at prices of between €170,000 and €225,000 are on offer there. Why does this Government believe that social and affordable housing need can be met by giving public money to private landlords and private developers? At what point will it accept that the best way to meet this need is for direct State investment in public housing on public land?

The motion before us is straightforward. We could have proposed many other things in it but really what we wanted to do was to focus on four key propositions. The first is, yet again, to urge the Minister to put the money on the table in the capital programme to deliver the minimum of 10,000 real social housing units each year, starting next year. The second is for direct State investment in affordable rental and affordable purchase housing, either delivered directly through local authorities or between local authorities and approved housing bodies on the model of the Ó Cualann project. The third is to take more direct action - something that is sorely lacking in the 18 points the Minister launched after the much-hyped homelessness summit - to stop the flow of families into homelessness. The Focus Ireland amendment is one key way of doing this, but we also urge the Minister to take more direct action to assist those in mortgage distress, including buy-to-let landlords who have rent-paying tenants in their properties, and to prevent those families from becoming homeless. Finally, we seek a clear commitment that no individual, family or child will spend more than six months in emergency accommodation and that no one will be forced to sleep rough because of the absence of secure and safe emergency accommodation. The latter have both been Government policy since 2008 but they have yet to be realised.

To comment briefly on the amendments, there is much I agree with in the Labour, People Before Profit and Fianna Fáil amendments, but Sinn Féin has taken the decision that we will not accept them. This is not because we have huge disagreements with them, but, rather, because we want to keep the focus of this Private Members' business on the four key issues to which I refer. We have some differences over the mechanics of how best to mobilise the assets and resources of NAMA. There are some parts of the People Before Profit amendment that we think are just unrealistic in the short term and some aspects of the Fianna Fáil measure with which we do not necessarily agree, although we accept the spirit of many of the amendments.

The crucial thing is this: if the Minister comes back to us over the next couple of weeks with more leaks and announcements and then with a minor increase in capital expenditure on budget day, what he is essentially saying is that the core programme that was introduced by his predecessor, Deputy Coveney, remains in place. The truth of the Government's own figures is that the private sector cannot and will not meet the housing needs of people reliant on social, affordable rental housing or affordable purchase housing. On that basis I urge the Minister to listen to what many of us in this House have been saying, listen to what the Dáil Committee on Housing and Homeless is saying and change track. If he does, he will be recognised for decades as the Minister who finally started to get a grip on the housing and homelessness crisis. If he does not, he will go down on that long list of ministerial failures - including Deputies Coveney and Kelly and former Deputies Gormley and Finneran - before him. They had the opportunity and failed because they would not invest in public housing on public land for those people who need social and affordable housing.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I have just a couple of minutes so I will focus on just one or two things. This is the big issue for all of us. Not a week goes by that a new homeless family does not come to my constituency office. The majority of the reasons that prompt people to come

in are housing-related. Sometimes they are people trying to get transfers. I was dealing with a case in recent days involving a couple and seven children who live in a two-bed unit. Again, they are trying to transfer - to move up. I would argue that I live in one of the areas with probably one of the most progressive local authority housing agencies. However, our biggest failure - this is what people say to us when they come to our constituency offices - is our lack of ambition. There are probably 5,000 households on South Dublin County Council's list and it is proposed to build a couple of hundred houses. If one looks at the numbers on lists throughout the country, they are similar. We could talk of 90,000 in total but the figure is probably much higher. In that context, it is proposed to build 36,000 units over the next six years. We are failing our people. We are not ambitious enough. We are not meeting people's aspirations, needs, hopes or expectations.

Sinn Féin's proposals are ambitious. We believe they can work. However, we need to start being more ambitious in our outlook. That is what we are trying to do and that is why we are trying to focus on these four areas. I do not think we can leave this to the market or to private companies that have ruthlessly taken advantage of the situation and people's vulnerability and that will continue to do so. The lack of affordable and social housing is acutely affecting young people. We know that. Increasing numbers of people are coming into our offices. I was at the National Youth Council's offices recently and, again, young people came to me and talked about the impact homelessness is having on families. We are all talking about it, but I would argue that we are not ambitious enough and we need to start looking up rather than down at these figures. I think we can deliver. Collectively, I think there is the goodwill in the House to do so. However, we need a plan that works, and I would argue that we need to approach the issue differently.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, as ucht an deis labhairt ar an topaic seo. The latest figures released by the Department show clearly that the Government's plans are not working; rather, they are failing miserably thousands and thousands of families around this country. My party has consistently called for a range of measures to be implemented to address this crisis, which is spiralling out of control. We have called for an increase in social housing stock to 10,000 units per year. We have called for security of tenure and rent certainty to reduce the flow of families into homelessness. We have called for a Government-led affordable housing scheme. The piecemeal approach adopted by this Government has done nothing to address this crisis, which worsens day by day, and it is the families that are suffering and paying the price for the Government's failure. There are now 8,000 people in emergency accommodation, and it is absolutely shocking and unacceptable to think that 3,000 of them are vulnerable children who have been placed in difficult situations. These are children who, no doubt, will suffer the impact of this crisis when it comes to their well-being, and that is unacceptable.

In my constituency of Offaly and north Tipperary, there are over 2,500 on the social housing waiting list. My offices throughout the constituency regularly deal with people who are living in overcrowded accommodation, people who are being evicted from private rented accommodation and, increasingly, families that are seeking emergency accommodation. These families are often very distressed, frustrated and left without hope. My county has the highest rate of homelessness in the midlands, with 33 adults in emergency accommodation in July. Twelve single-parent families are in emergency accommodation in the midlands region and a total of 55 children are in emergency accommodation.

Homelessness is not confined to the large urban centres and it has now spread to every re-

gion in this State. To add insult to injury, the census figures show there are 3,000 vacant dwellings in my county of Offaly. That is unacceptable and something needs to be done. There is a course of action that could be taken and we have proposed the increased use of compulsory purchase orders be adopted to address the vacant buildings situation.

The Government's approach clearly demonstrates the lack of joined-up thinking that is required to address this crisis. The Government needs to act now. I am calling on all Deputies to support this motion and send a clear message that we will no longer stand by while this crisis continues. The Government needs to show empathy with the people who are suffering. It is disconnected and it needs to change. It was elected to serve all citizens of this country.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We have 90,000 people languishing on housing waiting lists across the State, including over 4,000 in my home county of Louth. The Minister and his party have been in government for the last seven years and they have presided over it all. In that time the only thing they can rightly claim credit for is the fact they allowed a housing crisis to escalate into a full-blown housing emergency. They have opted to go for Mickey Mouse options, for half-baked options, so long as they were developer-led and developer-driven. In doing that, they have prolonged and compounded the misery and uncertainty of homelessness and they have point-blank refused to accept that, unless there is a proper roll-out of a State-wide, State-funded social and affordable housing building programme, they are not going to resolve this crisis. Because of their refusal to do that, the misery, the uncertainty and the sheer inhumanity of homelessness continues.

I can only surmise that the Minister is comfortable with people sleeping in doorways and under bridges, covered in cardboard for shelter, in cities and towns right across this State. He is also comfortable with four generations of one family living under one roof. He is also comfortable with tenants receiving eviction notices almost daily from greedy landlords seeking to exploit this emergency. He is also comfortable with the fact that younger generations have resigned themselves to the fact they might never be able to afford to buy their own home because few or no affordable homes are being built. All of this sits very comfortably with the Minister and his ilk.

I say this for the reason that, just last week, yet again, the Minister opposed a Bill calling for the constitutional right to housing, despite the fact 81 other countries have that right enshrined in law. If the Minister does not act, if he does not do what needs to be done in rolling out a proper social housing building programme to bring an end to the misery and inhumanity caused by homelessness, I guarantee that, at some stage in his life, it will come back to haunt him.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: This housing crisis has been coming down the tracks for decades yet the response of the Government has been dismal. We have 90,000 people on council waiting lists and 3,000 homeless children living in emergency accommodation. Let us think about that for a minute: kids growing up in family hubs and hotel rooms. These children have no certainty when it comes to going to school or being near their friends. They cannot even sit down at a table with their families for a meal when they get home. Yet we see many houses and apartments empty all across this State. In my constituency there are many houses boarded up and we urgently need to bring those homes back into council stock.

I want to address one issue in the time I have left. There is no such thing as a "free house". People in social housing pay rent, like everybody else, except their payments are based on their income. Let us have no more tinkering around the edges. There is only one way we are going

to solve this crisis and that is by building much more social and affordable housing.

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue in the House. We have a history in this country of shying away from discussing difficult things or things that make us uncomfortable. That has not been the right approach to take so we have to talk about this, and talk about it a lot, if we are going to find the right solutions.

Deputy Munster should not assume that I am comfortable with the difficulties and challenges that I face in this brief. She should not personalise this against me. She should not bring the culture of bullying in her party into this Chamber.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Seven years. The Government of which the Minister is a part has had seven years.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Do not personalise this against me. I am not comfortable about this.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister, without interruption.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Seven years.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: The Taoiseach himself has said this is a stain on us, and I support him in saying that. If we are going to discuss this, debate this and find solutions, we have to work together to do it. If the Deputy personalises this against individuals in this Chamber, if she seeks to bully other people and other parties, then she is not trying to be a constructive contributor to this debate or these solutions. It is not the role she is seeking to play.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Seven years.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: It is not reflective of her colleague, Deputy Eoin Ó Broin, who has sought to make a constructive contribution to this debate in every engagement I have had with him to date.

To address the motion, the Government will not be voting against the motion but we will not be voting in support of it either. We agree with the broad thrust of much of what is in the motion, because we believe that is exactly what is happening at the moment, but we cannot agree with the language. We cannot agree with it when it says, for example, “Rebuilding Ireland continues to over rely on the private sector to meet social and affordable housing need.” When we look at the construction output for next year we know that, of the 20,000 homes that will be built, which is a conservative number, one quarter to one fifth will be social houses built by local authorities and housing bodies. We cannot agree with how Sinn Féin manipulates the numbers either. While the motion points to some indicators, I can point to others that show Rebuilding Ireland is working. There has been a greater than 40% increase in planning permissions since last year, a greater than 40% increase in the number of commencement construction notices over last year and an increase of 33% in the number of homes connected to the ESB grid since last year. Those figures tell us that activity is happening - of course it is. When we approach this debate, we have to be even-handed in the language we use but also in regard to the figures we rely on to talk about what is actually happening out there today in the world.

When we look at some of the new measures that have been brought in under Rebuilding Ireland, like the fast-track planning process with An Bord Pleanála, it is important to note there are

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now 5,000 homes on the books through that fast-track planning process. That is 5,000 homes that will be built more quickly because of new measures that were brought in.

In so far as my analysis or review of Rebuilding Ireland is concerned, Deputy Ó Broin should not mind the leaks. I am taking a very collaborative approach to the work I am doing. I am talking to everyone I can and listening to them. I am considering as much as I can. I am not ruling anything out or anything in until I make a decision on it. If others choose to talk to others about that, and it makes its way into the media, I cannot control that. What the Deputy can rely on is the rolling analysis I am doing. When I make a decision and announce it, as I did in the course of the housing summit, that is the change or improvement that happens. It is similar in regard to the change to the rent pressure zones and in regard to the change that will be made in regard to the Residential Tenancies Board.

We have a crisis in homelessness and we have a shortage of houses - we know that. Many European neighbours are facing a similar situation today as well, such as France, Germany, the UK and the Netherlands. The Netherlands has a constitutional right to housing in its constitution but that does not mean it does not have a problem with homelessness and housing. Thankfully, we still have one of the lowest rates of homelessness among member states. Scotland's is almost double our rate and Germany's is more than double ours. While that is nothing to be proud of, we are putting in a huge amount of resources and effort to try to help people and families in very difficult circumstances. One homeless family is one family too many. The Taoiseach has said it is a stain on our society and I agree with him on that. Thankfully, though, we are helping these people as much as we can. At times, we will do everything we can to support a homeless individual and put in every single support we can, and it will not be enough, but that does not mean we should not try harder, which we do, although we know we need to do more. This year, more than €100 million will be spent on homelessness, which is more than double what was spent in 2014, and that does not include the €25 million that was allocated for hubs, the additional €10 million that I approved earlier this year and the additional €10 million that has been ring-fenced since then for family hubs.

I was in Limerick this morning to attend a two-day conference of the social housing bodies as well as local authority representatives. I know from the local authority in Limerick that it will be drawing down that funding for two new hubs in Limerick. It intends to have almost all families out of hotels and bed and breakfasts before Christmas as a result of the work it is doing and the funding we are providing. Consider the Mater Dei facility, which the Oireachtas committee was invited to attend, and which the vast majority of Members have not attended. Deputy Ó Broin has attended there - fair play to him for his engagement - but most Members have not. Of the 27 families that went to that new facility in June, half have moved on to more permanent accommodation. Others are, unfortunately, having difficulties finding accommodation. Different families have different needs and we must be sensitive to them. If they need a tailored response that takes more time then we will do that for them. We have nine family hubs in place at the moment that look after 300 families. We aim to have a total of 15 hubs. I repeat this is the first response. It is not a long-term source of accommodation. It is a better response than hotels or bed and breakfast accommodation. It is a first response for those families.

While we support the broad thrust of the motion, I cannot give the commitment called for in the motion: "to give a clear commitment that no family with children will be left in emergency accommodation for more than six months...". We must be sensitive to families' needs and we have to make sure that in finding them permanent, sustainable accommodation we take into account the different needs they have and we come forward with tailored solutions. The motion

also says “that no person will be forced to sleep rough due to lack of safe and appropriate emergency accommodation”. Again, sometimes we can do everything we can but it still will not be enough. There will be 200 more beds in place by the end of the year and this figure will have a spare capacity in it to make sure that nobody has to sleep rough. It is important that we do this.

The numbers of those who have come out of emergency accommodation show there have been 3,000 sustainable exits from homelessness in 2016. In the first quarter of 2017 there were 900. In the second quarter I hope to see the same. At the end of the housing summit I announced the new inter-agency group, to be chaired by John Murphy, the former Secretary General of the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. The group will co-ordinate the funding and resources that go into homelessness. It is not just about shelter and emergency accommodation; it is about a range of issues. We have exit co-ordinators coming into place also to prevent people falling back into homelessness. This is important and it was welcomed.

We also have a national director for Housing First coming and an additional 100 places for Housing First. This was all welcomed. There is also the new agreement whereby landlords must write to the RTB to notify it when they are issuing a notice to quit. This allows the RTB and the services to get involved to prevent people having to access emergency accommodation, to either keep people in the homes they are in or to help them into new accommodation. There is also the roll-out of the new HAP place finder service across the State, which is doing a good job where it is available.

If we look at the details of the motion and the provision of 10,000 houses for local authorities arrived at, when I talk about the figures I want to be quite accurate so people will understand what I am talking about. Because of a decision that was made a few weeks ago, 3,800 houses will be built directly by local authorities and housing bodies. This is a 30% increase on what we were going to build next year. When we count in Part V provision as well as the voids that will be converted, we are looking at 5,000 homes next year. The figures for acquisitions and leasing will be an additional 3,000. This is 8,000. The Deputies have spoken of 10,000 for 2018; we will get 8,000. With regard to those acquisitions and leasing figures, we will have the acquisitions in stock and the leases will be long-term leases. We will have those. When we look at the 20,000 homes that are going to be built next year, we look at the new accommodation coming online, we can point to 20% to 25%, or perhaps even more, that will be social housing homes for tenants who need those supports. This is because new money is made available and new money is re-prioritised. I am having conversations with the Minister for Finance and he has assured me that additional resources will be made available for our capital spend from 2019 on to make sure we can increase our ambition.

In addition, in 2018 some 17,000 new tenancies will be supported through HAP. This year 21,000 social housing homes will be through this range of measures. This is 80 new tenancies per working day of the week across the year. Next year we will see 8,000 homes from the build programme, acquisition and leasing and the 17,000 that will be available through HAP. That is 25,000 social housing supports next year. This is significant and is well beyond the 10,000 figure the Deputies are talking about delivering. It is important to point this out.

The motion also makes reference to the new measures to stop the flow of people into homelessness. I have already spoken of some of the outcomes of the housing summit, which I believe are very positive. The rent pressure zones, while a temporary solution, have worked. If the trends continue for the first and second quarters of this year we will see an average inflation rate of 3% in Dublin. It was 8.5% last year. This will help families to stay in their tenancies.

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I have announced a definition of substantial refurbishment that is coming. We are working on this with the RTB, and other services are going to feed into that definition. If I need to put it on a statutory footing I would have no problem in doing that.

A change management programme has been developed for two years to turn the RTB into a proper regulator. We also need balance and we must recognise that we cannot force anybody to be a landlord. People need to be incentivised to do this and they need supports, especially where there are accidental landlords or where people are thinking of selling on as a vacant possession. We must see if there are things we can do to make sure that landlords sell to landlords. If Deputies want to cry foul over the number of international institutional investors that have come in to invest in the rental sector, we must make sure that if we are trying to get them to exit there are going to be enough domestic landlords in place to take on that role.

Today in Limerick I announced that a housing body will use the new mortgage-to-rent scheme to help people whose mortgages are in distress of more than 720 days to stay in their homes as social housing tenants. This will help them and they are going to get a debt write-off too, which is welcome. For the last nine consecutive quarters the numbers of people in long-term arrears have been reducing. The measures that were already in place have been working. We can, however, always bring about new solutions. We reviewed the mortgage to rent scheme earlier this year and we now have a housing body taking advantage of the changes that were made. More changes are going to come also.

I cannot, regrettably, address all the points in the motion that I had wanted to address.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister will have another chance.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: We must also be careful what we say to the public as to what we believe is possible. Solidarity-People Before Profit Deputies want us to build 20,000 houses next year. How exactly do they think that will happen and where would it happen? Will it happen in the proper locations or will we return to bad planning? Deputies talk of the funding we spent in 2008 before we had an economic recession that was caused by the unsustainable way in which we were building houses.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I move amendment No. 3:

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

“notes that:

— the State has built fewer than 3,500 social homes since 2011, less than the number constructed every year on average from 1994–2010;

— fewer than 600 new social homes will be constructed in 2017 when the Rebuilding Ireland target is 5,000;

— only 24 per cent of 10,000 units in the ‘construction pipeline’ are on site, so it will be 2021 before most are built compared to the already unambitious target of 26,000 units;

— the overall housing budget is too low and skewed toward current housing programmes, such as Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) Scheme;

— the capital house building budget (€730 million in 2017) is still 51 per cent below 2008 levels;

— as a result, no new housing stock is being added as social housing provision coming from the private rental and owner occupier market;

— due to years of undersupply and pent-up demand Ireland needs 40,000–50,000 new homes per year to make a dent on demand and a noticeable impact on affordability;

— the Government target is 25,000 by 2021 and 15,000–18,000 new units expected in 2017;

— clearly there is a market failure in housing and new interventions are required to stimulate supply;

— the Government's reluctance to accept the actual challenges and their refusal to make any interventions in the housing market is making a crisis situation worse;

— there has been no commitment by this Government to making housing more affordable, with the confirmation that there is no intention to re-introduce affordable housing initiatives for low- and middle-income households;

— it is in the area of homelessness that the Government's inept housing policy really comes into plain view, and the abandonment of targets on hotel accommodation and continuing failure to make a dent in rising homeless figures cannot continuously be ignored;

calls on the Government to:

— commit to meeting Rebuilding Ireland's targets on moving homeless families out of hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation by the end of 2017;

— revise the emergency homeless strategy, in particular redesigning Homeless HAP and the HAP Scheme so households are not discouraged from taking up a tenancy and are not removed from main social housing waiting lists;

— increase and re-balance the housing budget toward capital expenditure;

— put in place new vehicles to enable off-balance sheet funding for social housing projects from private sources and credit unions;

— devise a strategy to enable and encourage far greater scale and size in social house building projects;

— recognise the significant market failures in housing, including in planning, finance, infrastructure and costs of construction, which the market requires State intervention to overcome;

— acknowledge that the Government's target of 25,000 new house completions by 2021 is not adequate, given years of pent-up demand and under-supply, and that at a minimum we need 45,000–50,000 units output annually over the next few years;

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- commit to reintroducing affordable housing schemes including affordable owner occupier and rental housing schemes for middle income households and explore possible financial incentives aimed at encouraging development of housing at more affordable price points;

- introduce financial incentives to build high-density developments where they are currently not commercially viable to build in Dublin City and other local authorities;

- commit to greater enforcement and implementation of Rent Pressure Zones and other rent regulations including more staffing and resources for the Residential Tenancies Board;

- tackle land hoarding by large investors, which is clearly holding back supply including by making changes to Capital Gains Tax and introducing a New Site Tax to encourage the use of empty sites; and

- devise new strategies to manage vacant properties including an active occupancy register.”

It should be uncontroversial by now to state that the situation in housing and homelessness constitutes an emergency, which unfortunately continues to get worse by the day. Fianna Fáil has submitted its own amendment to the motion, which we welcome. It provides a list of practical and workable solutions that would have a real effect on alleviating the crisis.

It is over one year since the Rebuilding Ireland report was launched but there has been little, if any, progress. Despite the huge demand and the unprecedented levels of unmet housing needs the State is still building and providing historically low levels of affordable and social housing. All the while the number of homeless families continues to rise dramatically, jumping fivefold in just two years. Homelessness is a great national shame. It is the greatest problem facing the State, and one of the largest problems our State has ever faced. We cannot give in to cynicism and despair. There are solutions. We have housed large numbers of our citizens in previous decades when we had much fewer resources. There is no reason why the State cannot do so again. We need to come together and make a concerted effort to fix this issue. No measures should be considered too big or too small in getting on top of the housing calamity.

While the rise in homelessness continued unabated over the past year, which is a consequence of the failure of Government policies to get to grips with the affordability problem in the housing sector more generally, the plight of families living in emergency accommodation has also worsened significantly. It is a shocking indictment of the Government that it does not consider rehousing these families, even in more suitable temporary accommodation, to be enough of a priority.

It is well known that living in hotels is having an impact on these families. Meeting these targets should not be considered a budgetary issue. I want to put on record that these targets have to be met and should be met. Whatever funding is required to meet these targets should be automatically made available. Hotels are not a place to raise a child for any length of time but many families have been living in these for a year and more in many cases.

The strategy of using HAP as the primary means of moving families out of emergency homelessness cannot be considered a success and absolutely must be revised. Homeless HAP,

the Government's flagship housing scheme to move homeless households in to privately provided rental properties, is failing drastically to provide secure accommodation for homeless households and move them out of emergency accommodation.

With regard to social homes being built, less than 800 new social homes will be constructed in 2017 when the action plan in Rebuilding Ireland targets 5,000. Only 24% of the 10,000 units that we are led to believe are in the construction pipeline are on site. It will be 2021 before many of these units come on stream compared to the already too low target of 26,000 that we are told will come to fruition.

The Government's core social housing strategy has been to rely almost entirely on the private rented market for social housing provision, through the HAP scheme. Last year, more than 75% of new social housing tenancies were placed in the private rental market. This strategy is reflected in the overall housing budget. While the total housing budget is just 24% below the 2008 level to which the Minister has just referred, the capital housing budget is a full 51% below the 2008 level. Nevertheless, we are told, as Deputy Ó Broin has already stated, that money is not the problem and that local authorities and approved housing bodies are adequately resourced should projects be available. That is not the case. This misguided strategy is exacerbating the housing supply problem with local authority tenants competing against households at the low end of the market. No new social housing supply is being added. While the greatest impact is on families who are eligible for social housing, housing supply across the board is affected.

Traditionally, the State and local authorities have acted as the largest single house builder in the country, adding significant levels of new supply annually. I am afraid that under Fine Gael Governments, this situation has been completely reversed. The absence of new supply from the State affects all in the search for affordable housing. This is due to the strategy of relying solely, or at least to the extent of 75%, on social renting through HAP rather than on building new social schemes. That has to change. The social housing budget must be increased to the 2008 levels, which it is currently 50% below.

While the Rebuilding Ireland report contains many positive proposals on housing supply more generally, many are not being implemented. This must change to a significant extent and a difference must be made in tackling the crisis. Recent trends, including continued rent inflation, reduced rental supply and an acceleration of house price inflation in 2017, are evidence that the plan is failing the key litmus test of expanding new housing supply and improving affordability. It is not acceptable that the Government has ignored the targets for housing delivery and output and continues to miss them while problems grow deeper and more entrenched every week. We reject absolutely the view that no intervention is required to stimulate the supply of residential construction. Given the level of pent-up demand, the targeted output of 25,000 new units by 2021 is wholly inadequate. The State can only build approximately 18,000 new units this year whereas we need in the region of 50,000 to make a dent in affordability. Just 4,000 of these units will be apartments notwithstanding the fact that there is huge demand for such accommodation in high-pressure areas such as Dublin and other cities.

There are significant market failures in housing including in respect of planning, the distribution and cost of finance, infrastructure deficits and, of course, the cost of construction. The market requires State intervention in order that these failures can be overcome. To ensure that supply translates into more affordable rents and house prices, we must incentivise directly the building of affordable owner-occupier housing and affordable rental housing. New financial

incentives to build high-density developments must also be considered. Dublin City Council and others argue there is a need to consider urgently incentives to get builders to begin an intensive house building programme on lands that are already zoned residential. While hotel, office and student accommodation is being built, very little ordinary residential construction is taking place because it is not commercially viable due to the costs associated with construction. While a reduction in the rate of VAT for houses built and sold at affordable price points is roundly condemned by many, it is just one proposal to help stimulate the greater supply of more affordable housing. To ensure that new supply translates to affordable rent and house price levels, we must incentivise the building of affordable owner-occupier and affordable rental housing. This is the only way to make housing more affordable for lower and middle-income households, in particular in the high pressure zones in Dublin, Cork and, indeed, beyond.

One of the first actions Fine Gael and the Labour Party took on coming to power was to abolish in 2012 affordable housing for low and middle-income workers under Part V. This must be addressed as a matter of urgency. Affordable housing has always been a key pillar of any housing programme put forward by government. I implore the Government to bring forward a new affordable housing scheme to meet the demand out there, to provide the necessary supply and create a market which provides more affordability. This would reduce competition between those who do not need to be in competing positions. The State must take responsibility and increase expenditure on social housing to the levels mentioned earlier. If it does, we might see some results and success. I would hope, thereafter, to be in a position to commend the House on playing its part to ensure that progress was made.

Deputy Pat Casey: I wish to share time with Deputies Cassells and Curran.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed. There are ten minutes in total available to the speakers.

Deputy Pat Casey: All of the evidence and data point to the fact that the housing and homelessness crisis is getting worse. It is depressing, a scandal and wrong. What frustrates me most as a first-time Deputy is that it does not need to be this way. I have stated repeatedly that this Dáil will be judged on its response to the housing crisis. I have not changed that view. In fact, I consider that both Parliament and the Executive will be judged on our response to housing.

As we stand here again tonight, I take no pleasure in stating that we are failing the Irish people in the politics of housing policy. It is now obvious that our Fine Gael-led Government does not get the seriousness of the crisis. The reason for that was demonstrated perfectly in the Chamber yesterday when the Taoiseach outlined his and his party's views on property rights. The Fine Gael view is that this is a temporary crisis that requires minimum intervention before we return to a market-based speculative treatment of housing. This view is wrong in its analysis and it is the reason Fine Gael's attempts to resolve the housing crisis have been too timid and have failed in every pillar of a well-spun but poorly delivered Rebuilding Ireland. Fianna Fáil's position is radically different. We have learned the lessons of the past and the key lesson on housing is that the State, whose representatives are elected by and accountable to the people, must have permanent control, oversight and responsibility for ensuring that there are homes for all.

The basic starting point is the European norm. In Europe, the norm is public and affordable housing supply, as well as affordable ownership and rental homes. This constitutes a key responsibility of most European states, which are proactive in housing provision. Fianna Fáil's

response will involve moving the Irish State, through central and local government, permanently into this space. We should do this responsibly but also radically through sustainable funding, both on and off-balance sheet, for the building of social and affordable homes for rent and purchase by working families. We want to ensure that local authorities and the Department are empowered and resourced, not only to deliver these homes but, crucially, to manage them into the future.

The investment required in housing supply is massive and far beyond what the private sector can manage. Investment in our housing stock must be considered in the context of managing that investment and ensuring that the quality of new housing is such that we spend public moneys not only with a view to addressing an urgent social need but also to the economic and long-term strategic return for the taxpayer. It is vital in the context of the State's role in housing that publicly owned land is retained for public investment in housing. It is wrong to provide public lands to private developers for the construction of private housing. It makes no investment sense whatsoever. The State has enough land to build significant numbers of mixed-tenure housing units. We have a unique asset at our disposal and we can build homes for all sectors in crisis, namely, the social and affordable and affordable rent sectors.

Deputy John Curran: I will be brief as the shared time is running out. I thank Deputy Ó Broin for putting down this motion and Deputy Cowen for sharing time. This is an important and timely motion. When one looks at the motion and the amendments put down, there is more in common between us than differences. The real challenge facing us is not to have another strategy, but to implement one in a timely way.

The cross-party housing and homelessness committee reported in June 2016. There was substantial consensus on a whole range of issues. The first recommendation on which there was consensus was that social housing provision should increase annually by 10,000 units for five years. The committee made the point that this would be through new builds, acquisition, refurbishment and so forth. The view of the committee at the time of the discussion, however, was that this would be in the early years and, over the duration of the five years, construction and new builds would increase significantly. This is why I have some concerns about policy now.

Today, the Minister put out a figure of 5,000 for social housing for next year. Yesterday, the Taoiseach also said there would 5,000 new social houses next year. He elaborated 3,800 would be new build and 1,200 would be either through Part V or other acquisitions. That figure needs to be increased radically year on year. My problem is that the Minister's construction programme shows the various stages but there are no deadlines for completions. We can see where each project is initiated and is going through the different stages. We want, however, to see where they conclude. If we have deadlines when a project is initiated, it focuses everybody's attention. I am concerned that there are even delays in the Department with processing. It would be a useful first step if there were transparency in this regard.

I also have concerns that it is hard to get definitive answers on some of the other short-term housing schemes. For example, the rapid build programme is way behind. The Minister gives out figures in replies to parliamentary questions on when some of the schemes will be completed but they are a long way behind. We need to redouble efforts on some of these short-term schemes. It is the same with the repair and leasing scheme. It started last year when it was announced in the budget. In March, it was increased but it is radically missing the targets set. We need to know why. I am not being critical of the Minister. The difference is we can formulate policy over here and have policy positions. Unfortunately, the Minister is in a different

position and must deliver results. I am not saying that in a lighthearted way. I am not here to knock the Minister but we need to understand in real time what is happening. If a scheme is not functioning in the manner in which it was expected, we need to change to drive the results we need. These short-term schemes have not delivered what was expected.

I am concerned about the vacant site tax. I do not believe it will achieve what it is supposed to. Many of the properties which might have been considered to have a tax on them will escape through one loophole or another. Where property prices are increasing significantly, I am not convinced a 3% vacant site tax will be the incentive to bring those lands back into use. I have concerns about developments around the greater Dublin area where we see prices increasing significantly and that the 3% vacant site tax will not achieve what we need it to do. That needs to be reviewed urgently.

Deputy Shane Cassells: The Taoiseach set out his targets yesterday when he spoke in the House on the subject of 20,000 builds in 2018, 5,000 of those for local authorities, acquisitions or Part V builds. He reiterated that it is the Government's intention to use the local authorities more in the provision of housing. Will the Minister explain today what that means in real terms and where, specifically, those 5,000 homes will be delivered, in particular, the 3,800 direct builds? Will they be completed units in 2018? Will they be in areas with high pressures on council housing waiting lists? I look at County Meath with a population of some 200,000, a commuter belt county which has huge housing, social and employment pressures, with 5,000 people on social housing waiting lists, 1,500 of those in my home town, Navan. If the Taoiseach's words of using local authorities are true, how will this work in Meath, whose problems in adjoining Dublin are pronounced?

Meath County Council owns one undeveloped field in the entire county. This 22-acre site has been earmarked for development under the activation fund. The price bill for these 42 units, which is on the Minister's desk awaiting approval, is €13 million. This works out at €310,000 per unit, a good €100,000 above what it should be because the reimbursement to the council for the site acquisition is factored into this. This has taken over a decade to get to this point and it comes with a price tag of €13 million.

If this is a prime example of what is happening in commuter counties like Meath for a mere 42 homes, how realistic is the 3,800 nationwide target? How is the Department helping counties like Meath, Kildare and Wicklow to acquire land for social housing? The basic commodity to provide homes, a point forgotten by many in this Chamber, is land in locations where people want to live and which is beside schools, amenities and shops. When I look at this case in Navan, I know this is it because there is no more land owned by local authorities. They need help in identifying strategic sites.

Last Thursday, Sinn Féin made remarks about not reducing tax. This is quite a statement considering every Sinn Féin councillor has sought to reduce property tax by 15% in the year and remove millions of euro from councils, money which could be spent on housing. Will Sinn Féin stop the double-talk and the spoof? If Sinn Féin has a policy principle of not giving people back a few measly euro, as Deputy McDonald said, but keeping it for public services, that is fine and admirable. However, Sinn Féin Members cannot think they are fooling anyone with that on the one hand while also sticking up posters claiming Sinn Féin councillors are the only ones who will cut the tax and expect the books to balance. They simply will not. Sinn Féin Members need to be honest with themselves and the public. They all need to write to Santy for Christmas to get calculators and learn how to use them because the books do not balance.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Fianna Fáil councillors on Dublin City Council voted for a reduction in property tax.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Sinn Féin is taking millions out of the Exchequer which is leading to the housing problems we have.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Fianna Fáil councillors vote for reductions in property tax.

Deputy Shane Cassells: This is typical of Sinn Féin shouting people down when it is exposed for taking millions out of the Exchequer.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: What about Fianna Fáil councillors on Dublin City Council?

Deputy Shane Cassells: It is par for the course for Sinn Féin Members to shout people down. Sinn Féin is taking millions of euro out of the Exchequer and does not want to realise it is contributing to the housing crisis and making people homeless.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: That is a joke.

Deputy Shane Cassells: You boys are the joke.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ellis will have an opportunity to respond.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will take the temperature down and talk about the actual issue addressed by the motion. As has just been said, there is much commonality in the motion and amendments. We need to get to the nub of the issue, namely, that we have many policies, announcements and proposals but little action. The Minister needs to come clean on the money issue. We have heard time and time again that money is not an obstacle. On the one hand, we hear from our local councillors when they want to advance housing proposals that they are delayed by the Department. On the other, the Department claims there are delays with the councils. Either way, the time it takes to get from a proposal to a finished housing development is not going to deal with the issue. That is the nub of the problem. We need honesty on whether the money is there.

The Labour Party amendment is about using the resources in NAMA. Our amendment proposes to:

introduce immediate measures to transform the National Asset Management Agency into a National Housing Development and Finance Agency and repurpose its mandate into one of addressing the serious shortage in supply of housing for sale or for rent at affordable prices, so that the new agency can take a leading role on behalf of the State in the development of affordable housing, the delivery of new builds and the long-term financing of social housing through local authorities.

This was also contained in a Labour Private Members' Bill last year. It proposed to merge NAMA with the Housing Finance Agency and then give it power to assist housing authorities and approved housing bodies in respect of the provision of management matters related to housing accommodation, as well as in respect of other housing matters, and conferring on it the power to give assistance conferred by section 6 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1992 as if it were a housing authority. We wanted to use the resources, the expertise and the money of NAMA to assist local authorities and voluntary housing associations in providing housing and dealing with affordability.

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We had to remove it from the Bill because the Ceann Comhairle wrote to me and said that it would conflict with the current functions of NAMA under section 10(2) of the NAMA Act 2009, to obtain the best achievable financial return for the State, and would reduce or eliminate any potential surplus to the Exchequer when NAMA's work is completed. We were turned down because of the current functions, but we wanted to amend those current functions. The other reason for being turned down was that we would curtail the return of the financial surplus to the Exchequer. Surely it is an excellent use of the resources of NAMA to use the money to build houses for people who are homeless or who are on housing waiting lists, whom we have discussed here many times. I strongly argue that it is much more important to do that than simply to return, in that clinical way, the finances to the State. This is the biggest issue facing the State so it makes sense to use the money. Fianna Fáil has come on board with that idea since then. It is a sensible proposal, which is why we made it in our amendment.

6 o'clock

We would have added another area to the motion. I accept that Sinn Féin wished to be specific on particular issues and that there are many matters that could be included, but our proposal regarding the Kenny report relates to the issue of hoarding building land. We wish to see that implemented as well. There is certainly evidence now that much-needed building land is being sat on where there is a high demand and need for houses. We would have liked to have seen that included.

Will the Minister tell the House if he intends to introduce an affordable housing scheme? There was a report recently that he is planning to announce it in two weeks' time. Perhaps he would clarify that because all Members have been calling for an affordable housing scheme for some time.

I wish to raise another issue with the Minister. He spoke about the two hubs in Limerick this morning. What Limerick City and County Council is doing is very welcome. Obviously, I am familiar with it. There has been very good interaction on homelessness with the voluntary sector. Novas Initiatives has done brilliant work in Limerick, as have the Simon Community, Focus Ireland, the Peter McVerry Trust, Clúid Housing and others. The council has also been proactive. However, I return to my original point. It has been extraordinarily slow to get local authority developments completed. The developments that are almost completed in Limerick - one beside the Southill Area Centre in O'Malley Park, one in Edward Street and one on Hyde Road through a voluntary housing association - are developments I announced when I was Minister of State with responsibility for housing, which was back in 2012 and 2013. They are only being completed now. I cannot see evidence of anything started or anywhere near completion since then. The nub of the problem is the length of time it takes to go from a concept to construction. We discussed previously with the former Minister, Deputy Coveney, the plans relating to the more than 700 sites in public ownership. Again, my fear is that the current plans in that regard will take far too much time.

I will refer again to empty houses. It is a matter I raise every time I speak. We might dispute the number and say it is not the almost 200,000 claimed by the census, but if even a fraction of the number can be brought back into use it would be positive. The voids scheme has been successful under various Ministers. However, we must have private houses coming back into use, even if that requires compulsory purchase orders. We must see the Minister's strategy. It has been delayed for a long time. We also require a vacant homes tax.

We have spoken about many of these issues repeatedly, but they are important. The final

one I wish to reference is included in the motion, namely, the insecurity of tenure and high rents for people who are renting. I do not believe the rent pressure zone system has worked. It obviously has not worked for places such as Limerick which are excluded from it. I do not know as much about areas that are in the system but I am told that, for one reason or another, in many cases landlords are able to wriggle out of their obligation not to increase rent above 4% per annum. We have to go back to the drawing board on that as well, particularly during these intervening years when people will continue to be stuck in rented accommodation. They possibly could buy if there was support for them to do so in terms of affordability but they are on housing waiting lists and are paying high rents. Indeed, they might not be on the waiting lists because they are above the threshold. There must be proper control of the rents people are paying. There is also the issue of security of tenure. There must be far more protection of tenants from eviction by landlords for reasons that are sometimes not credible, such as that the house is going to be sold but it ends up not being sold.

It is important to continue having these debates. However, we must get to the nub of the problems in terms of why matters are not moving more quickly.

Deputy Mick Barry: This motion from Sinn Féin is on social and affordable housing. We support the motion although we believe it does not go far enough in some respects. However, we will speak and vote in support of the motion. I suspect that the motion will be defeated by the combined votes of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael or that it will be gutted by the amendments that have been tabled. The main reason for that is the conservative, Civil War parties joining forces yet again to ensure that a solution which is not first and foremost based on the private sector is not advanced.

When the motion is gutted that should not be the end of the matter. There are other practical remedies. For example, in a number of councils in this country the radical left, left independent and Sinn Féin councillors constitute a majority. Those councils will meet in November to set budgets for next year. I propose that if those budgets do not include sufficient funding and practical plans for massive numbers of social and affordable houses to be built within those councils' jurisdictions next year, the radical left, left independent and Sinn Féin councillors should join forces and refuse to pass those budgets. They should bat the ball back into the court of the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, and ask him what he will do about it and whether he is prepared to give the funding that is necessary to provide houses for people.

If that means creating a political crisis, that is what should be done. For our part, we will support such a position and encourage our allies on the radical left and among the left independents to support it. Is Sinn Féin willing to support such a position? This is an important motion, but it should not be just a question of throwing parliamentary shapes. When one is in a position to put forward a practical remedy that is a radical alternative to what is being served up by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael the opportunity should be grasped. We are prepared to grasp it. Is Sinn Féin prepared to follow suit?

South Dublin County Council is such a council and Cork City Council is close to being one. Dublin City Council certainly is such a council. It has a housing waiting list of more than 20,000. There is zoned land in the ownership of the council on which between 11,000 and 14,000 houses could be built. Officialdom is putting forward a proposal to build approximately 1,000 houses next year. It should be refused on those terms. Put the ball into the Minister's court and create the crisis. The ball is in Sinn Féin's court in many respects. This is a practical proposal and we would be interested in discussing it and getting Sinn Féin's feedback on it.

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Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I wish to formally move our amendment.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You do not do that until voting time tomorrow, if we reach that. Only one amendment can be moved.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: One of the important parts of the motion, which is included in our amendment as well, is to call this a national emergency and to declare a national emergency. I put that in all seriousness to the Minister. The type of dramatic, radical action that is necessary is simply not forthcoming. We talk about tweaking Rebuilding Ireland. While some of the measures the Minister has announced may make a difference, they will not address the fundamental crisis we face. The key to resolving this issue is to embark on an emergency programme of direct council housing construction on a much more significant scale than that proposed by the Minister. The delivery of 3,000 council houses and 5,000 so-called social housing units next year will not cut it because it will be a drop in the ocean, especially in light of the number of new people who will be added to the housing list in the interim and over the coming five-year period.

I asked the Minister's officials for figures on the number of new applicants for housing in recent days. I have still not received them and I would like to get them. The figure of 91,000 people on the housing list was, I believe, provided just after the list had been the subject of a major cull. I also believe that the number of families on the housing list is significantly higher than the official figure suggests. The increased number of applications that will be received must be factored into the Government's calculations.

Against this background, Rebuilding Ireland proposes that 21,000 new homes will be constructed directly by councils or approved housing bodies, with the remainder consisting of refurbishments and so forth. Under Rebuilding Ireland, the vast majority of new homes will be provided under the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, the housing assistance payment, HAP, and leasing arrangements. The final target, based on the Government's reliance on the private sector, exceeds 90,000. As I have stated to the Minister and his predecessors for years, this target will not be realised and even if it were, it would not deliver secure social housing.

One of the many cases I am dealing with involves a couple with eight children - they have another child on the way - who are housed in a hotel in Shankill. Before the Minister decides to move the family to a hub in town, he must not do so because they do not want to move into town. The children go to school in Shankill and the family should not be moved out of the hotel unless a council house is available. They have been told by the council to find their third RAS or HAP tenancy, which is a joke given that there are eight children. They are at breaking point, yet they are being told they have no chance of securing a council house any time soon. The housing assistance payment will not cut it for this family.

Even if the Government achieves its target, the HAP scheme will cost between €800 million and €1 billion per annum in payments to private landlords. Further, it will provide housing that is not secure or permanent and will not deliver the type of social housing that would resolve the problem.

Against this background, the Minister continues to speak of public private partnerships. Under PPPs, up to two thirds of public land and housing stock, all of which could be public, will be flogged off. The Minister refuses to take emergency measures to acquire housing units that are lying vacant. The Central Statistics Office has provided a figure of 180,000 vacant hous-

ing units. Even if the figure is only 10% of that, it would still mean 18,000 units were vacant. Where is the emergency legislation to get these units into the system and provide housing for people on the housing list? It is not forthcoming.

Deputy Joan Collins: While I support the motion, it is extremely frustrating to take part in an endless discussion on the housing and homelessness crisis. Given the Government's stance on the issue, it is clear the debate will go nowhere. As I stated last week, the Government is implementing the same policy and sending out a message that it will deliver different results and address the crisis.

What is needed is agreement on what the solutions to the crisis are, both in the short and long term, followed by action to implement them. By this, I mean an agreement among those of us who are not in hock to developers and vulture funds and do not have an ideological stance that precludes intervention in the market or private sector. There is broad agreement that an emergency must be declared. The Government has never declared an emergency, although it has used terms such as "crisis" to describe the problem. I want it to declare a housing emergency tonight and address the issue.

There is broad agreement that immediate action must be taken to curb evictions, while a massive programme of public and social housing construction is essential in the long term. On the issue of evictions, I welcome the agreement reached between the Irish Mortgage Holders Association and Allied Irish Banks, EBS and Haven Mortgages, under which a new not-for-profit company, iCare, will be established to operate a mortgage-to-rent scheme. I hope the new entity will overcome the problems the mortgage-to-rent sector has experienced thus far. In particular, I hope it will be in a better position to negotiate house prices and write-downs. This scheme will not provide a solution for all of the more than 50,000 people who are in arrears but it will offer a practical solution for many families.

The Keeping People in their Homes Bill 2017, which passed Second Stage, should be processed through the House as emergency legislation. Proposed by Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran, the Bill would oblige judges in repossession cases to take into account the impact of losing the family home on children, older people and persons with disabilities, the probability or otherwise of finding alternative housing and other factors. This would be a step forward that would assist many families fighting to keep a roof over their heads.

Emergency legislation is also required to stop vacant repossession being used in the private rental sector. Legislation should also be introduced to stop evictions on the basis of rent increases. Stopping evictions is the key to stopping the rise in homelessness. In the medium to longer term, we need agreement on what is the best way to fund, implement and manage a programme of public and social housing. I favour the proposal made by the Nevin Economic Research Institute, NERI, to establish a national housing company which would build and rent public housing on the European cost recovery rental model. The new company would cater for a wide range of housing needs, from single people to those who are working and young people. Such a company, with the assistance of local authorities and State companies, could use existing zoned land, borrow off the books and quickly commence a programme to build 10,000 public housing units per annum.

The word "NAMA" should not be used in the same sentence as the phrase "public and social housing". The National Asset Management Agency was established to bail out banks and developers. Its role in Project Eagle and selling off the best zoned land to vulture funds demon-

strated a mindset completely unsuited to the task of providing public and social housing. The agency should be disbanded and its assets transferred to a national housing company.

Some may argue that the provision of public and social housing should be left to local authorities. While this approach is correct in theory, in practice how many local authorities have become involved in building, managing and maintaining public and social housing in recent years? Too many officials at management level in local authorities are opposed to public housing, just as they are opposed to providing refuse services. I have no doubt they would gladly divest local government of its role in water services. The only solution is for the Minister to instruct councils to produce plans to provide housing. The key issue is whether money will be provided to do this.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I call Deputy Wallace, I remind Members - I am not looking at anyone in particular - that there is no provision to hold parliamentary party meetings in the Chamber.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I welcome the Sinn Féin motion. I mean nothing personal towards the Minister but I will be highly critical of the Government's handling of the housing crisis for the past six years.

I was a little thrown when I heard Deputy Jan O'Sullivan tell the House that we should bring back affordable housing given that the Labour Party got rid of it. I was even more upset when she started to tell us about the expertise in the National Asset Management Agency.

Yesterday, I put three questions to the Taoiseach. I asked him to seriously consider introducing real measures to deal with landbanking because the vacant site levy is a joke. I assure the Minister that no developer in his right mind will be bothered by the levy. Not one will be caught by this minuscule levy that will not have any effect.

I also asked the Taoiseach about his plans to relaunch NAMA as the solution to our housing crisis. It is incredible that we would even consider the notion. These people are under investigation in three countries. They know nothing about housing. Not one person on NAMA's board has expertise or a background in property, including residential property. They clearly know bugger all about the markets, given that they are selling stuff for peanuts, but now we might ask them to build on some of the lands the agency controls.

Yesterday, I pointed out the example of Project Abbey, under which NAMA took 72 acres of land, with planning permission for more than 900 units, off the hands of Harcourt Developments. It boasted about that, claiming that it would keep the land for housing. That would have been grand, but what did NAMA do? It gave the land back to Harcourt Developments to build the houses. Developers are not interested in making €5,000 or €10,000 on a unit. They are interested in making €50,000 plus. They are the only people with whom NAMA will work because it does not have the expertise itself. The developers have the expertise, but they cost us too much and are producing units that are too expensive.

Yesterday, I asked the Taoiseach whether he would give NAMA's lands to the local authorities. We all know that they have problems delivering housing. The Government might say that they are not fit for purpose, but why do we not make them fit for purpose? The previous Minister, Deputy Coveney, told us last November that local authorities could produce three-bedroom houses in Dublin at a cost of €205,000 and for €154,000 outside Dublin. Why would we want to get developers to build houses and pay them €350,000 or €400,000 per unit? The average

price of a house in Dublin is €461,000. Where is the rationale? I do not understand what the Government is thinking. I do not understand why the State does not engage directly in building social and affordable units via local authorities. It is not rocket science. Yes, it requires a great deal of organising and a restrengthening of local authorities after their powers being watered down for over 30 years. Rebuilding them would be a good idea. We did away with local authorities, leaving us with just weak local administration. We can have local authorities again and get them to provide social and affordable housing. The alternative will not work. I assure the Minister of State that the Government will need-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We must conclude after two hours, so the Deputy might think of his colleagues.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Some 30% of the population will not be able to buy the private units that the Government's favoured developers will build.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Rural Independent Group has a total of eight minutes. I call Deputy Michael Healy-Rae.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin. It is because of it that we are debating this important subject. One of the major issues preoccupying every politician who is worth his or her salt in any way is the housing situation. In County Kerry, which I represent, there are problems with housing every day. Young couples are looking for housing, and not just local authority housing. People are simply trying to find homes to rent. Be it through the HAP scheme, RAS or any other scheme, all that they want to do is have a home that they can afford without being robbed in rent, a home that is a safe and happy place for them where they know that they will have security of tenure over a number of years.

The Government should address several issues immediately. We have discussed local authorities. Kerry County Council's housing department is excellent, as are the people who work in its homeless unit. However, they can only work with what the Government gives them, be that money or sanctions for housing start-ups. Something that would drive anyone mad would be seeing so many houses and buildings boarded up and unable to be reopened for use. They would make for fine places, but investors need encouragement, not discouragement. When people try to provide accommodation, they sometimes meet every obstacle and piece of red tape in the book. Most of that comes from the Government, planning divisions and various departments. All that people want to do is work together to ensure that our young, middle-aged and retired people have homes that they can call their own without being robbed and left broken into pieces.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Next is Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. We are overrunning, so we must keep the contributions tight.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister of State provide funding to local authorities and remove the shackles that have been imposed on them? The four stages of approval demanded by the Department take too long and funding is not filtering down to local authorities. It has been suggested that local authorities, including ours, are not able to build houses because they have lost their way. The previous Taoiseach said that - as did Deputy O'Dowd in recent days - but I will contradict him. Local authorities can and will build houses if the Government gives them the money.

I will give an example. At least 25 rural cottages are demanded in Kerry. We will only build

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seven this year. If the local authority had the money, it would build all 25. It has the land and could put the contracts out to tender, but it will not do so because it does not have the money. The situation is as clear as that. Private builders will not build either. I will give an example. On a house that costs €210,000, more than €80,000 in levies and VAT is collected by the State. The Government should be able to do something about that, for example, make those payments in instalments down the line.

The HAP system is not as good as the rent allowance or RAS. Many-----

Deputy Damien English: It is better.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It is not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have to press on.

Deputy Damien English: The expansion worked.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The very minute the tenant is put out the door, the local authority has no further obligations to him or her.

Deputy Michael Harty: I will make a proposal to the Minister of State that I made to the Minister regarding a solution - not the solution - to the housing situation in Dublin and other high-pressure areas. There is a surplus of housing in rural Ireland. There are many vacant properties in provincial towns and villages. We should be able to marry the pressure for housing in Dublin with the availability of housing in rural Ireland. I propose the establishment of a scheme under which people would be offered the opportunity to relocate voluntarily, have a different lifestyle and have an opportunity to get a house and bring up a family in a different environment. This voluntary scheme would give people the opportunity to move from high-pressure areas to low-pressure ones. It would not be an economic charge upon the State because the rent for housing in rural areas is substantially less than the rent for housing in urban areas. This scheme would also benefit rural communities that have an excess of housing and a problem with depopulation. New families coming to rural towns and villages would help to maintain the fabric of rural society, services, shops and schools. It would be a win-win situation for a small minority of families who could be taken out of emergency accommodation - bed and breakfast establishments and hotels - after having spent time on endless housing lists or on the HAP scheme even though they cannot find housing that takes HAP. I would like the Minister of State to consider this scheme. The Minister will be doing so.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I compliment the proposers of the motion.

I must ask the Minister of State some questions. Houses were recently offered by NAMA to many councils. In a reply to me, however, Tipperary County Council stated that the NAMA units referred to were not appropriate for use by local authorities because a high number of them were not up to standard or did not meet construction regulations while some units had legal title and management issues. The council had granted planning permission for them in the first instance, so I do not know why that would be the case.

Following recent coverage of the rejection of significant numbers of properties offered to Tipperary County Council, I contacted both the council and NAMA. The council, in its reply to me, outlined a range of reasons it was obliged to reject the properties NAMA offered it through the Government-established Housing Agency, which acts as a mediator between NAMA and

the local authorities. When I put these to NAMA however, it insisted that it was made quite clear to all agencies that any property handed over by NAMA to the Housing Agency would be fully remediated to the highest living standards and would be in full compliance with construction and building standards and in compliance with the conditions of planning regulations. Additionally, NAMA has insisted that it was made clear that prior to a hand-over, any issues relating to legal title or financial matters would have been fully regularised. There is someone coddling someone here. As a result, no local authority or approved housing body would be liable for costs relating to remediation works or legal fees yet they are telling us that they will, my own council included. The Housing Agency in particular needs to clarify urgently why the properties were rejected when it appears that steps could and would have been taken to make them suitable for tenants at no cost to the local authority or the Housing Agency. We need to find out what is going on. Even if there was no immediate need, which I find very hard to believe, could they not have been accepted, remediated and then offered at a later point when social housing need arose?

The Minister of State needs to get in charge of this. He is the fifth or sixth Minister or Minister of State with responsibility for housing. We are pushing paper around and reports up and down and we have this crisis and that crisis and different agendas. We need to sort it out. We need to get NAMA and the county managers in before the committee and the Minister of State to see what is going on because there is someone coddling someone and there are unfortunate people left without houses.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I am sharing with Deputies Catherine Martin and Healy. First, I want to challenge some of the spin I am hearing around housing. With all the missed targets and with reports that delivered so much less than was promised, the approach should have been to say it as it is rather than to adopt a new line of spin. I heard the Taoiseach repeatedly say that 80 individuals and families will be housed by the State every day. I heard the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government repeating that. The Taoiseach said:

They are new tenancies. And on every working day this year, 80 individuals and families will be housed by the State. About 20,000 people will be housed by the State.

Most of those will be people who searched for housing themselves. They will have been put through the wringer in searching for housing, which often takes months with huge stress and they may at the end of it get a one-year tenancy. In 2016, 72% of all such tenancies were housing assistance payment, HAP, tenancies. They were not new houses entering the system. If that profile continues in 2017, of the 20,000 tenancies, 15,000 will be HAP tenancies. Of the 80 a day the Government talks about, if we use the same ratio, it will be just 22 delivered from voids, from housing associations, from local authority builds and from Part V provision. The lack of housing supply, whether it is local authority housing or housing that is affordable to rent or buy, affects us all. Apart from the human impact of homelessness or of living in overcrowded accommodation, which people are doing for years now, or adults with no prospect of living as adults should, independently of their parents, it also has an economic impact. It drives up costs and makes it difficult to employ people in some sectors such as nurses. In the context of Brexit, it limits our ability to absorb new industries. There is a real problem with spin. We are being told the numbers will be quadrupled over 2015. There were only 1,030 local authority builds in 2015. Let us cut out the spin and let us start calling it as it is. The response of Government is nothing short of pathetic in terms of the numbers and lack of ambition. While there is not a silver bullet to resolve many of the problems straight away, the one thing we can be absolutely sure about is if we do not build, this problem will continue to get worse.

Deputy Catherine Martin: Tá an Comhaontas Glas fíorshásta tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. The Government lacks vision and strategic planning when it comes to the scale of the housing and homelessness crisis, which severely affects the most vulnerable in our society. I appreciate that the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, is relatively new to his brief. However, his party and the Government certainly are not. In the past four years we have had four Ministers with responsibility for housing. This is indicative of the Government's track record and shows the level of genuine intent, level of priority and respect for the role of this Ministry, which is at the centre of the biggest crisis of our time. It is an indicator of how this critical Ministry has been treated in recent times. It has become the revolving-door Ministry, with no continuity, no stability and no appropriate demonstration of the level of priority and real action the crisis clearly and urgently needs.

Government statistics for July show there were 1,429 families without homes. The figures have gone up by 25% in one year. The number of children without a home now stands at almost 3,000. That is 3,000 children without a place to call home. It is time for this Government to view housing as a human right and one which must be enshrined in the Constitution. Earlier this year, the Green Party introduced a Derelict and Vacant Sites Bill in the Seanad that would have addressed the specific problem of land hoarding in a number of ways, but remarkably in a time of an unprecedented crisis in homelessness, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael chose to vote against this Bill in the Seanad.

The State needs to create an affordable housing provision agency and implement a cost-rental model for affordable and social housing, which would be delivered by a newly-formed national housing trust linked to local authorities that would be outside the general government sector and provide a combination of affordable and social housing, either directly or through community land trusts or housing associations. The institution should ideally incorporate the capabilities developed in the Housing Agency and NAMA and could be an amalgam of the two. It would also incorporate existing expertise in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the local authorities and in the housing associations and co-operatives.

The housing issue is complex and there is a huge number of variables and perspectives which the Government needs to take into account to tackle it. It is absolutely unacceptable that the lack of real action we have seen from this Government continues. The Green Party will support this motion to show that the Dáil not only recognises the magnitude of the problem but the extremely urgent and present need to take immediate and effective action.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I will support the motion. The former Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the current Minister have accepted we have a housing crisis on our hands. When will the Minister accept there is a housing emergency that needs emergency measures to deal with it? We simply have to look at the figures to show there is an emergency. There are 90,000 families on local authority housing lists. There are 8,600 people homeless, 3,000 of whom are children. There are 25,000 people on housing assistance payments and there are unaffordable rents and rising house prices. I will repeat what I said last week because it has to be repeated again and again. We need the formal declaration of a housing emergency by the Dáil. We need to stop repossession and evictions from the banks we own - Allied Irish Banks and Permanent TSB. We can do that by a direction from the Minister. Sitting tenants must be legally entitled to remain as sitting tenants in purchase situations. We must immediately start to build an emergency house building programme by local authorities - 10,000 in 2017-2018 and rising after that. We also need compulsory purchase powers and a site levy.

In the half minute I have left, I will refer to two groups of people who are often overlooked in this emergency situation. First are the families in HAP accommodation. The HAP scheme is a disaster for tenants and a bonanza for landlords. Tenants do not have 2 cent to rub together at the end of the week because they are paying a local authority rent and a top-up to landlords. Even in County Tipperary, they often pay well in excess of €100 a week in rent between both. A communion, confirmation, wedding, death or illness drives them into serious debt and into the hands of moneylenders. That has to stop and proper accommodation has to be given.

The other group that is often forgotten are those who are marginally over the local authority limit for housing but who do not qualify for a mortgage. They end up in County Tipperary paying €900 a month for a three-bedroom house, which is more than €200 a week. This is simply not good enough. The Government needs to take this by the scruff of the neck, declare an emergency and give homes to people who need them urgently.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are 25 minutes left and three ten-minute slots. The proposer of the motion is the last to speak. I respectfully suggest the three slots be eight minutes each.

I call Deputy Stanley, who is sharing time with Deputies Ó Laoghaire, Ellis and Quinlivan.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I suppose we have accepted this evening that we have a full-blown crisis, which needs an emergency response. I can see the extent of the crisis in the constituency where I live. In County Laois, the number of households on the housing waiting list has increased by 200 in recent months alone - a 15% increase. The response is that the first new council estate to be built in Portlaoise for 13 years is under construction. Those 33 houses are welcome. A further eight in Mountmellick, eight in Mountrath and five in Rathdowney have not started construction yet. That is not nearly enough and does not measure up to the scale of the crisis. The delay between approval by the Department and construction is far too long. A 22-house estate in Ballymorris in Portarlinton will take four years from approval to construction, which is far too long and that time needs to be shortened.

We also need large-scale development of social housing. I am not saying this to have a go at the Minister of State. Given the size of the problem, it needs a huge response. This is like the 1930s and 1950s again. To address the scale of the problem under both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, they built 10,000 and 12,000 per year at that time. There is no reason we cannot do this again.

Only 206 private and council houses were built in County Laois last year. Rents are skyrocketing; the average rent in County Laois rose by 13.7% in the past year, which is the third highest in the country. In some cases more than half of people's wages is going on rent. It needs to be linked to inflation. People are paying top-ups on top of housing assistance payment, HAP, and rent supplement. A Simon Community report showed that no housing unit under the limits set for HAP and rent supplement was available to rent in County Laois over a particular three-day period. The Government's failure is making people homeless. I meet them; they walk in my door every day. People become homeless because they cannot afford the top-ups. Three to four people are presenting to the council every week.

We need to stop land hoarding once and for all. In 2012, the then Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, introduced capital gains tax exemption for investors who bought property by the

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end of 2014 and held on to it for seven years. People are sitting on building land because of that and the Minister must stop that. We need to build more social housing, stop land hoarding and restart the affordable housing scheme. The time for action is now and it needs to be big action.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I am no different from any other Deputy in the stories I hear in my constituency office and clinics. In the past ten days I have met a family of a man, his wife and their two children. The woman is pregnant and expecting twins in a few months. They are in emergency accommodation and are concerned over where they might find emergency accommodation capable of housing the six of them. In the past six days I met two different parents who have to share a bed with a teenage child because of overcrowding. There are countless more stories as bad as or worse than that. That is the human cost of the crisis we are dealing with.

People realise there is pressure but they do not understand why nothing is happening. They have heard about the housing crisis for three years or so - in reality it has probably been going on for seven or eight years. This institution and the media noticed the crisis in the past three years. People are wondering why nothing is happening. It is the cause of enormous frustration. The reality is that we have not been building enough social housing for 15 years. Even in the past three years there has been nothing near an adequate reaction in the delivery of social housing.

I wish to touch on three issues that need to be acknowledged. Nothing is being done for those people whose income is above the social housing limit. They have very few options and we are still awaiting the affordable housing scheme.

The issue of HAP has been well rehearsed. Forcing people to go on the transfer list takes away from people the sense that there will be a permanent solution at some stage. Worse, it is needless. It could be resolved immediately by allowing them to be on the standard housing list. That should be done.

People becoming homeless can do nothing to prepare until the day they are made homeless. People are told to show up at the homeless service on the day they are made homeless. Why can they not have the opportunity to prepare in the days in advance?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I wish to raise the plight of dozens of families I am dealing with on housing alone on a weekly basis in my constituency. In the majority of cases, landlords are seeking repossession because they are supposedly selling their properties or they or a family member are moving back in. Assuming proper notice is served and the RTB is satisfied, tenants are left with no alternative but to seek another rental property, which is almost impossible, or to go homeless.

The other new homeless are those in mortgage distress who have exhausted every avenue to remain in their homes with little or no support from the State. In such cases it is galling that they later find out that their homes have been sold at a knockdown price to some vulture fund, bank or agency. I recently encountered a case involving a woman with three children, one of them with a serious disability. She had been served notice to quit as the landlord was selling the house and needed vacant possession. This woman is at her wits' end and on the point of breakdown because she cannot find another property and faces the real prospect of going homeless.

The scandal of NAMA selling off properties and landbanks is a crime against the people. It will go down in history as contributing to the humanitarian disaster that has led to the housing

and homelessness crisis we are now experiencing. The Minister needs to stop that. It is obvious that since the Celtic tiger period the building of social housing has come to a standstill. The lesson from this is that we need to ramp up the building of social and affordable housing.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Last year after the election the cross-party Dáil Committee on Housing and Homelessness was set up to review the implications of housing and homelessness and make recommendations in that regard. Unfortunately, most of those recommendations were ignored.

Despite Government spin in recent months, people are not getting houses. Last week I spoke on a Dáil motion which, if enacted, would have given people the right to have their own home. Unfortunately, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael opposed that motion. In that speech I said that 50 families, including 80 children, were in emergency in Limerick city, the second largest outside of the Dublin area. Unfortunately, the crisis continues in Limerick and the council confirmed on Monday that 61 families are now in emergency accommodation, including 111 children. This is causing huge stress to those families and I have serious concern at the long-term impact on those children.

Before he left the Chamber, the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, said he was in Limerick today and he spoke about two hubs that are opening. Deputy Jan O'Sullivan welcomed that. I have serious concern about the hubs. Families who are watching the debate tonight are concerned that while the hubs might be better than hotel accommodation, they are not stable accommodation. We do not know how long they will be there. As I am out of time, I ask the Minister of State to answer this specific question. Will there be a time limit on how long people will spend in hubs? Will they be there for a long time or will he commit that it will a priority to get them out of the hubs and into secure council accommodation?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I will try to squeeze as much into eight minutes as I possibly can. I am pleased that Deputy Ó Broin is present today because we did not get a chance to finish our discussion during the Private Members' debate last week.

Based on the discussion I believe we are all on the same page. We want solutions and we want to increase the supply of housing. There is no logic in us opposing the motion, although we might not agree with all the wording and some parts of it are slightly wrong, but we also want to achieve the general gist of what Sinn Féin wants to achieve. Most of the debate has been saying much the same thing.

It is important that we deal with some of the contributions we have had here tonight. I do not want to row with anybody but we need to deal with facts. I do not do spin. This Government does not do spin. Others might do that. I will tease out the facts. I am not necessarily referring to Sinn Féin; I refer to Deputy Catherine Murphy who stood there and talked about spin although it was purely facts she was talking about. It is factual to say there are 80 people finding housing solutions every working day. That is a fact. We did not say there were new houses so it is a fact, it is not spin. Could Members please stop referring to spin? If it is spin, then I will put my hands up. I have no problem when it comes to election time if Members want to engage in a bit of spin. That is fair enough, but they should not try to mix facts when they are facts. Deputy Catherine Murphy has left the Chamber before we even get to respond. She did not refer to any other spin after making a big speech at the start. There is a lot of showboating going on here, which is a pity because we want to get solutions. It is true that a number of peo-

ple are finding housing solutions but it is not enough. As I said last week, we are not asking for a pat on the back. Nobody is doing so. The process will not end until everybody has a home. We will have to keep doing what we are doing and keep making all the changes we can as well.

The contributions to this debate were wide-ranging in nature and all referred to the need to increase the supply of housing. It is wrong to say nothing is happening. Again, that is not true and it is not a fact. The Rebuilding Ireland strategy - the Action Plan for Housing - is a four to five-year plan building on action after action to correct all the elements of the problem. A key to it is the supply of housing. I refer Members to the trends which show the increase in the supply of housing is positive. They do not give us houses today or tomorrow but housing is coming on stream in the months ahead, next year and the year after. That is part of the solution. I do not say it solves today's emergency but the strategy is also to generate increased supply for the years ahead.

Let us consider from where we have come. Based on ESRI figures, we were in a situation two years ago where approximately 12,000 houses were built in this country. More than half of them are one-off developments. That scale of building was not going to contribute to a housing solution. Last year, a little over 15,000 houses were built. I do not say they were all built from scratch. They were not. Some of them were housing completions and others had been vacant houses but they were back in use. That is the truth. That is the figure. This year, the figure is approximately 18,500 and might rise as high as 19,000 before the end of the year. Again, that is another positive fact in the right direction. Next year - in respect of which we had a target of approximately 20,000 - there will be in the region of 24,000 in the system. That is based on ESRI figures. It is a positive development, it shows we are moving in the right direction and people should see that for what it is. I accept that we all want more houses to be built, and we will do that as well, but that is the current and projected level.

Likewise, if one looks at social housing delivery, one could not defend what was happening a couple of years ago. I do not blame local authorities. One of the Deputy Healy-Raes - the twins - talked about the councils having lost their way. It was not that they lost their way, they lost the capacity. The people were not there and the money was not there. No one is denying that. This Government does not try to hide behind that. We put the figures out there every month. They may, perhaps, be a bit late the odd month, but they are out there and they will be debated if we do not hide them. We are not hiding them. The capacity was not in the system but the capacity is back in the system now. We are putting the people back in or putting the money back in.

One of the Deputy Healy-Raes raised the issue of rural cottages. I am not aware of any housing project that has been refused funding. If he wants to bring a case to our attention we will look at it but I have not come across that happening.

There are other delays. I agree with what has been said about timelines. They are too long for the delivery through all the various stages. There is the option of one stage but most do not want to use that. They go by choice to take the four-stage approach. We have condensed that a lot and we will condense it even further. I am now working with the delivery team and we will increase the staff on that and on local authorities as well to try to get the timelines down even more. We will produce a chart to show Members the timelines and see how they compare to the private sector as well. We will push that agenda and drive the urgency to get the delivery of social housing up to speed.

I agree with Deputy Ó Broin. He said last week he wants to 10,000 houses to be built. So do we. That is what our plan amounts to. He wants to get there in one day but we are saying it will take a couple of years. I am not sure who is being honest here but one cannot do it in a day, a week or a year. Step by step, we are bringing social housing back up to where it should be. I agree with Deputy Ó Broin. Our ideology is the same. The State should be producing 10,000 social houses a year. That is what we will get to. We were at 75, which I said one could not defend, a couple of years ago. Approximately 700 new builds for social housing were completed last year. There will be just under 2,400 new builds next year. There will be approximately 3,800 next year and there will be up to 6,000 the year after. I hope we will get to the 10,000 per year through pursuing this plan because that is the target we must reach, and even beyond it. If future Governments want to add to the target, then good luck to them. Well done if that is what they want to do.

Those figures only relate to social housing. They do not include affordable housing, which we also want to construct on the 2,000 ha the State owns. There is potential there for up to 50,000 houses divided into affordable, social and even private. It is fine if someone wants to build all affordable houses. There is nothing stopping anyone doing that. We will bring forward the plans. There is a commitment to 10,000 social houses. A number of Deputies keep saying there is an ideological problem but there is not. The reality is that it takes a bit of time to put the capacity back into the system. I want to be clear about that as well.

In terms of the number of houses we intend to build, out of the 47,000 units to which we are committed, as a minimum - it should rise to 50,000 and beyond during that timeframe - more than 30,500 will be direct builds. In other words, they will be new build social housing units. Approximately 6,530 houses will be achieved through acquisition, perhaps a few more or a few less depending on the value in the market. That goes back to the vacant properties in various parts of the country where there is good value in purchasing them. Nobody else is competing for them so it makes sense. In some cases they are dilapidated or in need of repair. That is where we will step in. We will buy them where it makes sense to do so. There are also approximately 10,000 houses that are on long-term leases. Sometimes long-term leasing gives good value to the State but I do not say it is always the case. We are committed to lease approximately 10,000 houses in our plan but we will do more new builds and turnkey houses if we can as well. We recognise that we just cannot get the supply we need straight away in year one. I wish we could because it would save us having these debates week in and week out as well as the suffering homeless people are experiencing. We will build on that as well.

I welcome the mortgage-to-rent scheme announced by David Hall and his team at iCare. He was one of the first people I met when I came into this job and we worked on the plan. It makes total sense. We revamped the mortgage-to-rent scheme under Rebuilding Ireland. It was one of the first actions that we implemented. We made those changes in February and March and we will announce increased funding for the sector through various mechanisms in the months ahead as well. Today's announcement is a positive because it keeps people in their homes. It is not a solution for everybody but it is another option. There is a range of solutions in the toolbox.

I wish to correct what another Deputy said a few minutes ago. It is wrong to say one cannot engage and look for help until the day one is homeless. That is absolutely wrong. We repeatedly ask people to come forward at a much earlier stage to engage with the system so that we can try and keep them in their home. Thousands of people have been kept in their homes that did engage. I have no problem saying that was not the case two or three years ago but for the

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past year we have been saying very clearly that people should come forward if they are about to become homeless and we will try to keep them in their homes. I do not promise that we will keep all people in their homes but thousands have been kept in their homes. Likewise, 3,000 came out of emergency housing last year into sustainable homes. The difficulty is that just as many became homeless so I do not say the situation is great. This year, the number finding housing solutions has reached approximately 1,800, of which 900 were assisted in the first quarter. While I accept it is not enough there is progress. I urge Members to please not come in here week after week telling me we are doing nothing.

The final point I will make is to Deputy Harty.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State is depriving Sinn Féin of speaking time.

Deputy Damien English: I agree with what he said on rural housing initiatives. We are working with him on that. The Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, has met him, as have I. That is something we want to progress. We have already changed the rules so people can move their housing assistance payment between local authorities. Approximately 400 people have used the scheme this year already. I hope we can focus on that now so as to give people the choice to move to a rural area if they want to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State should be reasonable.

Deputy Damien English: I am sorry, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are eight minutes left in this slot. The remaining speakers are Deputies Buckley, Brady and Ó Broin. They can decide among themselves how much time each one gets.

Deputy Pat Buckley: The Minister of State really let himself down in his desire to get upset and make this debate about him.

Deputy Damien English: I was not upset.

Deputy Pat Buckley: He was upset. Let us focus on the people that are really suffering not the pampered Ministers who have their feelings hurt because the Government has failed so badly. To be honest, to call it failure is probably kind, particularly in light of the malicious undermining of social housing his party engaged in along with the Labour Party when the previous Government was in office. The amendments introduced to Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000 in the previous Dáil represented a shameful attack on housing in the interests of private developers, but that is hardly surprising since there are so many landlords in the House.

The State has failed to deliver on a basic right. The private market is unwilling to house those who are not on tech bubble wages. Many landlords have shown themselves to be only interested in eking out the maximum from places not much better than slums. The only solution is widespread mass construction of social housing by the State through local authorities which are in public ownership, affordable and sustainable.

Fine Gael has told us each year that there will be thousands of houses built the following year, despite only a few hundred are being built. Every year the rubbish that was spewed out the previous year is repackaged and resold. No one is fooled. The Government's inaction speaks

far louder than the spin.

Deputy John Brady: I welcome the fact that Sinn Féin and Deputy Eoin Ó Broin have introduced this motion and that I have an opportunity to speak on it. In my constituency of Wicklow, which is in the commuter belt, there are many factors driving the housing crisis. We have a significant housing waiting list and a lack of supply. Even last week, unfortunately, we had another fatality on the streets, this time in Bray in my constituency when a local man died in a tent. There are many reasons why that happened, some of which I touched on already but another reason is the fact that there is no emergency homeless shelter or beds provided in County Wicklow. That is a serious problem that needs to be addressed.

7 o'clock

The Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, visited County Wicklow last week to turn the sod on a 20-unit development in Rathdrum. It is a very welcome start, although there is a long way to go. In other areas of the county such as Blessington, there are huge problems in terms of infrastructure. Irish Water has confirmed that there is a serious problem with sewage treatment in the area and that there will be no additional capacity in that infrastructure until 2019 at the earliest. There is simply no housing construction going on in Blessington and there certainly will be none until 2020 at the earliest. That a serious problem which needs to be addressed. I urge the Minister of State to examine it.

While the small steps and small changes in other areas are welcome, in parts of Wicklow and other parts of the State critical infrastructure is not in place and will not be for the foreseeable future. We will continue to have the serious housing and homelessness crises and all the other problems that stem from them.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I listened very carefully to the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, and to the Minister of State, Deputy English. I am genuinely surprised that the Minister said the Government's plan does not overly rely on the private sector. According to the social housing plan in Rebuilding Ireland, 130,000 families were to have their social housing needs met. Of those, 93,000 were to have them met through private sector housing leased for two, four or ten years. That constitutes 72% of the plan. Only 28% or 37,000 were to be housed in what we call real social housing - units owned by local authorities and approved housing bodies. That is clearly an over-reliance on the private sector.

It is exactly the same with affordable housing. There is no direct State involvement in the provision of affordable housing and there is no central Government support for approved housing bodies to provide it. The schemes, whether help-to-buy, the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, or the land initiatives, are private sector led. At the very heart of Rebuilding Ireland - and this is as much a fact as those the Minister of State talked about - there is an over-reliance on the private sector to meet the majority of social and affordable housing need. That need is not being met.

I do not disagree with the Minister of State that planning permissions, commencements and ESB connections are increasing and the fast-track planning process is in place. None of that is under dispute. However, none of it guarantees that this plan will meet to a sufficient extent the social and affordable housing need that exists. During the boom, we were building 90,000 houses in one year, yet social and affordable housing need was rising. Supply in and of itself without adequate attention to social and affordable supply does not work automatically.

We argue about figures but it is important to understand them. The report of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness contains very specific recommendations. The committee's first recommendation is that there be an increase in the stock of local authority units and those owned by approved housing bodies by 10,000 a year. Let us consider the Government's figures. In 2016, the increase in the stock under that definition was 2,541. In 2017, it was 3,684 and it will go up to just under 6,000 if the Government's targets for next year are met. That is way short of the minimum identified by the committee as being required. That is a big difference. If the Government meets the targets as set out in Rebuilding Ireland, it will still be 40% short of the minimum that the cross-party housing and homelessness committee recommended. In my view, that is not good enough.

It is not about doing it in a day. Fine Gael has been in government for seven years. It had the Kelly plan in 2014, which was meant to start this process off, and then the Coveney plan. Our frustration is not that the Government is not doing it overnight but that it is not happening even within the six years of the current plan.

If there is a single message we want the Government to take away from this motion, it is that the most important intervention it could make in terms of a change in direction of the plan is to return to large-scale public housing developments with social, affordable rental and affordable sale, delivered with public money on public land to produce vibrant, mixed-income communities. That is not what it is doing at present. The proof of the pudding is that to do what I have just described would require the Government to move towards a capital spend on social and affordable housing in the region of €2 billion annually. Rebuilding Ireland at its very best will give it below €900 million annually through to 2021. Money is an issue. I am not necessarily saying ideology is an issue. However, unless the Government is willing to make that level of investment and direct State intervention, we are going to have very significant difficulties.

Finally, I wish to express a huge frustration. A lot of our debate is rightly about social housing. However, there is no affordable housing coming on stream. We are hearing nothing about LIHAF. There is nothing about the land initiatives, the three sites in Dublin or the Grange in my own constituency. By affordable I mean houses priced at between €170,000 and €260,000. There is no sign that they are going to be delivered. Until the Government starts to show how that is going to happen, not only is it not going to meet social housing need but it will not meet affordable housing need either.

I welcome the fact that the Government is opposing the motion. I urge it to think seriously, particularly in the context of the budget, about the level of capital investment and the speed at which it can deliver those social and affordable units for which the plan currently does not cater.

Amendment put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 28 September 2017.

UK Withdrawal from the EU: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Michael Collins: I am sharing time with Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. I am happy to be able to speak on this issue of huge importance this evening. Ireland is left in a very uncertain place following Britain's decision to leave the EU last year. We are well aware of the great dif-

difficulties we will face along the Border with Northern Ireland and the economic implications to which it will give rise. I wish to voice one view that is rarely heard, however, namely, that of Irish fishermen in the context of their concerns about their future following Brexit. In my own constituency of Cork South West, the fishing community is quite large and its members fear that as soon as Britain formally leaves the EU, both Irish and European trawlers will be banned from British waters. This would result in reduced reach for our Irish fishermen and increased numbers of trawlers fishing in already overcrowded Irish waters.

Many say that areas in the South will not feel any effect from Brexit and that the Border counties are the only ones that will be hit. This is simply not true. Recent CSO figures have noted a 6.4% decline in British tourists coming to Ireland, many of whom would usually be visiting the west Cork area, a popular destination for tourists all year long. This is largely down to the drop in the value of sterling against the euro. British tourists are vital to the Irish tourism industry and represent over two in every five international visitors to the country. The chairman of the Cork branch of the Irish Hotels Federation, Aaron Mansworth, expressed his fears that the recent recovery in tourism is now under threat as a result of Brexit.

I have met many farming organisations, including the Irish Farmers Association, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association and the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers' Association. They are greatly concerned about the implications Brexit will have on the Irish agri-industry, especially through our agri-exports. The UK was the market for 50% of Irish beef exports. A loss of access to the UK markets would destabilise the overall dairy sector here, as a third of all our exports went to the UK and it was our main market for cheddar. I think it is vital that our Government strongly negotiate for fair deals with Britain in terms of farming and fishing to secure their economic future here.

I think it is fair to say that Brexit will do more harm than good to Ireland, whatever way it falls. It is hugely important that we look for as soft a Brexit as possible in terms of trade barriers, Northern Irish relations and to keep growing our unique Irish-British relations.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The next speaker is Deputy Catherine Murphy.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will take that slot, if I may.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy has taken it by decree.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is either that or I do my impression of Deputy Catherine Murphy.

I am happy to debate this critical issue. We are coming back to it again and again, and rightly so, because it is very important. I spend a lot of time giving out to the Government, which is a valid thing for an Opposition to do, but I wanted to compliment it on taking the correct approach this summer. It was right, in its negotiating stance, to say it was up to the British Government to come forward with proposals to deal with the Irish Border issue, and that it was not for us to try to get them out of the incredible dilemma they created in this regard. I still think that was the correct approach because Brexit is creating such difficulties that it behoves those who instigated it to come forward with a workable solution.

The contribution in this House from Mr. Guy Verhofstadt, European Parliament rapporteur on Brexit, was a welcome intervention. He took a reasonably strong line and stated that the European Parliament would look to implement the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts in

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whatever Brexit deal emerges. I recall him saying that, in order to minimise the damage for Northern Ireland, it would have to stay in some type of Single Market or customs union arrangement. He later said he did not want to determine what the mechanisms would be but that is what he said and if that is carried through in the European Parliament's final approach it would be very welcome as it gives us some security about it.

I was very concerned at the earlier statements of the chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, in this House who said a border is a border. He said free movement could be arranged but for trade in goods and services the European Union would take the position that there has to be a border. This led me to be concerned that we would be left with both Britain and Europe facilitating a border against the wishes of the Irish people on, I believe, both sides of the Border.

I watched Theresa May's speech in Florence with interest. It was welcome to hear her talk of the move towards a two-year transition and paying European contributions in that time, as well as her recognition of the European Court of Justice and regulatory systems. However, we are still scratching our heads about this process. The fundamental obstacle is that Britain still wants to have its cake and eat it. Mrs. May did not put forward any real, practical tangible answer to the question of how the UK can leave the European Union, the Single Market and customs union yet trade as it does today. The British do not have an answer to that question. They want both, and the ones to whom I have spoken seem to believe Europe will concede on trade because trade will trump politics. They do not seem to understand that, in this instance, politics will trump trade and this is understandable from a European perspective. How could we agree to them wandering off without being subject to any regulations or common agreements and agreeing to a trade deal because we want to sell beef or BMWs to them? I do not hear any politician, on either the Labour or Conservative side, putting forward a proposition which addresses this issue. I am sure, in the end, there will be some fudging of the wording where, in effect, membership of the customs union continues but dressed up in a different language. They will broadly accept the European regulatory approach but will coat it for their home audience in something different.

I am now joined by my colleague, Deputy Catherine Murphy, and I will happily cede to her in a few minutes' time.

It is important for us to maintain a close relationship at this very difficult time. I am with Sadiq Khan, the Lord Mayor of London, in saying they should vote again but I have looked at the most recent opinion polls and, when asked if they will be better off post-Brexit than staying in the European Union, the people of the UK are still split 50-50. Some 47% think they will be better off after Brexit so the chance of a second vote is slim. I could be missing something and perhaps they will get some benefit from the freedom to trade but I do not think so. In such circumstances, it is very important for us to maintain good and close relationships and there are three or four key areas where this can happen, regardless of what happens in the negotiations around trade, the customs union and the Single Market. The first is in energy, where we have imperative needs to maintain an integrated approach with Britain. They also have these needs, not just in regard to ourselves but to all the rest of north-west continental Europe, because they are now as dependent as we are on imported Norwegian, Russian, Nigerian and other gas supplies. Like us, they are beginning to realise the future is going to be renewable electricity. It will be offshore and it makes no sense at all for Britain to develop that on an isolated basis. It makes sense to develop further interconnection to Ireland, Belgium, Denmark, Norway and Germany to enable a low-cost, effective, secure, balanced, variable and renewable power supply, because this is where the power system is going.

I see the development of cables as connections and those connections will manage the north-western Europe variable, regional, balanced power market. On the other side of this balancing system is the demand management side, which will increasingly be managed by digital services. This will cover the way we run our electrical car fleets, the electric heating systems in the home and how our industry and data centres work. We will all turn our power on and off in a flexible balanced space and efficiency is the key to everything.

Managing it will be all about digital rules and the second physical connection, in addition to the electricity cables, will be fibre-optic cables connecting us to Britain and the rest of the Continent. It is only the European Union that can effectively stand up to global corporations such as Google, Facebook and others by setting the regulatory rules around the digital economy so that the public can have confidence in it. This is the second area, which is not part of the customs union but at which we must look in order to maintain a common approach. Britain happened to follow the European rules in this area because it is not big enough to do it on its own.

Last but not least is food. It is a real concern that one quarter of our product exports is in the form of beef and we are very over-reliant on sales of beef to the UK. One of the things that will protect us are high environmental standards, the European standards on which we will insist. If one was to ask the British people tomorrow whether they wanted chlorinated chicken from the United States, they would say “No”. If they were asked if they wanted beef up to the eyeballs in steroids, they would say “No”. These are, therefore, the areas in respect of which we can get agreement and a common regulatory approach that will help us continue to work together, regardless of whatever else falls apart.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I echo the previous speaker’s points about food standards. It is something that is very much in our interests - certainly the European standards - and it does give rise to concern.

While the actual level of progress that has been made between the European Council and the United Kingdom so far in the negotiations remains unclear, the fact remains that it is imperative that the Union delivers for this State an arrangement in which we can continue - with as little interruption as possible - our relationship with our neighbours. Let there be no doubt that there is still a complicated path ahead over the next month before the European leaders meet in Brussels. It is imperative that our economic course and relationship with Britain post-Brexit has as few obstacles as possible for a myriad of reasons, not least those of an economic nature.

As the Welsh First Minister, Carwyn Jones, states recently, Brexit trading issues cannot be addressed until the question of the Irish Border is resolved. He also stated that what we must all agree on is that the issue of the Irish Border needs to be given top priority in negotiations between the UK and the EU. The Government must ensure that it presses this point at every available opportunity.

While we hear a great deal about this matter, it is the practical outworkings relating to it - in terms of how it will be delivered - about which we need to hear. It would probably have to be a political decision as opposed to any kind of technical decision. We cannot sit idly by as decisions are made that will impact directly on our future. We cannot become collateral damage as an afterthought in these negotiations. There have been fine words spoken about how we will be protected - not least in this Chamber last week - but it is how that happens in practice, and not just the words, that will be important. We know we will have a new relationship in the context of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. That relationship must continue to be

underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

Brexit Secretary David Davis said that the UK and EU will crunch through the technical detail when they discuss Northern Ireland in Brussels today. Mr. Davis also said there is a shared desire to maintain the common travel area and protect the Good Friday Agreement. Of course, it is much more detailed than that. These issues are sacrosanct to all citizens across this island and it is vital they are protected. The EU is the basis for an equality that was provided by virtue of Ireland and the UK's common membership of the Union. It is difficult to see how the Good Friday Agreement can remain as it stands in the absence of that arrangement. However, remain it must and we, the UK and the EU, must do absolutely everything within our power to ensure that happens.

One thing we will all miss should Brexit happen - and I hope there is the possibility of a second referendum overturning it - is the engagement that occurs when people encounter each other at meetings, whether it is at the European Council, in the European Parliament or at other fora. That day-to-day, week-to-week type of engagement is something we have not factored in and that will certainly be missed.

We know we are in a unique position. When the German election was being held, I listened to some commentary on whether Brexit featured. The conclusion was that it did not feature at all. However, it is the backdrop to a huge amount of what happens in this country, perhaps because a mishandled negotiation will propel our economy into a fragile state. The fact that 41% of Irish farm produce goes to Britain is a very stark example of just how interlinked are our fates. Equally as important as recognising the problems is recognising that if we support Britain to exit in the least damaging way possible, it would make matters a lot easier for us.

Brexit poses significant competitiveness implications for Britain and with that comes an onus on the political structure here in Ireland to maximise the support mechanisms to Irish enterprise. I acknowledge that the Enterprise Ireland "Be Prepared" grant of €5,000 being offered to businesses to help them manage Brexit is a step in the right direction but, to be honest, it is a drop in the ocean and does require far greater support. I know there are other supports but that sector, and the agrifood sector, are the sectors about which we have got to be most concerned.

A well-managed Brexit represents the best possible outcome for Britain. That should be our focus because a good outcome for Britain gives us the possibility of a reasonably good outcome for us, albeit in a situation where there are no ideal outcomes from a scenario that is not of our making and to which there are many downsides, some of which we have not yet even considered.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I very much welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I have spoken on this topic on numerous occasions in this House and at many events in my home county of Louth.

We must not forget that it was the United Kingdom that decided to leave the European Union. A referendum was called and the UK people decided, whether rightly or wrongly, to leave the EU. We do not want them to leave the EU, the Single Market or the customs union but, ultimately, that is a decision for them. We have a strong relationship with both the EU and the UK and we intend on keeping both.

Over 200,000 jobs in Ireland rely on strong trade with the UK. Coming from a Border county like Louth, I know more than most the possible effects of a hard border. While there will

be a political border between Ireland and the UK, there should not be an economic border on the island of Ireland. The Border needs to be invisible. We want to maintain a common travel area and the current situation regarding reciprocal citizens' rights and the ability of Irish and British citizens to live, work, access health, housing, welfare and pensions in each other's countries.

Ireland's unique situation will require tailor-made solutions. It will be difficult to determine how Border issues will be resolved until we know what will be the new arrangements between the UK and the EU. However, it is important to make as much progress as possible in the first phase where the Irish-specific issues have been prioritised.

We would like to continue to reassure Irish citizens living in the UK and UK citizens living in Ireland that their rights have not changed. They are the same as they were before Article 50 was triggered.

While some progress has been made in negotiations, October is fast approaching. Further progress is needed. Our overall priorities are clear: no economic border; retention of the common travel area; protect the peace process; reciprocal rights; an effective transition arrangement leading to the closest possible trade relationship with the UK; and the need to work for the future of the Union.

Now is the time to be optimistic about Europe. Significant progress must be made on citizens' rights and the financial settlement so that the discussions on the EU's future relationship with the UK can begin. This is about building confidence. We need a foundation before we can build the house. This will be a long process and the outcome is far from determined. A lack of agreement resulting in a disorderly withdrawal would be damaging for all concerned, particularly Ireland.

I welcome the recent paper on guiding principles for Ireland and Northern Ireland from the European Commission's task force. That paper builds on the EU guidelines issued earlier this year in which Ireland's concerns and priorities were strongly acknowledged. The paper makes clear that it is the UK's responsibility to propose workable solutions when it comes to the Border.

The UK remaining in or as close as possible to the customs union and the Single Market would be the best solution. We want to maintain the trading relationships that have existed on our island for many decades. We are also passionate about the future of the European Union and playing our part in determining that.

We are not under any illusions about the complexity of Brexit. We have already taken important steps to prepare our economy, including in budget 2017, the Action Plan for Jobs 2017 and our trade and investment strategy. More initiatives are being prepared. Our Government enterprise agencies continue to work with companies helping them deal with Brexit, making them more competitive, diversifying market exposure and upskilling teams. The EU is a home that we helped to build. The Irish Government is confident we can work together as 27 countries to deal with all these challenges. When Ireland joined the EU, our reliance on the UK for our exports was over 50%; it is now 17%. Our exports to the rest of the EU are currently 35% of our total exports. The EU is a marketplace of 500 million people; the UK is a marketplace of 65 million. This is not an either-or choice between the UK or our membership of the EU. We want the future relationship between the EU and the UK to be as close and as positive as possible. We will work hard with them to achieve that.

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Brexit also presents massive opportunities for us here in Ireland. We will become the only English-speaking country in the EU. We now have an opportunity to attract even more foreign direct investment. To put this in perspective, the UK is currently the largest recipient of foreign direct investment in the EU. The latest recorded figures show the UK received over £35 billion in foreign direct investment; Ireland during the same period received just over €5 billion. This represents a good opportunity to attract those investors to Ireland. The choice is simple for those companies: do they want to invest in the only English-speaking country in the EU or do they want to invest in the UK, which wants to leave the EU? In my humble opinion, the choice is very clear.

I know from my constituency of Louth, the effects of foreign direct investment. We have seen many multinational companies locate to the town of Dundalk especially. The people and businesses of the town know at first hand the many benefits that large multinational companies locating to the town can bring. I wish to put on record the good work done by IDA Ireland in attracting foreign direct investment to the region. Dundalk has had more foreign direct investment over the past ten years than anywhere outside of Cork and Dublin, and that investment builds on this major urban centre's great tradition of industry.

A perfect example is Mullaharlin Park, a world-class science and technology space which is the result of a wonderful collaboration between Louth County Council and the IDA. Only last week we had the announcement of 125 new jobs as Graebel makes Dundalk its hub for its European, Middle Eastern and African operations. Dundalk owes much of its success to Dundalk Institute of Technology because of the quality of education it provides. Industries seeking to come to the region know they will be able to avail of a highly-trained and skilled workforce. Dundalk also has a reach of over 3 million people within a 90-minute drive. This is why the M1 corridor currently hosts many foreign direct investors. I congratulate Dundalk Chamber of Commerce on its 125-year anniversary and for having sold more than 800,000 "buy local" vouchers in Dundalk.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is useful that we are having statements on Brexit after Guy Verhofstadt's visit here and British Prime Minister May's statement on Friday, 22 September, but we must look at the format of how we do this. We have had a debate on Brexit over two days. If we get past the first phase of the negotiations - I will deal with that in a minute - I believe the Government should work with the Opposition and other parties to publish an agreed statement, an agreed motion, from the Dáil reaffirming our position as an Oireachtas. I do not want this to be divisive. Statements are good and this business is appropriate but, as we get further down the line, if we get to a stage at which the financial settlement, Ireland and citizens' rights are agreed, the Dáil and the Seanad - the Oireachtas - should consider making a formal statement, particularly in light of the fact that we have a minority Government in place. Yes, we have Ministers in place, but it is important we do that.

I know this is not a questions-and-answers session but I am interested in the Government's view on the status of the negotiations on the financial settlement, citizens' rights and reciprocal rights between UK and EU citizens, and Ireland, specifically Northern Ireland. If we are really honest, progress has been extremely slow. One of the areas where there has been some positive comment is Ireland and the North of Ireland. However, I would caution again, as I have done every time I have spoken on this, that we should not allow Ireland and the North - the island of Ireland - to be used as a British Trojan horse when the British are dealing with the European Union. What is good for Ireland, in the position that Britain has actually put forward, is also good for Britain.

Furthermore, if history teaches us anything, it is that until recent times, the past two to three decades, British foreign policy has not been advantageous to Ireland but has been about Britain, Britain first and Britain alone. I would therefore be cautious about the welcome we are giving to Britain's affirming what it has already affirmed in international law. I refer to the Good Friday Agreement, to which the UK has signed up as a co-guarantor, and which is an international treaty lodged with the United Nations. The common travel area is also based on agreements between two sovereign states and those agreements go back to the foundation of the Free State. The Good Friday Agreement and the common travel area are therefore fundamental issues. I do not see Britain saying it will guarantee them as a gift from Britain. They are must-haves. They are absolute. The UK cannot just unpick them, tear them up and throw them away.

I do not wish to be overly negative. There were positive aspects of the British Prime Minister's speech. Ireland was central to it, there was the reality of a time-limited extension to the two-year period, a transitional arrangement, and there was a commitment to honour future financial commitments and obligations. The latter is important because it flies in the face of the "go whistle" strategy of Boris Johnson and others and is therefore a big change, which we recognise.

However, while we should not be used as a Trojan horse for Britain, neither can we allow ourselves to be used as a battering ram for the EU. It concerned me when Michel Barnier was here and took a particularly hard line, but some of Guy Verhofstadt's comments also concerned me. The engagement with Mr. Verhofstadt was useful to have, particularly the questions-and-answers element of it, but let us remember that Guy Verhofstadt is effectively the representative of the European Parliament. He is not a negotiator and is not on the negotiating team. When Mr. Verhofstadt says Ireland should not and will not suffer because of Brexit, I am absolutely with him 100%. They are good words but they must be backed up by deeds. Furthermore, when Guy Verhofstadt, Michel Barnier and others say it should be up to the British to come up with solutions, I could be okay with that if I thought the British could come up with solutions to this and if Boris Johnson, Mr. Davis, Prime Minister May and a Cabinet in Britain, that is fractured, were not involved.

Are we going to leave it up to them to come up with solutions? The political judgment of the Tory Government over successive Prime Ministers, including the former Prime Minister, Mr. Cameron, but particularly the current one, and successive foreign secretaries would tell me there is no way on earth we should leave it to the British to come up with solutions, particularly a solution to an Irish border. Again, history tells us that the British do not really have a fantastic track record of drawing up borders and dealing with international crises. I do not wish to be facetious. I genuinely think we and the EU have a role in bringing about solutions. It is not acceptable to say we will leave it to the British to come up with the solutions.

We must remember that when the British talk about free trade and access to a free market, the irony and contradiction of that is that they actually have that already. They have access to the largest free trading bloc in the world with the highest of standards and their own British companies export over €300 billion worth of goods and services into the EU. Do they actually think they will be able to replace that level of trade with trade with Argentina, Brazil, Australia, India and their former colonies in the far-reaching four corners of the world of the former British Empire? They will not be able to do so. Nor will we be able simply to replace any trade with Britain that is lost, and that will be very difficult. To talk about diversification is fine, but in certain sectors it is not that easy. The Minister knows this, as do my other colleagues in the Chamber, in particular in respect of the agrifood sector. In my area of Dublin Fingal, where

there is a large horticultural sector, the value of exports to England has already dropped. We have lost nearly €800 million worth in the value of exports in that sector alone and we are highly exposed in certain other sectors. What we have proposed, as a party, and I made this point to Guy Verhofstadt, is the creation of an EU reform fund, which is a pan-European fund that certain affected sectors, such as the horticultural sector in Holland, Poland or Ireland, can access so that those sectors which are most at risk and which are losing jobs can get real support from the EU. I welcome the fact Mr. Verhofstadt said that is under active consideration. However, what I need the Minister of State and the Government to do is to formally request it at Council of Ministers level and Commission level. That may have been done since July and the Minister of State may be able to inform me of this separately. When I was in Brussels with my own party team in May and June, we questioned whether a formal proposal had been put forward. A parliamentary question was also asked of the Minister of the time, Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor, as to whether we had requested of Europe a relaxation of state aid rules in order to look at an EU reform fund to assist businesses. It had not happened as of then.

If it has not happened, it needs to happen urgently while the door looks like it is slightly ajar. However, it should not be just seen as a dig-out or a helping hand for Ireland alone. In Denmark, Belgium and Holland there are people who are highly exposed to the British market, particularly in the horticultural sector. We need to level the playing pitch. We need have no doubt that, right now in Britain, EU state aid rules are not to the forefront of the British Government's mind. The Nissan deal in Sunderland was one area where, if we were to get the details, we would be able to see whether it breached state aid rules. We have to level the playing pitch.

Let us remember as well, as part of this, that while the UK is our biggest single market and a very important market that needs to continue operating, at the same time, Ireland is the UK's fifth biggest market. The trade between the two countries is over €60 billion a year, which is significant and important. Furthermore, what is also significant is the lack of agreement in an area where I would have foreseen agreement happening much sooner, namely, on citizens' rights and the reciprocal rights of citizens. We will have the largest number of EU citizens living outside of the EU should Brexit happen, which it will, and they are our own fellow citizens in the North of Ireland. However, what Britain proposed was a new level and a new grade of citizenship for which someone would actually have to apply and which was not reciprocated. The EU has been very clear that British citizens' rights in the EU will be protected and will be transferred across. However, if we cannot even agree that fundamental, I think we have to prepare for the worst; we have to work for the best but prepare for the worst.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm deis a bheith agam labhairt ar an ábhar seo anocht. Rural communities in particular face very serious challenges as a result of Brexit. It is my belief that this Government has done precious little to ease that uncertainty and fear among many communities. Recent research by IBEC shows that the rural counties with the highest exposure to a potential hard Brexit are Cavan, Monaghan, Kerry and Longford. It estimates that 243,000, or 13.2%, of the employed population of these counties work in Brexit-exposed sectors. A report by the Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation in March identified very serious threats to the agriculture sector and research by IBEC finds that average farm incomes overall could be slashed by more than 6%, which is a serious worry to many of us in the House. This is in addition to reports from Teagasc which show a 9% decrease in farm incomes in 2016.

I attended a briefing with representatives of the IFA earlier today and I can tell the House that Brexit is chief among the concerns for their livelihoods. There is fear that the progress that has been made by many farming families will be lost in this whole Brexit ordeal. Their interests

and the interests of all citizens and all sectors need to be protected.

Bord Bia has stated that Brexit has already cost the Irish food and drink industry almost €570 million in 2016 and a report by InterTradeIreland and the ESRI estimated that, in a worst-case scenario, exports of the food and beverage manufacturing sector to Britain could fall by 45%, or €2.1 billion. Workers in my own constituency have already been exposed to the negative impacts of Brexit, with the closure of the mushroom factory in Portarlinton and the loss of 33 jobs. The prospect of a reinforced border on the island of Ireland is devastating for small businesses and the farming community, particularly for those who straddle the Border.

We do not want any border on this island. Sinn Féin has consistently called for special designated status for the North within the European Union in order to protect the interests of citizens on this island, North and South, and to respect their rights and their vote in the referendum. This call has been supported by all parties in the Dáil and is echoed in the report by the Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. The Irish Government must intensify its efforts to advocate and build support for this position within the EU. Budget 2018 provides the Government with an important opportunity to strengthen supports to rural communities facing the challenges of Brexit.

Sinn Féin is arguing for the establishment of a €10 million Brexit support fund to assist small businesses and farmers in assessing and preparing themselves for Brexit. Such a fund will provide for the expansion of current enterprise programmes in order to enhance assistance to our SMEs, including those in the agrifood industry. The Action Plan for Rural Development commits to the commissioning of specific research on the impact of Brexit on rural Ireland. To date, this research has not been carried out, which again shows the neglect of rural Ireland. It is unacceptable and needs to be addressed. While I acknowledge extensive research has been carried out by relevant sectoral stakeholders, it is important that we obtain a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by rural communities in social, economic and cultural terms. I believe this type of research is essential and will form a blueprint to ensure that appropriate planning can take place in order to mitigate negative consequences for rural communities. I urge the Government to commission this research without further delay and put in place a comprehensive plan to support rural Ireland in the challenges that lie ahead.

This Government was elected to support all citizens, rural and urban. I call on it to do just that in the context of Brexit.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There is unanimity across the House and among the majority of people in the North of this island that Brexit will be bad for Ireland. Not only is it a threat socially and economically, but it also threatens the health of people, north and south of the Border. It threatens the health of Irish people because a hard border will damage access to health care and health facilities, as well as damaging the health co-operation that exists.

The past decade has seen major developments in health co-operation, with a number of joint departmental projects being developed across the island. These include: work on shared radiotherapy and paediatric cardiac services; health promotion focusing on alcohol, tobacco and obesity; cancer research; mental health; and suicide prevention. In particular, I would highlight the areas of suicide prevention and shared radiotherapy services. A huge amount of work has been put in by the individuals concerned and those projects are really starting to show dividends. People in Donegal can now access radiotherapy services in Altnagelvin and it is extremely important for those people that we maintain that service.

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There is already a shared understanding between the Governments, North and South, that health is an area of opportunity for shared provision. However, Brexit could derail this co-operation in a number of areas. In the 18 months to 30 June 2016, the HSE reimbursed over €650,000 for treatments and services in the North under the cross-border health care directive, which represented 277 people. I have spoken to people in my own constituency of Dublin Fingal who have availed of this and who have travelled across the Border to avail of services that we have not been able to offer them in this State. Illness, disease and health know no borders and these figures demonstrate that people are willing to travel for vital services and treatment when they are needed. The evidence of this is in the every area and constituency; people will travel if they can get the health care they need.

It is of major concern that this scheme could cease North and South as a consequence of Brexit. Further entwining of the health services and co-operation can be found through the all-island congenital heart disease clinical network board. Only a few years ago the board was tasked to build a world class congenital heart disease service for all of the children and young people on the island who suffer with congenital heart conditions. As a result, an announcement was made in 2016 that capacity would be expanded for catheterisation procedures in the newly opened, state of the art hybrid cardiac catheterisation laboratory at Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children in Crumlin. This service is very much anticipated and needed. This will create an all-island catheterisation waiting list, to the benefit of children across the island. This will be the first all-island waiting list of its kind but a hard border will threaten this. To be clear, in order for this service to be effective it needs a critical mass of a minimum of 6 million people, which is the population of the whole island.

Brexit also threatens clinical trials for medicines and treatments which are carried out on an all-island basis. Cancer Trials Ireland, CTI, is the leading cancer research trials organisation in Ireland. A major goal of CTI is to strengthen the capacity for cancer centres across Ireland, North and South. While the vast majority of these trials are carried out in Cancer Trials research units in the south, a number of trials have participation from research units in the north. The withdrawal of Britain from the EU will, no doubt, have a significant impact on this.

A hard border threatens services that are already stretched and struggling in the Border region. Currently there is a memorandum of understanding between the ambulance services North and South. Ambulance personnel and paramedics from the North and the South routinely attend to people and accidents on either side of the Border. We should be looking at strengthening this understanding as opposed to having to deal with a situation where ambulances cannot operate in this manner any longer.

To date there is a record number of shared health services operating on a North-South basis. Those operating these services and those using them know that sickness and disease do not respect arbitrary borders and they are keenly aware that between the North and the South we have some of the best hospitals, doctors, nurses and health care professionals in the world. Such work could all be undone if the Government and all Members do not fight to ensure that there is no hard border.

What is being done to protect these services? I welcome the all-island health dialogue. It was a good innovation but it is not enough. We need to know that these arrangements will be Brexit-proofed. We need to know that people who live in the Border region will be able to rely on the systems that have developed through North-South co-operation. We need to know that these issues are taking priority in Government buildings and at negotiations between the EU

and Britain.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: While we respect the vote of the electorate in Britain, and rightly so, one cannot help being struck by the total lack of awareness and lack of preparation before Brexit on so many of the implications of Brexit. One is also struck by the way in which Brexit was reduced to just two issues: the money that Britain would save and the migrant issue. We now know of the massive implications for Ireland, for Irish-British relations and also for Northern Ireland. These implications cover a wide range of issues from agriculture, the agri-food business, transport, tourism, energy, the environment, culture and so on.

Ireland and the EU recognise that Brexit will impact significantly on our relations with Britain but I wonder if the British Government is really grasping that. There has been a lot of lip service paid. We know the old cliché of talking the talk but not walking the walk. On Northern Ireland, Brexit is very definitely gambling with the Good Friday Agreement, in spite of the assurances given. It is vital that what has been achieved in the Good Friday Agreement, imperfect as it is, is not jeopardised or undermined.

There will be consequences, unintended or otherwise, and I make the point again of the possible implications for identity and culture. These may, in the long run, be more significant and potentially dangerous than specific economic consequences. It is in an atmosphere of uncertainty that direct confrontation can happen.

We are hearing a lot of assurances that there will not be a return to the hard border. Those words are very welcome but what exactly will happen in reality? It seems that the suggestion of a transition period of at least two years is being considered. The farm groups are looking for five years and others are suggesting ten years. Prime Minister May said that Ireland has unique issues to consider and that protecting the Good Friday Agreement and the common travel area are of importance to Britain. The Prime Minister spoke of Britain’s responsibilities to the island of Ireland, North and South. The words of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, this week match that. The words are there but the detail for realising those matters is still lacking. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has called for detailed implementation proposals and we are at that stage now. The real danger is that what is good for Ireland may not be compatible with what is good for the EU. There is a real danger that Ireland may be caught in the crossfire between Britain and the EU. Human nature being what it is, when one member leaves a club the other members will not be happy and they will certainly not give the member who leaves the same privileges and benefits of the members who are still in the club.

There is a need for support for Ireland as Brexit has the most impact on our economy. We must protect those jobs in businesses that are most affected. There is an example in Germany after reunification.

I shall now turn to the environment. Britain will not be bound by some of the key elements of the EU environment directives and there could be implications relating to the conservation of our shared natural heritage. I attended a retailers against smuggling event today and there was much concern, from attendees from North and South, that Brexit will create a bigger market for smuggling of cigarettes, loose tobacco and alcohol. Retailers conducted a survey that showed 51% of the Border retailers in the Republic of Ireland believe that ensuring there is no growth in price differentials between alcohol and tobacco sold in Northern Ireland and the South after Brexit is the primary way to prevent smuggling. They had staggering figures on the loss of revenue due to smuggling.

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Britain has contributed considerably to the EU monitoring centre for drugs and drug addiction. Their expertise has been particularly welcomed in the areas of research on the social and health response around drugs and drug addiction. One must wonder about this sort of membership and contribution continuing.

I acknowledge Britain's big contribution to overseas development aid - €13.3 billion - and the fact that Britain is one of five EU countries that has reached the 0.7% contribution. There could be that shortfall to consider. There is a danger that Britain could divert its overseas development aid to countries where Britain has a particular interest, rather than to the countries of most need. We are seeing an increase in its aid no longer being untied in the way ours is.

There are challenging times in this long goodbye as Britain leaves the EU but it is also a time of opportunity. There has been an over dependence by our markets on the British market; we know the figures for beef and dairy products. I acknowledge the work of the Departments, the embassies and our ambassadors in trying to develop new markets. At a committee on the issue we were told that if 1% of the firms relocated to Ireland it would mean 6,000 new jobs.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I attended the Committee for Budgetary Oversight earlier today and it was good to hear that the Minister for Finance is to introduce a Brexit package to support Irish businesses, exporters and hopefully the Irish farming sector. Witnesses at a recent Committee for Budgetary Oversight, including the Irish Tax Institute, IBEC and the chambers of commerce, all called for additional supports for companies that will be strongly impacted by Brexit whether in 2019 or 2021. I hope that any such tax expenditure will have detailed costings and that a time cap is put on whatever provisions the Minister will bring forward. Undoubtedly some supports are necessary for Irish industry and agriculture and the EU 27 should contribute heavily to their funding. I welcome that the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, inaugurated the stakeholders' forum. The reality of the vital necessity to protect the North of Ireland and its people, in respect of Brexit, came home to us recently when the UK Office for National Statistics, in conjunction with Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and Ireland's Central Statistics Office showed us quite clearly the incredible amount of interaction between the North and the South. There are 110 million Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland crossings back and forth annually and a huge number of rail passengers.

There are nearly 300,000 UK citizens living in the Republic of Ireland while there are well over 100,000 persons of EU birth living in Northern Ireland. It is therefore welcome that Prime Minister Theresa May announced in her recent speech in Florence that the UK did not plan to bring forward new border infrastructure such as the infrastructure we had during the disastrous years of the Troubles. I also welcome the emphasis by Mr. Michel Barnier on the protection of the common travel area as a core objective. It was good to see that the Florence speech at last signalled an acceptance that a transition period was essential prior to Britain leaving the EU.

While the visits to the House of Mr. Michel Barnier and Mr. Guy Verhofstadt seemed reassuring at the time, it is fair to say that profound concerns remain among our citizens North and South as to whether our interests will really be protected in March 2021. Last week, we thought there had been strong progress on the three issues of our own country, citizens' rights and the financial settlement, but we have now heard that there has not been. A lot of people have concerns about both sides in this negotiation. In the UK, Minister David Davis and his Brexiteer allies were clearly ready at the start of the negotiations to have a so-called "hard Brexit" and to drive their economy and country, and us with them, off the cliff. That would

have been disastrous for Irish and UK trade and for our economies. It is good to hear the British Labour Party say through Mr. Keir Starmer that there is a need for a transition period. The current and very popular leader, Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, has indicated that there may have to be a second referendum on the result. Of course, the UK Labour Party feels the ordinary working people of England, in particular, and Wales made a decision to leave which has to be respected.

On the other side, it sometimes seems with Europe that it is a case of one step forward, two steps back. I have always been unhappy that Ireland is not directly represented at the table and that the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, is not part of the actual negotiating team. We remember in the House the great former Finance Minister of Greece, Mr. Yanis Varoufakis. He detailed in his book “Adults in the Room” how impossible it was to negotiate with the EU. Mr. Wolfgang Schäuble, Mr. Jerome Dijsselbloem and the rest of them sidelined him and refused, almost, to accept him as the Finance Minister of his country. Eventually and in effect, they got him sacked.

The most astonishing thing of all on the European side is that at the very moment when one of its largest economies and member states is leaving, the President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has come forward with federal proposals including qualified majority voting on the CCCTB - the tax base - which could be disastrous for us. We then had President Macron addressing the kids in the Sorbonne to say there will be one president and parliament for the eurozone and one finance minister. Mr. Guy Verhofstadt, who came to the House, is dedicated to creating a federation in Europe. At the very moment that people are leaving and five or six other member states, including Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, have grave concerns about the European Union, we get this agenda. What happened to multi-speed Europe? We have so much in common in terms of culture, history, trade and other interests and Britain could have stayed somewhere in the outer part of that planetary system.

I welcome the fact that there will be a Brexit package. I welcome the moves which have been made to link up and work closely with Denmark, the Netherlands and others to encourage a situation in which, if there must be a divorce, it is a velvet one. There are 22 smaller member states, of which we are one, in the remaining 27. Sometimes when one reads Mr. Yanis Varoufakis, one is reminded of the Hotel California from the famous song which the Acting Chairman, Deputy Durkan, may remember from his rock and roll days. As he knows, one of the lines states “You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave”. A lot of people think the European Union is exactly like that and that, in some way, Britain will always be with us as a member state.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I wish to share time with Deputy Seán Haughey.

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

Deputy Brendan Smith: It need hardly be said that this is an extremely important debate. It was very important that senior people from the Commission and the European Parliament had the opportunity to engage with us here in the Oireachtas. Some months ago and at my invitation, the Vice-President of the Commission, Mr. Franz Timmermans, came to a joint meeting of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs. It was the first public recognition at a committee by a senior Commission official that the Good Friday Agreement had to be protected. He accepted the arguments of the Chairman and other members of the committees of the centrality of the Good Friday Agreement to the

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future development of our country. We recorded very strongly that day the fact that since May 1998, the Good Friday Agreement had transformed our island.

As a person with the privilege of representing two of the Southern Ulster counties, I cross the Border several times a day as I travel in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. If I travel from Cavan town to Clones, I go in and out of Fermanagh four times. As such, I know what impediments and obstacles might exist for the likes of me and others living in that community in going about our daily business. The Good Friday Agreement has been transformative. I welcome the fact that Mr. Michel Barnier and, last week, Mr. Guy Verhofstadt have recognised in the House the importance of ensuring that the agreement is protected in full. We should refuse to countenance any diminution in the workings of the agreement or of its potential. One of the best meetings I participated in at parliamentary level on Brexit, its challenges and opportunities, was a meeting of the North-South Interparliamentary Association in the early days of December 2016. The association consists of members from Stormont and the Oireachtas. We had an extremely good, frank and vigorous debate that day. It was extremely important to widen the discussion to include people who do not share our views on this very important issue. Sadly, there is no Executive or Assembly in the North today yet we have never needed them more. I hope sincerely the Minister and his colleagues in government will work might and main to ensure the institutions get back up and running.

I have highlighted in the House on numerous occasions the vulnerability of the area I represent. The economy of the central Border area of Cavan, Fermanagh, Monaghan, Tyrone and Armagh is heavily dependent on the agrifood, construction products and engineering sectors. They are the three most vulnerable sectors as a result of Brexit. They have already been impacted by the fluctuations and weakness of sterling since June 2016. I have appealed to the Government at every opportunity, including during Question Time and other debates in the Dáil, to ensure that sector-specific assistance is given to enterprises in these sectors to help them remain competitive. They face huge challenges. In an area that suffered so much due to the Troubles over a period of more than 30 years, it was local enterprise and entrepreneurial flair that led to the creation of very successful businesses which have been built in the agrifood, construction products and engineering sectors. These sectors have been impacted most already as a result of the British referendum and they remain the most vulnerable. They are the most reliant on the British market for the export of their products. The budget is only a few weeks away and I must again appeal for specific assistance for those very vulnerable sectors.

I note also the tourism and hospitality sector. In the area I represent, a sizeable proportion of the sector's business comes from Northern Ireland. Obviously, the weakness of sterling has already had an impact. I hope sincerely that the 9% VAT rate will not be changed. While a change may be fine and dandy for hotels in the larger urban areas which are doing well, there is still a need for a major recovery in rural areas. It is essential to maintain the current VAT rate.

Some speakers earlier referred to the understandable focus in our Brexit debates on the economy, business and trade. Brexit will also impact on the provision of education and health services in my area. We have 30,000 people a day crossing the Border to go about their daily business of attending work or accessing health and education services. We must ensure that, under no circumstances, obstacles are put in the way of people going about their daily business or in the movement of goods or services.

Deputy Seán Haughey: After the vote in the UK on 23 June 2016, I said in the House that it would be regrettable that a considerable amount of time, effort and resources would have to be

expended by the Government, and public administration generally, trying to sort out the Brexit fallout. I said then that this would ensure policy-making in other areas would be delayed. One only need look at the crisis in our health services or the housing crisis to see these effects.

The concerns of Ireland then are still the concerns now, namely, the need to maintain the common travel area, the need to avoid a hard border between North and South, as well as the need to protect the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process. The British Prime Minister and European Commission have also agreed these issues need to be addressed. I welcome the support of Michel Barnier, European chief negotiator for Brexit, and Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament's chief Brexit co-ordinator, for the view that the Irish question has to be addressed before moving to the next stage of the negotiations dealing with the new trade relationship. Their support given in this Chamber is most welcome. In his address last week in this Chamber, Guy Verhofstadt said ultimately the UK will have to propose and agree solutions to the Irish problem.

This is a concern. The UK's Conservative Government has to deal with many problems, not just Brexit which is taking up much of its time. I am not sure Northern Ireland will be high on its list of priorities. Much of what the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, said in her Florence speech on 22 September, however, is to be welcomed. She spoke about the need to protect the Good Friday Agreement and the common travel area. She also ruled out any physical infrastructure at the Border. It is hard to see, however, how this can be achieved, given the UK is intent on leaving the customs union. For that reason, Fianna Fáil advocates the establishment of a special economic zone for Northern Ireland and the Border counties to enable them to maintain links with the European Union. I hope the Government will give serious consideration to this proposal and signal it to the UK Government in whatever way is deemed appropriate. It is also unfortunate that the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly are not in place. They are very much needed at this time.

Will the Government publish the proposed Brexit sectorial response plans? We need to properly resource and staff State agencies and do more to ensure diversification into new markets for Irish businesses. It does not look like sufficient progress will be made in the next few weeks on the three main issues at this stage of the negotiations, namely, the rights of UK citizens living in the EU and EU citizens living in the UK, the EU budget commitments and the Irish situation. As regards the future relationship, particularly in respect of trade, an overall solution as far as Ireland is concerned should involve a free trade agreement with conditions which mirror, as far as is practicable, the provisions of the customs union and the Single Market, together with lengthy transitional arrangements.

Members have already spoken about the future of Europe. A debate on the future of Europe, initiated by the European Commission, is now under way. It has taken on added impetus with the election of Emmanuel Macron in France and the re-election of German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Ireland should remain at the heart of the European Union and should be fully committed to playing a full and active role in planning the EU. That said, we should pay particular attention to the speech made this week by the French President in which he called for further EU integration. In particular, he called for a common intervention force, defence budget and strategy and requested a European defence fund be established quickly. He also called for minimum and maximum corporate tax rates to be replaced by 2020. He suggested access to the EU Cohesion Fund be conditional on respect for these rates. All food for thought but Ireland will have to be particularly vigilant with regard to these two particular issues as the debate continues. As the Franco-German axis is fully restored, the interests of small nation states must not

be forgotten.

We need a public consultation in this country as regards the future of the European Union. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Union Affairs has initiated a process at parliamentary party level and brought in various stakeholders. The Irish public needs to be aware of this debate, these developments and have an input into the type of future European Union which we all want to see.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We are all talking in a vacuum tonight, as we do not know what the British Prime Minister, Mrs. May, is really going to do or what her timeframe is for Brexit. I do not think even Mrs. May knows what she is doing herself. After the Brexit vote, I was the first to suggest we cajole the UK into having another vote. That may not even be out of the frame yet. I hope it is not because I know many people across the water and in the North who voted for Brexit but who would gladly vote the other way if there was another chance.

Brexit has already caused trouble. Deputy Brendan Smith from the Border county of Cavan spoke about how it is affecting his constituents. Believe it or not, it is also already affecting people as far as Killarney, Castleisland and Cahersiveen. Small manufacturers exporting to England are paying a high price and losing much money due to the fall in the sterling rate caused by the Brexit scenario. Several years ago there were small manufacturing companies in practically every town in Ireland. However, they have ceased business because, with the Nice treaty and other developments, all our small manufacturing companies went to eastern Europe for cheaper labour. Those we had left survived the economic crisis. However, Brexit will impact them with the fall in the value of sterling which will have a further adverse effect on rural areas such as Castleisland and Killarney.

There is much talk about special status for the North of Ireland. We should really be looking for special status for the Twenty-six Counties. With the value of sterling reduced, much trade from the South will inevitably go to the North. People will be able to buy many of the commodities they need for daily living cheaper there. That scenario could obtain for 20 years. What would that do to this current generation? It would wipe us out completely.

Today we met with representatives from the motor industry in Buswells Hotel. They are saying they are losing a large amount of trade with already many cheaper vehicles being brought down from the North or being brought across from England, which is impacting in a serious way on their sales. There are many other similar matters that worry people. Every man, woman and child in the country will be affected if England eventually leaves the Single Market.

I call on the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to act. Farmers throughout the country are worried about prices and what will happen their trade if we do not continue to have as much trade with the UK. We must ensure that this trade continues. In the meantime, however, I call on the Minister to seek to provide more markets for live cattle exports, even outside the European Union. Sadly, a group of people were protesting against the live cattle trade yesterday outside Agriculture House. I and many farmers throughout the country are not praying for them. We know that if farmers were dependent on the price offered by the factories, which are a monopoly and have a stranglehold on prices, they would be in a very bad position. If it were not for the live export of young cattle, many farmers would not be in business.

We are in a very serious situation. As I said, we are in a vacuum because we are dependent on what the government across the water will do. I ask this Government to leave no stone un-

turned in doing everything possible to protect the people we represent throughout the country. They range from small farmers and small manufacturers to exporters such as Liebherr Container Cranes in Killarney, which employs many people, and all the other exporters in the country. We must do our best to ensure that we maintain the standards and profits they have at present and that they are not reduced or hurt in any way.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: Theresa May made a speech in Florence on Friday, 22 September, last. While a number of the points made in the speech are welcome, it is clear that the UK is intent on delivering a hard Brexit. We welcome that the Prime Minister emphasised in her speech the need to protect the Good Friday Agreement and the common travel area and ruled out any physical infrastructure at the Border.

The UK has been our largest trading partner for centuries and our countries trade approximately €1.2 billion in goods and services each week. All countries will be affected by Brexit, but Ireland will be disproportionately affected on several fronts among the EU member states. The issue of the Border is particularly complex and while we welcome that the UK has ruled out a return to any physical infrastructure at the Border there is no clarity on how it plans to avoid this, given that it is intent on leaving the customs union. The British have created this problem so we wish to see how they will solve it. Domestically, much more needs to be done to be Brexit ready. On several fronts Brexit is nothing short of a disaster for the people of Northern Ireland, the majority of whom voted to remain. Ultimately, Fianna Fáil wishes to see a Brexit deal that secures a trade deal which is as close as possible to what we have now. We also must maintain the almost invisible Border on the island.

The UK leaving the Single Market and possibly the customs union will have serious consequences for Ireland's economy. Although Ireland has significantly diversified its economy and lessened its dependency on the UK market, Brexit will nevertheless have a profound impact on Ireland across a range of sectors. Some 14% of Ireland's total exports go to the UK. Similarly, imports into Ireland from Great Britain accounted for 24% of total goods imported in 2015. In fact, in some sectors this reliance has increased over time.

Some of the most exposed products to the UK under the proportional exposure measure are Irish exports predominantly from the agrifood sector. A recent report by Bord Bia illustrates the challenges ahead for the agrifood sector, a sector that has already lost up to €570 million due to sterling depreciation. Currency fluctuation and the lack of certainty in currency rates are causing huge problems for the sector. Despite the growth in new markets, the UK remains by far the single largest trading partner for the agrifood sector. In 2016, agrifood exports to the UK totalled €4.8 billion or 39% of all our exports while imports were €3.7 billion or 40%, with a trade surplus of €1.1 billion.

Ireland's food and live animal sector is substantially more exposed to the UK when compared with the other 27 member states. This sector accounts for just under 30% of Ireland's goods exports to the UK. At the agrifood sub-sectoral level, Ireland's meat and dairy products, in particular, are substantially more exposed to the UK in comparison with other countries. Some 50% of our beef exports and 26% of dairy exports go to the UK, as do 80% of our cheddar and 90% of our mushrooms. Regardless of what funding we put into State agencies, that dependency will take a long time to erode. Teagasc estimates that a 10% fall in the CAP, along with lower UK food prices due to tariffs, could reduce farm incomes by 26%.

Brexit poses challenges in terms of changes to the EU-UK trading relationship, changes to

regulations and standards, border controls and certification and the related areas of veterinary and health certifications. For example, in the last couple of months stricter controls and more checks were put on Brazilian imports into the EU. If the UK leaves the EU, will it follow what the rest of Europe does? Among other actions what we require is: a Minister for Brexit to oversee and co-ordinate the cross-departmental approach required; detailed contingency and scenario planning, by sector, for a hard Brexit; increased resources for our State agencies, including the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and Bord Bia; an exporters fund to assist companies to diversify into new markets and maintain their UK market share; export credit to be available to offer finance to companies for international export operations and other activities; regulation changes to allow credit unions to loan to businesses; the corporation tax rate protected; a review of strategic plans, such as Food Wise 2025, in light of Brexit and the potential impacts on the development of the agrifood sector over the next decade; support for the regions and targeted measures to ensure that Brexit does not contribute to greater regional imbalance. It is the parts of this country that are dependent on agrifood businesses that will feel the chill of Brexit most.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Political activism is mainly a hard grind. Progress is usually frustratingly slow and barriers to development often seem insurmountable. However, on rare occasions big objectives coincide with major opportunities. When that happens, it is very important to have the skills to identify that and the doggedness to pursue those objectives. Brexit is an unmitigated disaster. It will affect every part of Ireland. I believe it will affect Ireland more than any other European country, including Britain. Obviously, it will push a coach and six through the Good Friday Agreement.

How we might mitigate the Brexit disaster will determine the economy and the politics of the island for a generation. Top of the list of threats to us is a border between North and South. Trade, travel, tourism and the lives of ordinary people will be significantly threatened. There is a solution, however, one which provides for the free flow of people and goods, namely, special designated status. For a few months, Sinn Féin was alone in pushing for this solution. However, we succeeded in having a motion in favour of special designated status passed in the Dáil with the support of the majority of Deputies. My party's MPs have also been working long and hard on this issue in Britain. Just this week, they managed to persuade the British Labour Party, in the form of Owen Smith, the shadow Secretary of State for the North of Ireland, to state the North should stay in the European Union. That the shadow Secretary of State and Sinn Féin are on the same ground on this issue is an important development.

The European Union wants to punish Britain for the Brexit vote to ensure no other member state dares consider exiting the EU. Strangely enough, this desire to punish Britain presents the State with an opportunity. Guy Verhofstadt indicated he would support a solution that is virtually identical to that which Sinn Féin has put on the table. It is shocking that the European Union is taking a more ambitious approach to the Brexit process than the Fine Gael-Independent Government. The EU is at the leading edge on this issue, whereas the Government is, unfortunately, a reluctant laggard.

For the first time since the foundation of the Northern state, unionists have lost their majority position in the North. This is one of the most important developments in the North in my generation as it materially changes the moral right of unionists to dictate to the rest of Ireland what happens to the island of Ireland. Of course, we should listen to unionists and pay strong heed to their desires for the future. However, people in the North voted to remain in the European Union and unionism is in a minority position. Even by the rules imposed on the peace process by the British, unionists do not meet the criteria that would allow them to exercise a

veto over the rest of us on this issue.

The democratic will of the Dáil is in favour of designated status for the North. The main opposition party in Britain is also in favour of designated status, as are the European Union and the majority of voters in the North. We have, therefore, an alignment of core interests and stakeholders in this process. If this is not a once in a generation opportunity to fix much of the collateral damage done to this island and much of the damage that Brexit threatens to do to Ireland, I do not know what is.

There are, however, challenges. We have a clueless and disinterested Tory Government in London and a Government here that is weak, feeble and reluctant. While we do not have any control over the British Government, we must try our damndest to get the Government on-side. I ask the Minister of State to take from this debate the message that the Government must recognise and doggedly pursue the opportunity Brexit presents. It must come on board with the voters of the North, the democratic will of this Chamber, the European Union and most of the British electorate.

To reiterate a point that was well made by Deputy Broughan, the biggest threat to the European Union is not the United Kingdom Independence Party or the Alternative für Deutschland but EU federalists. What struck me after Britain's vote to exit the European Union was the complete absence of some badly needed navel gazing. There was no understanding in the EU establishment that it needed to analyse the reasons the citizens of Europe were turning their backs on their focus on a federalist Europe. Unless such an analysis takes place, the EU will experience major trouble in the period ahead.

The President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has raised the issues of consolidated corporation taxes and a European army immediately after a major country decided to leave the Union. The federalists are people deaf. The European Union needs to decentralise by devolving powers from the centre back to the people of Europe. They will not hear this message from yes-men or in an echo chamber. They will only hear it if we have a Government that is willing to stand up to the EU federalists and tell them what needs to happen. I ask the Minister of State to take that message back to the Government and European Union.

Deputy Mary Butler: Brexit is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges Ireland has ever faced. It is an immense task which has serious ramifications for the entire island. The United Kingdom has traditionally been our largest trading partner, with our countries trading approximately €1.2 billion in goods and services each week. While all countries stand to be affected by Brexit, Ireland will be disproportionately affected on several fronts and more so than any other EU member state.

The British Prime Minister, Mrs. Theresa May, made a speech in Florence on Friday last. While a number of the points she made were welcome, it is clear the UK is intent on delivering a hard Brexit, given the Prime Minister's re-statement of her Government's position that the UK will leave the Single Market and customs union. It is incumbent on the Government to prepare and plan for this eventuality.

The issue of the Border is particularly complex. While we welcome that the UK has ruled out a return to any physical infrastructure at the Border, there is no clarity as to how it plans to avoid such a scenario given that it is intent on leaving the customs union. From the outset, the Fianna Fáil Party has strongly advocated the establishment of a special economic zone for

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Northern Ireland and the Border counties which would enable the North to maintain links with the EU. This possibility must, at a minimum, be explored in full.

Domestically, much more needs to be done to be Brexit ready. First and foremost, Northern Ireland is still without an executive and has been rudderless for a number of months. On several fronts, Brexit is nothing short of a disaster for people in Northern Ireland, the majority of whom voted to remain, and the Border counties. It is imperative, therefore, that all sides redouble their efforts to resolve outstanding issues and move forward to promote actively and to seek the least damaging Brexit possible.

I am the chairperson of the Oireachtas Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, which recently undertook a series of engagements on Brexit and produced a document on the issue. In the course of our engagement, the committee heard presentations from, among others, Enterprise Ireland; IDA Ireland; InterTradeIreland; the Centre for Cross Border Studies; the British-Irish Chamber of Commerce; the Small Firms Association; the then Minister for Finance of Northern Ireland, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, MLA; the then Minister for Infrastructure of Northern Ireland, Chris Hazzard, MLA; and the then Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor.

The stakeholder engagement highlighted how difficult the road ahead will be and the importance of Ireland being prepared for the negative economic impact of Brexit and to take advantage of opportunities that may arise. The joint committee's report attempts to gain a better understanding of the consequences of Brexit on the economy, jobs and enterprise. The future trading relationship between the European Union and United Kingdom will be critical. The closer we remain to the current relationship, the less will be the impact of Brexit. However, as we seem to be heading for a very hard Brexit, we must be ready for the worst case scenario.

We have already begun to see some of the negative consequences of the uncertainty caused by the Brexit vote. I propose to address a number of these issues. It is vital that Ireland has a strong voice in the Brexit negotiations. It is important that we argue strongly in favour of making a transitional agreement until such time as the future relationship between the EU and UK is agreed. A special status arrangement for Northern Ireland within the European Union is also vital to protect the rights of Northern Irish citizens and residents. The peace process and the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement must also be at the forefront of negotiations. As the Border area is likely to be one of the regions of Europe most affected by Brexit, it is imperative that peace and community projects continue to be funded. Deputy Tóibín raised the issue of special designated status for the North. I am happy to say that our committee recommended a designated special status for Northern Ireland within the EU that protected the peace process, allowed access to the Single Market and all EU funding streams, retained the common travel area, allowed access to EU institutions, including the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights, and EU sectoral agreements, and protected EU rights pertaining to employment, social security and health care.

The enterprise agencies' funding must be adequate to help businesses that are struggling due to Brexit and maintain Ireland's image internationally as a country that is open for business and investment. I hope that funding for the IDA and Enterprise Ireland will be addressed in the forthcoming budget.

Ireland is a proud and committed member of the EU. As proud Europeans, it is our duty to highlight areas that need reform. To deal with the effects of Brexit, it is vital that there be

changes to the EU's fiscal rules to allow for more capital investment across the Continent. By allowing for greater capital investment, EU member states will be better able to prepare their economies post Brexit. There also need to be exemptions from state aid rules to allow member states to aid businesses and sectors that are experiencing particular difficulties related to Brexit. Allowances need to be made for the exceptional circumstances in which the EU, particularly Ireland, finds itself.

It is important that the EU does not become embroiled in a race to the bottom with the UK. High standards in environmental and employment law must be maintained. We want a competitive economy, but one that provides secure, well-paid jobs.

The committee believes that action needs to be taken within the Irish economy. Businesses throughout the country must be helped to understand the dangers of Brexit. This applies to all firms, not just those that are directly involved in exporting to the UK. An early warning system should also be developed, bringing together employers and employees or unions to help identify sectors and enterprises at risk. The committee has recommended that the Department monitors the number of businesses relocating from Ireland to the UK and determines what measures can be put in place to avoid this.

The committee believes that there needs to be investment in education, infrastructure, housing and office space throughout the country to allow communities and businesses to mitigate the negative consequences of Brexit. For its part, the committee is fully committed to monitoring the progress being made on the ongoing implementation of the recommendations in the report, as well as other policy initiatives, in close consultation with Ministers, the Department, its agencies and other stakeholders with responsibility for policy in this area. Brexit will require a response from the whole country, including Government and all stakeholders.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is someone sharing Deputy Butler's time?

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: Mise.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Actually, the Deputies are not sharing, so I must cross the floor to Deputy Durkan.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. Brexit affects every aspect of people's lives on the island of Ireland, North and South. The decision taken by the people of the UK by way of a referendum has the potential to have a major negative impact on this country, some of which has already been felt.

However, I am not as pessimistic as many seem to be. There are opportunities. Contrary to what some say, the Irish Government has adopted the correct attitude. It has maintained its position on retaining the *status quo* and included the island of Ireland in its submissions. The EU has responded positively and recognised the need for the island of Ireland to proceed within the customs union, the Single Market and the common travel area.

All this will undoubtedly be difficult. It is a new ball game and a challenge to everyone, but it comes down to the extent to which the British Government is prepared to negotiate. It initiated its departure - it had that right - but it must consequently negotiate its exit. At the beginning, it was stated that no agreement would be better than a bad one, but I am not so sure about that. Our part of the EU will need to trade with the UK, and it would be much better were Ireland to trade as a single entity. Again, it comes down to the extent to which the British

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Government will agree to that, but it is not impossible. This approach can be catered for, either within existing arrangements or if changes in structures are needed.

Similarly, the UK needs to trade with the EU after Brexit. It cannot do all its trade with far-flung regions around the globe, even if that means cheaper imports. Again, that issue is down to the UK Government.

One of the problems is that the people of the UK were told before the referendum about the massive savings that would accrue as a result of exiting the EU. Of course, those savings were never quantified or backed up. The facts did not emerge until afterwards. It is sad to say that people and, in particular, the British Government have suddenly recognised that much of that talk was chatter, something that was grasped by some at the time to sell what they were selling because they wanted out of the Union. We must not forget that the decision was not made by a landslide majority or that Northern Ireland did not acquiesce in going the same route. Neither did Scotland.

All credit is due to the Irish Government. In the early stages, the previous Taoiseach nailed down the territory on which we would negotiate, that being retaining the *status quo* and everything that entailed. That is still the case. To be fair to all sides of the House, the Opposition has generally been supportive of that concept because it is the only show in town.

The new Taoiseach has continued solidly and constructively in the same vein. This has been critical to the debate. If any chink appears in the armour, if any weakness shows at all, negotiators will see it.

People say that we should accelerate the negotiations, but that is for the UK Government. It exited; it made the decision. It is not for the rest of us to compromise our position.

I agree with the number of Deputies who made the point that this country should not be used as a Trojan Horse. It is important for both parts of the island of Ireland that we speak, operate and negotiate as one and that we leave no one behind. It is equally important that we speak as members of the EU. While many aspects of Europe need to be changed, improved and so on, the Europe we have had in recent years has been immeasurably better than anything in the previous 100 years. That would not be difficult to guess.

We need the resolve to see this out and get the best of what we had before. Prior to Brexit, we could have sought improvements, so there is no reason in the wide earthly world that we could not continue doing so in the interests of the island of Ireland.

The politicians and public in Northern Ireland are good, hard-headed business people. They may have political difficulties from time to time, but they know what is in their interests as well as ours. They know the degree to which we must co-operate to do what is necessary to get over this difficulty. Guy Verhofstadt, Michel Barnier and all the other Europeans we have met in recent times have been very reassuring and have shown a very clear knowledge of the situation in this country with regard to the Border between Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. They have reiterated at every opportunity their view that they understand our situation, that it is in the European Union's interest to retain the *status quo*, that it is in the interest of this part of the European Union, as it was, to retain the *status quo* and that it is in the interest of the future development of Europe that we stand over what we say and that we do not blink.

I will conclude by saying a certain amount of poker playing is going on. There always is in

any negotiation that takes place, particularly in situations like this. We have to show that we have the prowess and ability to play the game of poker as well as anybody else. We have a lot to play for and we have a lot to lose if we blink. We should not blink. We should be reassured of the strength of our case and be convincing to ourselves, but more especially to our colleagues across the Irish Sea with the support and co-operation of our European Union colleagues.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: When the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union approximately 16 months ago, it was an opportunity for us to pull out our green cards and go on a Brit-bashing tour which so many of us, that is, politicians, the media, and the general public duly did. What has become clear over the past number of months is that any attempts to make the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union as painless as possible for the island of Ireland as a whole has actually come from the British Government. The stance of the British Government on Brexit has softened since the Conservatives had a disastrous general election result on 8 June. Although the softening of its stance is welcome, I find it astounding that it is it which has stood up more for Ireland’s interests in the recent talks than our own Government which is playing a game of tit-for-tat. Let me remind the House that it is a Conservative-DUP Administration. Prime Minister May has already said the freedoms of Irish citizens in the UK are to be preserved and that they would not have to apply for a document similar to an ID card in post-Brexit Britain, something that sadly so many non-British nationals in post-Brexit Britain will have to do in the coming years. Freedom of movement between Ireland and the UK is high on the priority list for the British Government. There are greater challenges ahead in terms of trade which will require reasonable input from all institutions.

No Member of this House wants a return to a hard border between the North and South. The EU needs to be reminded that it was the British and Irish-led Governments along with all parties in Northern Ireland that negotiated the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. It is only us who understand the significance of any such border. What impact has the European Union had on previous Anglo-Irish relations such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998? The European input was greatly appreciated during those intense times. I understand and respect that the EU is compelled to seek the best deal for its member states as a result of the UK leaving the EU but we should not underestimate our ability to negotiate bilaterally with the British Government and start putting Ireland first for a change.

One issue on which I feel strongly, as does the Fianna Fáil Party, is that a Brexit Minister should be appointed to co-ordinate overall negotiations with the various Government Departments. Following Brexit, many Ministers said there were positives resulting from Brexit, with the example that we could entice financial institutions from the City of London. Our big issue here is that agricultural trade with Britain is of paramount importance. No matter what happens with Brexit, it is important that in any agreement, agricultural trade continues with the British. That is why we need a Brexit Minister so that every Department filters through him or her to ensure we are all singing from the same hymn sheet.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Ciarán Cannon): I welcome the opportunity to make some concluding remarks this evening. I believe that a detailed debate on the issue this early in the Dáil term has been time well spent. All of us are in daily contact with a vast array of stakeholders who are deeply worried about the impact Brexit will have on their lives and livelihood. Just this morning, I met with the executive of Galway county IFA. The first item on the agenda was Brexit and the likely impact of Brexit on the agricultural economy of County Galway.

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I thank all the Deputies who have contributed over the past two days, many of whom have highlighted the issues and concerns they have been hearing in their constituencies. It is important these concerns find voice and are brought to bear on our collective thinking and planning for Brexit. It is a priority for the Government and I welcome that the Minister, Deputy Coveney, is convening the third plenary session of the all-island civic dialogue tomorrow in the Royal Hospital in Kilmainham. Since its establishment in November 2016 over 1,500 representatives from a range of industry and civil society groups have taken part in the all-island civic dialogue process. Its inaugural plenary session marked the beginning of a series of public consultations with a broad range of stakeholders and 19 all-island sectoral dialogues have taken place across the country. The work of that civic dialogue process to date has had an important role to play in shaping and reaffirming the priority issues identified by the Government ahead of the negotiations. The issues identified across a range of sectors were clearly reflected in the Government's comprehensive document, Ireland and the Negotiations on the UK's Withdrawal from the European Union: the Government's Approach, which was published on 2 May.

Additionally, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, has established a Brexit stakeholder forum as a means to inform and explain the Government's position during the Article 50 negotiations on the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. This brings together the voice of business, unions, political parties or State agencies and specific key sectors such as farming, and leading experts. A particular focus of this forum will be on our preparations for phase two of the EU-UK negotiations when parallel discussions are expected to begin on the framework of the future relationship between the EU and the UK.

The Government is strongly committed to engaging with all relevant stakeholders, is doing so and will continue to do so. We are acutely aware of the concerns of all sectors including the agrifood sector and it is clear our response must be multifaceted, requiring cohesive action here, at home and in the EU and further afield. As the House is aware, the Taoiseach has designated special responsibility to the Minister, Deputy Coveney, for the all-of-Government response to Brexit. Further intensifying the co-ordination of work across all Departments will be an immediate priority and to this end new cross-departmental co-ordination structures are now in place chaired at a very senior level by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It is clear the conclusion of a withdrawal agreement between the EU and the UK will continue to be a very significant focus of our efforts in the immediate term and I will return to this shortly. I also assure the House that the wider goal of protecting our economic interests in terms of trade and investment in the UK will be a key priority as well as a need to drive further diversification of our trade and investment flows across the globe.

My Department and its diplomatic missions will play a crucial role in protecting these interests and in promoting diversification and identifying and seizing new opportunities. It is clear Ireland will need to augment resources in networks overseas, including our diplomatic network. We also need to capture larger market shares in fast growing emerging countries and our priority will be to maintain, grow and diversify our share of international trade, employment and investment given the challenges of Brexit and a more competitive world. The recently published trade strategy, Ireland Connected: Trading and Investing in a Dynamic World, and the Taoiseach's recent announcement of a wish to double our presence across the world by 2025 are a clear demonstration of the Government's ambitions in this area. Our efforts to realise the economic opportunities as distinct from the challenges arising from Brexit also include working closely with the Ministers, Deputy Harris and Deputy Donohoe, on Ireland's bid to bring the European Medicines Agency and the European Banking Authority to Dublin. Brexit will be a

critical factor in our long-term economic strategy and a new ten-year capital plan is in preparation.

We are revising our Enterprise 2025 policy and we are in active discussions with the European Investment Bank for a potential increase in investment in the country.

The Government's enterprise agencies continue to work with companies, helping them to deal with Brexit, making them more competitive, diversifying market exposure and upskilling teams. In this regard I strongly encourage businesses to make use of the resources and the advice available including through our local enterprise offices and Bord Bia to help them build their own plans for Brexit.

We are entering an important phase of the negotiations. We know that in broad terms the EU and the UK share the ambition of sharing the closest possible relationship in the future and I welcome that the British Prime Minister, Mrs. May, confirmed this overriding objective in her speech last week. However, certain important milestones must be passed to get to this point. First, we want to achieve an orderly withdrawal of the UK from the EU. As the Minister, Deputy Coveney, set out in his opening remarks, a key benchmark in coming weeks will be the question of whether sufficient progress has been made on the so-called withdrawal issues during the current phase of the negotiations.

At the outset of the negotiations the EU and the UK agreed that the advancement of these issues must be the immediate priority so that we can move as quickly as possible to begin discussions on the framework for the future relationship between the EU and the UK. Last week's speech by the British Prime Minister, Mrs. May, was welcome. It provided some further clarity on the UK's position, including on citizens' rights and the financial settlement. We will now wait with anticipation for Mr. Michel Barnier to outline tomorrow the extent to which these commitments have translated to progress around the negotiating table during this week's round of negotiations.

Ireland has also consistently stressed that a transition phase supported by adequate governance arrangements will be required to minimise the disruption of trade and avoid a cliff-edge scenario. Equally important will be to ensure a level playing field on any future EU-UK agreement and to ensure the integrity of the Single Market and customs union. This is also in Ireland's fundamental economic interest.

The closest possible future relationship between the EU and the UK must be based on a level playing field and recognise the proper balance between rights and obligations, an issue also helpfully acknowledged by the British Prime Minister, Mrs. May, in her speech last week. I have spoken of the so-called withdrawal issues, which, of course, include the unique set of issues related to the situation on the island of Ireland and which, quite understandably, have been raised repeatedly throughout this week's debate.

The continuing understanding we enjoy from our EU partners is very clear. This shone through very clearly during last week's visit to Dublin by Mr. Guy Verhofstadt, MEP. I know that our partners in the EU 27 reiterated their support at the General Affairs Council earlier this week which was attended by the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee. Ireland's unique priorities of protecting the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process, maintaining the common travel area, and avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland have been reflected in the EU's core negotiating documents. We will continue to work closely with Mr. Barnier and his team to

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advance Ireland's concerns in these negotiations to build on the progress made to date.

I thank all the Deputies who took the time to contribute to the debate. I assure the House of the Government's commitment to continue such engagement in the coming weeks and months.

Water Services Bill 2017: Order for Second Stage

Bill entitled an Act to provide for discontinuing and extinguishing liabilities in respect of charges imposed by Irish Water for the provision of water services to a dwelling; for refund of certain payments made in respect of charges so imposed; for setting a threshold amount; for liability to pay for provision by Irish Water of water services exceeding the threshold amount to a dwelling; for allowances and exemptions from that liability in certain circumstances; for funding for Irish Water; for establishment of a body to be known in the Irish language as An Fóram Uisce or in the English language as the Water Forum; for establishment of a body to be known in the Irish language as An Comhlacht Comhairleach Uisce or in the English language as the Water Advisory Body; for amending arrangements in relation to the Local Government Fund; for those purposes to amend the Local Government Act 1998, the Valuation Act 2001, the Water Services Act 2007, the Water Services (No. 2) Act 2013 and the Water Services Act 2014; and to provide for matters connected therewith.

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I move: "That Second Stage be taken now."

Question put and agreed to.

Water Services Bill 2017: Second Stage

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Today I present the Water Services Bill 2017 before the Dáil. The Bill provides for the repealing of the 2014 domestic water charging regime and it introduces a new programme focused on the promotion of water conservation under which a levy will apply in certain circumstances for usage of water above a reasonable threshold. In making these changes, provision is made in the Bill for the extinguishing of liabilities under the current regime and the making of refunds to the 990,000 customers who paid in accordance with the 2014 Act. This will give rise to a new funding model for Irish Water, which is underpinned by the Bill. In so doing, the Bill reflects the recommendations of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services, which was adopted in April by both Houses of the Oireachtas.

The publication of this Bill brings us towards completion of an extensive deliberative process about the funding of domestic water services. It does not bring us to a point I am personally happy with or proud of, but my responsibility in this matter is to implement this legislation to protect Irish Water as a single public water utility, and to continue to work to improve and modernise water services throughout the country.

While there may be many opposing views on the appropriate way to fund water services, this Oireachtas has had a full examination of the matter and came to a compromise that is re-

flected in the Oireachtas joint committee's report. The Government is following through on its commitment in the confidence and supply arrangement and is bringing forward the necessary legislation to reflect the outcome of the Oireachtas decision.

This Bill offers clarity and certainty to the water services sector about how services will be funded in the future and how Irish Water will implement the Government's objectives and priorities in this area. The Bill will also help to increase transparency and accountability regarding Irish Water and its performance, and will facilitate greater civic and public engagement on the issue of water as a natural resource to be protected and a service vital to our economic and social progress.

Over the past year we have seen an extensive policy debate on how we fund domestic water services. Last July, the Government enacted the Water Services (Amendment) Act 2016 to provide the political space for a calm, comprehensive and detailed debate on water services. In the same month an expert commission was established comprising international and national experts on water services, which dedicated five months to examining the various issues concerning the funding of domestic water services.

Last November the commission produced its report, which provided the basis for the work of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services. The Oireachtas committee's deliberative process, which comprised public meetings and detailed submissions from a range of public bodies and organisations, involved a welcome discussion about the many deficiencies with our public water and wastewater system, such as the reliance of 736,000 people on public water supplies in need of remedial action; the discharge of raw sewage directly into local waters at some 42 urban areas at the end of last year; and the loss through leakage of about 45% of all water produced.

The debate also outlined the evolving challenges that Irish Water faces, such as dealing with the presence of THMs - a potentially harmful by-product of the chlorination process - in public water supplies for about 400,000 people. It underlined the need for sustained investment so that we can address these problems and provide a secure, safe water supply and the appropriate level of wastewater treatment to protect public health, the economy and the environment.

A year of political and policy debate on water services also provided a further opportunity for Irish Water to outline the improvements it has made to our water and wastewater infrastructure during the first regulatory period. This included work such as the national programme to reduce boil water notices. By the end of 2016 Irish Water had removed long-term boil water notices that in January 2014 were affecting over 20,000 people. It also replaced or repaired almost 860 km of pipeline. To put this in context, this average of 286 km per year compares with an average of approximately 149 km per year during the final ten years of local authority responsibility for mains rehabilitation. There have been 28 new or upgraded water treatment plants. There have been 65 new or upgraded plants for wastewater treatment. Some 89 million litres of water are saved daily through the customer-focused first-fix repair scheme and related customer repairs, which is equivalent to the water needs of Galway city and county. These initiatives have all helped improve people's daily lives, whether it be the quality of the water they drink, the ability to drink it without boiling it or simply living in an area free of raw sewage discharge.

Ultimately, we are having this funding debate because we are trying to improve people's lives and their environment, to facilitate business and industry, and to enable social and economic progress. Irish Water is doing this and I acknowledge the progress it and the local

authorities have made. The deliberative process identified the problems, the progress and the need for funding certainty if we are to continue upgrading and modernising water services and infrastructure. In legislating for the Oireachtas joint committee's recommendations, we have devised a policy and funding framework through which the utility can implement national objectives and priorities within an economically regulated environment. This framework provides funding certainty from Government while maintaining a regulatory environment that demands efficiencies of Irish Water through the targets set by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, known until now as the Commission for Energy Regulation but that will legally become the Commission for Regulation of Utilities in October.

While the processes of the expert commission and the Oireachtas joint committee resulted in enhanced debate on water services, the Government recognises the need for greater public confidence in the work of Irish Water, as well as further transparency about how it is funded and where that funding is invested. Therefore we are providing for a water advisory body to give the Oireachtas and Government assessments on the performance of Irish Water in implementing its business plan.

The Government also recognises the importance of the role of civic society in safeguarding water, be it for services to urban and rural areas or water in the aquatic environment. For this reason, and in line with our commitment in the draft river basin management plan for 2018 to 2021, we are providing for a national water forum, which will provide for public support for water services investment; public awareness of and participation in increased water conservation and initiatives to protect water quality in our rivers, lakes and coastal waters; and national appreciation of the links between water and public health, economic progress and environmental protection. Those key aims will advance if wider civic society debates and analyses the issues on an ongoing basis. The Government will support that by facilitating and funding a national forum that will advise the Minister but will also have an independent voice to communicate directly with wider society.

I will now outline the purpose and operation of each section of the Bill. Section 1 sets out the Short Title of the Bill and provides that the various provisions of the Bill may be brought into operation on such day or days as may be appointed by order of the Minister. Section 2 sets out the definitions required to give effect to the provisions of all Parts of the Bill.

Section 3 is a standard provision enabling expenses incurred by the Minister in the administration of the Act to be paid out of moneys provided by the Oireachtas. Section 4 provides that every order and regulation under this Act shall be laid before each House of the Oireachtas as soon as may be after it is made and, if a resolution annulling such order or regulation is passed by either House within the next 21 days on which that House has sat after the order or regulation is laid before it, the order or regulation shall be annulled accordingly.

Section 5 outlines the legislation and regulations that are repealed or revoked. Section 6 provides for the insertion of certain definitions into the Water Services Act 2007. Section 7 provides for the inclusion of the proposed water advisory body and the water forum in bodies that can be funded by the Minister.

Section 8 provides for the Commission for Energy Regulation, which from 2 October will be known as the commission for regulation of utilities, to carry out a review to assess the average consumption by customers of water services provided by Irish Water to dwellings, a review that shall be used by the Minister to set the threshold over which excessive usage payments may

apply. The commission will also recommend to the Minister, based on consumption trends, the level of allowance to apply for usage by larger households, that is, where five or more people are ordinarily resident in a dwelling. The first such review will be carried out and completed within one month after the coming into operation of this section, with provision for future reviews prior to the expiration of the water charges plans.

Section 9 sets out the process for specifying the threshold amount and the allowance amount, following receipt by the Minister of the report from the commission. It specifies that the threshold amount shall be calculated by multiplying by 1.7 the amount assessed by the commission as the average rate of consumption of water services in a 12-month period. Allowances will be provided where the excessive use of water is caused by the size of the household or medical needs in the household. Provision is made that the multiplier of 1.7 may be reduced in time, but not within the first five years of the Act, and not without a positive resolution of the Oireachtas. Guidance is given in the Bill as to the factors that might be taken into account in such a change to the multiplier in the future, which are primarily based on promoting water conservation and sustainable use of resources, reflecting the objectives of the Water Framework Directive.

Section 10 provides for the insertion of a provision into the Water Services Act 2007 to preclude Irish Water from charging a customer for water services provided by Irish Water to the customer's dwelling where that customer does not consume water services in excess of the threshold amount.

Section 11 inserts a provision into the Water Services Act 2007 for Irish Water to give notice to a customer where the threshold amount has been exceeded. A customer who continues to consume water services in excess of the threshold amount after a period of six months following a notice from Irish Water will be liable to pay Irish Water for the provision of any water services that exceed the threshold amount. The payment levels will be set by the commission having regard to the costs of Irish Water. This period of time will allow the customer to adjust consumption patterns or avail of the Irish Water first-fix scheme where the usage is caused by a leak in the grounds of the dwelling.

Section 12 provides that a customer who receives a notice of the provision of water services exceeding the threshold amount can seek an allowance relating to the size of their household to reduce or eliminate their liability. The allowance amount set will be multiplied by the number of persons over four in a dwelling. Section 13 provides that a customer who receives a notice of the provision of water services exceeding the threshold amount can seek an exemption from payment where the usage arises from a medical need of a member of the household giving rise to additional demand for water services.

Section 14 provides for an amendment to section 2 of the No. 2 Act of 2013 to insert the definitions for dwelling, strategic funding plan, threshold amount and water services policy statement. Section 15 provides for the charging of customers of Irish Water for services that exceed the threshold amount in respect of which a customer is liable to make a payment for services relating to the connection of the dwelling to water services and reading and testing of water meters when requested by a customer of Irish Water in respect of the dwelling.

Section 16 provides that the commission for the regulation of utilities, CRU, would have regard to a strategic funding plan prepared by Irish Water when considering a water charges plan submitted by Irish Water. Section 17 provides that Irish Water amends its code of practice to make additional provision in relation to the making of complaints to Irish Water by persons

in relation to notices received relating to the provision of water services and exceeding the threshold amount, and in relation to refunds being made by Irish Water to customers who paid water charges.

Section 18 provides that the Minister shall prepare a water services policy statement before the expiration of the water charges plan. The statement will contain information concerning the policy objectives and priorities of the Government regarding the provision of water services in the State and will be laid before each House of the Oireachtas.

Section 19 provides for Irish Water to prepare and submit a strategic funding plan outlining the arrangements for implementation of the objectives of the water services strategic plan for the duration of the water charges plan being prepared by Irish Water. The strategic funding plan will include an estimate of the costs associated with the provision of water services to dwellings and recovery of those costs, costs associated with the provision of water services to premises other than dwellings and recovery of those costs and income of Irish Water and the operating expenditure and capital expenditure of Irish Water. The strategic funding plan will be laid before each House of the Oireachtas and will be furnished to the commission. I plan to bring forward a technical amendment on Committee Stage in relation to this section. The amendment will clarify that it is the objectives of the water services strategic plan that need to be taken account of when Irish Water is preparing the strategic funding plan.

Section 20 provides for grants to Irish Water, sanctioned by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, towards the expenditure incurred by Irish Water in the provision of water services to a dwelling. Before deciding whether or not to make a grant, the Minister shall have regard to the water charges plan last approved by the CRU, the strategic funding plan last approved by the Minister, the refunds plan, the need to ensure the recovery of costs of water services in line with the Water Framework Directive and the environmental objectives of the EU Water Framework Directive.

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services recommended that there should be funding certainty and long-term stability for the water utility. The proposals in sections 18 to 20 of the Bill are in line with those recommendations. The amendment to which I referred is a minor amendment in relation to the naming of one of those strategies.

Section 21 provides that no liability arises for domestic customers of Irish Water in respect of the period from 1 January 2015 to 30 June 2016, or to any related late payment charge, that is the period prior to the suspension of domestic water charges.

Section 22 provides Irish Water with the power to make a refund payment to a customer who paid a charge for the provision by Irish Water of water services to a dwelling. Section 23 strengthens the role of the commission in relation to disputes between Irish Water and those seeking a connection to the public water or wastewater network. Sections 24 to 32 provide for the establishment of the water forum and set out the provisions relating to the membership, functions and operation of the forum.

Sections 33 to 41 provide for the dissolution of the Public Water Forum and the National Rural Water Services Committee and set out the transitional arrangements in moving towards the establishment of the water forum. Sections 42 to 53 provide for the establishment of the water advisory body and set out the provisions relating to the membership, functions and operation

of the body. Section 54 provides for the Minister for Finance to pay into the local government fund the local property tax collected during the financial years 2014 to 2017. Commencing with the year 2018, the Revenue Commissioners shall pay directly into the local government fund an amount equivalent to the local property tax received by them, including any interest or penalties.

Section 55 provides that the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport can issue directions in relation to the collection of motor tax under sections 5(3) and 7(1) of the 1998 Act. Section 56 amends section 4(6) of the Local Government Act 1998 to provide that from 1 January 2018 all motor tax collected by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport shall be paid into the Central Fund.

Section 57 provides that from 1 January 2018 motor tax collected by local authorities shall be paid to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. It also clarifies that all motor tax collected up to 31 December 2017 shall continue to be paid into the local government fund. Section 58 amends section 6 of the Local Government Act 1998 and provides for the deletion of subsections 1A, 2A, 2AB, 2B, 2CA and 9. It also amends subsection 2C to provide for a payment to the Exchequer in 2017. Section 59 inserts the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport as the relevant Minister. It also adds a provision that any direction in force remains in force.

Section 60 deals with consequential amendments to the water charges plan in force to give effect to the amendments in this Bill. Section 61 provides for Schedule 4 to the Valuation Act 2001 to be amended by the deletion of paragraph 21. This deletion will provide for the entire network used for the provision of water services by Irish Water or a person who holds a water services licence or land and buildings occupied by Irish Water or such a licence holder now to be rateable. Section 62 provides for the removal of the requirement provided for in section 70B(5) to register a domestic wastewater treatment system every five years. Associated sub-heads 70B(6) and (7) are also deleted.

The Bill represents a comprehensive policy and funding framework to bring settlement and certainty to the funding of domestic water services. The framework should also improve transparency and accountability in relation to Irish Water, providing greater information to the Oireachtas and the public on the utility's work. This transparency and information will be underpinned by stronger public and civic engagement on water issues through the new water forum.

The Bill provides for retention of the incentive among households to conserve water and will help Ireland meet the objectives of the Water Framework Directive and other water directives. To be clear, the aim is not to establish a new domestic funding stream for Irish Water. We do not want any money raised through the excessive usage levy. We want to tackle the 8% using 30% of our water. They are using this much either because of leaks or because they are wilfully wasting it. We want to cut out both, not get money for this waste. Again, this is not about new funding. If there are additional people in a home, the allowance will be increased. Those with an illness will be exempt entirely. It provides a framework through which Irish Water and the water services sector can plan and deliver a modern, reliable public water and wastewater system. This is vital for families, communities, the economy and the environment.

The ongoing debate on the funding issues has diverted attention to some degree from the core challenge of fixing our weak water infrastructure. It is time to give certainty to the sector.

The Bill presented today reflects the outcome of a serious consideration of the issues by this Oireachtas. It is time to implement these changes and support Irish Water in focusing on making the changes and investment required to build a modern public water and wastewater system that we can all be proud of, building on the progress already made. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Fianna Fáil supports this legislation, which is a direct result of the confidence and supply arrangement of April 2016. This Bill brings to an end the disastrous water charges regime brought in by Fine Gael and the Labour Party. Now, only those who wilfully waste water after continued warnings will have to pay a fine. All paid bills will be fully refunded. It is a fair outcome to a deeply difficult issue. It is now time to draw a line under this issue and focus our attention on the greater challenges of health, housing and Brexit that face our country today.

Water charges were the straw that broke the back of many ordinary working families across Ireland. The groundswell of opposition to them bears testament to the depth of feeling working people had against a charge they knew was not necessarily going towards their water services. However, it was not the politics of thuggery that defeated water charges. This Bill is the outcome of long debates and hard-fought compromises. Fianna Fáil opposed a charge that cost the State more than it made and hit working families regardless of their ability to pay. After the inconclusive election where voters rejected the broken promises of Fine Gael and the Labour Party, we worked to give our voters a voice. While other parties and Deputies took a ten-week break, our party took the responsible path in reaching an agreement to put in place a stable Government. The pathway to the end of the failed water charges regime was laid out in detail in the confidence and supply arrangement. The work of the expert commission and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services has led to this Bill. Over 22 meetings and detailed discussions, a clear route forward was set out. As a result of that work, we have secured the end of the failed water charges regime, equity of treatment between those who paid and those who did not, an increase in supports for rural dwellers and reform of Irish Water. This outcome was the result of engagement and compromise, the stuff of responsible politics.

It is important to take note of the water charges fiasco that has culminated in this legislation. Many commentators have criticised the decision to end water charges but have failed to acknowledge the reasons the policy failed. If centre ground politics is to have a future, it must recognise where mistakes have been made, take responsibility for them and work to rectify them. Stubbornness should not be mistaken for bravery, indifference should not be confused with principle and rigidity should not be viewed as firmness. This is not a technocracy. Both responsibility and responsiveness must be joined together in a functioning democracy. We must have the bravery to see where things have gone wrong and address them.

This Bill sets about bringing a failed and democratically rejected policy to an end. I want to reiterate the chronicle of failures. By every measure the water charges regime introduced by Fine Gael and the Labour Party utterly failed to achieve its objectives. After a dizzying series of more than 12 U-turns, the Government lost money on domestic water tariffs. In 2015, only 53% of bills due were paid. Some €100 million was spent on the water grant while €41 million is due in interest repayments over the year and another €25 million on administration costs. On this basis, the State lost €22 million in total on its water charges regime in 2015. Water charges have cost the State money. This is important for all Deputies and stakeholders to remember. We had a tax that cost the State money.

This policy debacle, combined with the failure to pass the EUROSTAT test, meant that the very reason Irish Water and water charges were introduced was completely lost. No additional revenue was available for investment in the water infrastructure due to domestic water charges. It was not off balance sheet or able to garner new revenues. The water network was no better off and indeed suffered from Government cutbacks to capital investment. It is against this backdrop that ending water charges must be set, not any hypothetical best-case scenario.

I know the former Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, has been deeply critical of this decision, criticisms he has voiced both inside and outside this House. Deputy Kelly reminds me of Japanese soldiers in remote islands of the Pacific who were still fighting the Second World War in the mid-1970s.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: Deputy Cowen has a selective memory himself.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Deputy Kelly and his colleagues must recognise that the war is over. It is time to move on to another mess of his Government, namely, the housing crisis. In regard to the specifics of this legislation, building on the work of the Oireachtas joint committee, over 92% of households will not have a water bill. The remaining 8% will have until July 2019 to avail of the first fix policy, a medical exemption or the large family clause. Beyond that I believe only people wilfully wasting water, despite the various warnings and measures to assist them, will be fined. I believe this is fair and in line with our EU obligations. The Commission for Energy Regulation, CER, will set what the payment level for each litre above the threshold will be. This will be inserted in the water charges plan, as the Minister outlined in respect of section 21 of the Water Services Act 2013. The Bill allows for the multiplier of 1.7 times the average usage to be reduced by a Dáil vote if the Minister feels certain criteria have been met. Critics have attacked this as a slippery slope whereby the threshold is steadily reduced, taking more and more households into the payment system. However, this wilfully ignores the fact the Dáil retains power over the multiplier. I am informed the clause is required to meet EU laws but the key point is that Deputies have complete control over this process, not any Minister. Given that over a series of motions across the past 18 months we have heard other parties call for a Dáil vote on water charges, I am certain all Deputies agree this Chamber is the place where such power should be vested.

I want to draw attention to the need to equalise treatment between rural dwellers and those on the public mains. Fianna Fáil secured a significant increase in support to group water schemes. I am calling on the Minister to expedite the establishing of the working group on rural water supplies to ensure supports levels are fair to all citizens regardless of where they live.

Drawing on the committee’s work and legal advice, we believe this Bill meets our EU obligations. It also ensures a clear route forward for the capital investment required in our water network to ensure it becomes fit for purpose. It has been a long road to this point. There have been deeply unsavoury moments along the way that reflect badly on those involved. However, street thuggery has not won and democracy has. Votes cast for parties that were willing to show leadership and take responsibility led to policies being enacted. The end of the failed water charges system is a testament to practical politics. It means only water wasters will be penalised. For the overwhelming majority of households, water charges are gone. Let us pass the Bill and mark the end of a failed policy. It is time to turn the page and move on to more pressing national challenges. We hope to play our part, along with others, in ensuring progress is made on these issues.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Deputy Cowen seems to have forgotten some of the more heated sessions at the water charges committee, to which I will return to refresh his memory and point to the difference between what he claims to have got at the end of the process and what is included in this legislation. The Bill before us is the latest in the long and sorry saga of Fianna Fáil's and Fine Gael's water charges regime. Deputy Cowen also forgot to tell us that it was Fianna Fáil who first put water charges on the table, in its agreement with the troika and its own programme for so-called recovery. At that point, they would have been in excess of €400 per household.

It is always worth remembering that we did not need to go down this route. We did not have to have metered domestic water charges. That is because the Government and its negotiators had secured an exemption in Article 9.4 of the water services directive. We could have funded water services directly from general taxation, not in the failed way in which it had historically been done by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael through the chronic underinvestment of local authorities but by way of a real and ambitious programme of general taxation. The problem was that the State simply did not want to invest the required level of revenue prior to the creation of Irish Water and metered domestic water charges. Irish Water's funding model was designed to allow the State to continue to underinvest. The very complex, off-balance sheet model underpinning Irish Water required the introduction of water charges. They were never about conservation and there is a growing body of academic research that shows that domestic water charges do not result in a long-term reduction in domestic water usage. They were never about asking people to pay for the service but underpinning a model that had been designed to allow the State not to invest in this vital strategic public service.

The arguments of those who are opposed to water charges are sometimes lost and we are accused of naked populism or having unconsidered views, but there are three fundamental reasons those of us on this side of the House opposed metered domestic water charges and the Irish Water funding model. The first is commodification. Something changes in a society when one starts to link access to water which is so essential for human life with payment in order that people do not have an entitlement to it on the basis of need but on their ability to pay. That is a fundamental shift which, in countries that have gone down that route, has a very clear consequence, namely, water poverty, something about which we never hear the Government talk in these debates, where families pay a disproportionate or an unacceptable proportion of their income on domestic water services. This member state of the European Union has the unique distinction of being the only one in which there is no water poverty. Some manage it better than others, but it is to be found in all of them.

The second reason we oppose water charges is financialisation. This is another of the great unspoken realities underpinning the original model. If the State refuses to invest the funds required, it requires a utility - in this case, Irish Water - to be reliant on private sector borrowing for funding which comes at a significantly greater cost. One of the most interesting things we discovered during the course of the Oireachtas committee's hearings was the NewERA report which had previously been denied to us under freedom of information legislation but which showed very clearly the additional cost to the State and the taxpayer of going down the private financing route.

The final element is privatisation. The Government will state it never had any intention of privatising water services, but, to some extent, that does not matter. The policy process followed in this country was also followed in many other parts of the world and it involved a set of steps. Even if the original intention was not to privatise a utility, given the level of interest

in the private sector and its desire to invest in such services for profit and given the unwillingness of governments to invest, once commodification and reliance on private finance was introduced, privatisation, almost always and universally, followed.

I was once asked why I was against charges for water but not against charges for electricity and gas. The simple answer is that water provision is fundamentally different. It is a finite resource. There is only a limited amount available, as we know from many studies. Unlike electricity and gas, it is the new oil, the oil of the 21st century. The scale of private financial investment across the world shows that when one goes down this route, those who need water the most often have the poorest access to it. I have no doubt that if Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael had got their way, we would at this point be in a discussion on the possible privatisation of services. We know from looking across the water to England what that means - it means lower levels of investment in infrastructure, higher levels of charges and poor quality service.

Contrary to Deputy Cowen's reading of how we ended up forcing the Government to back-track on this issue, what mattered was a campaign by hundreds of thousands of people who marched, demonstrated, boycotted and used their influence in the general election. One of the first stunning successes of the Right2Water movement of citizens, communities, trade unions and political parties was forcing Fianna Fáil into making two very significant U-turns in its manifesto for the last general election in which, for the first time, it clearly and unequivocally called for the scrapping of water charges and the abolition of Irish Water, a decision I welcomed as a good one. That would not have happened without that mass mobilisation of people across the State.

The Right2Water movement called for a number of things, which are directly relevant to the legislation in front of us and the work of the special Oireachtas committee. The first was for the enshrining in public ownership of the water system in the Constitution, the second was the funding of water services from general taxation and, crucially, increased investment to meet the level of need in the service, while the third was the abolition of water charges and metering and the replacement of Irish Water with a genuinely public and democratically accountable water and sanitation board. Of all the many campaigns in which I have been involved, it has been one of the most successful, but have we yet got to the end of the battle? No, we have not. Have we achieved everything we set out to do? No, we have not. The campaign group is still in place and mobilised and watching proceedings in this House with acute interest.

Contrary to Deputy Cowen's portrayal of the confidence and supply agreement as mature politics, it was really about kicking the can down the road by the two parties on either side of the House who needed each other's support. As they could not reach an agreement, they threw the issue to an expert group and then to a special Oireachtas committee, to be dealt with at a later stage. The first problem for Fine Gael was presented by the recommendations made by the expert group which took the party by surprise. The crucial one involved the recognition of the fact that domestic water services should be funded, in the main, from general taxation. That was a huge shift which discomfited the members of the party. The expert group also fully supported Right2Water's proposition that there should be constitutional protection for water services, as well as making some very good recommendations on other issues.

We then had the special Oireachtas committee. I am not sure whether one could call it calm and reasoned as a lot of the time it became very acrimonious, but we managed to get through the work with some delays. The recommendations made in our report are also important, particularly as most of them are not included in the legislation in front of us. They include

constitutional protection for the public water system. As Deputy Cowen rightly said, equity of treatment for those in group water schemes was important for us, as were greater levels of public engagement and transparency, in relation to which there are some moves made in the legislation. Crucially, it called for a far more ambitious programme targeted at water conservation, planning regulations, education and the use of new technologies. While a number of us did not support the final report, and I will come to that in a second, clearly there was a range of issues on which there was absolute unanimity. The irony of the legislation in front of us is that it is those issues on which there was absolute unanimity that we have yet to see any action from the Government.

That leads me to the Bill before us. This is a complex piece of legislation. However, the Minister speed-reading through a set of bullet points which tell us what is in the explanatory memorandum but do not go into much detail about how the actual text of the Bill will achieve those objectives is deeply disappointing. What have we got? Yet again, another complex piece of water services legislation is being rushed through the House. Our deadline for amendment is Friday. We will rush through Committee Stage next week having only got the Bill from publication last Friday. I am not casting any aspersions on the hard-working officials who produced the legislation but when the House is forced to proceed with these types of Bills in this way, mistakes are made and we have seen that previously, particularly in regard to water services legislation.

I am really surprised with the miscellaneous amendments on property and motor tax. They might be very simple and straightforward but they will be lost in this debate and again, we will not have sufficient time at committee to ensure they are what the Minister says they are.

In terms of what is not in the Bill, there is nothing on the referendum. This House has passed legislation for a referendum. The committee has commenced pre-legislative scrutiny but we cannot progress that Bill because the former Minister and now the current Minister are telling us that they are still awaiting advice from the Attorney General. On the one hand the Minister expects us to pass the legislation he wants to get through the House, such as the Construction Industry Register Ireland, CIRI, legislation and other things coming down the line, but we are none the wiser in terms of when the referendum legislation transpires. I get the feeling that there is a deliberate attempt by the Department to drag its heels on that Bill to prevent the Oireachtas committee from doing its important work. That is disrespectful. I understand that the Attorney General is busy and the Government has a lot of work but it has been almost a year since that Bill was passed in this House by a majority vote, and we still cannot get it through the formal Committee Stage. If the Government does not want to support it, that is fine. If the Government wants to propose amendments, that is fine, but it should come back to committee and let us proceed on all of that.

I strongly echo and support Deputy Cowen's remarks about those in group water schemes. There has been plenty of time over the past year to tackle this issue. I believe what people want to hear is that the Government is absolutely committed to equality of treatment between those in group and private water schemes and those in the public system. If there is no standing charge for people accessing domestic water services for their home in urban Ireland there should be no standing charge for those in rural Ireland, and where additional costs are incurred regarding the installation and maintenance of private or group water schemes, that that would be covered. It is actually very small amounts of money in the bigger scheme of things from the data we got at the committee, but I have yet to hear the Government say it is absolutely committed to that recommendation in a report.

One of the most interesting parts of the committee's deliberations was the very detailed discussions we had on conservation. There were very good contributions from all Members of the House from Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party, the Green Party, ourselves and others yet where are the proposed amendments to planning legislation, building regulations, investment in retrofitting programmes and ensuring that, for example, with social housing new builds all local authorities have to have the highest standards, for example, of water efficiency and water conservation? Local authorities are doing good stuff but there needs to be standardisation of that.

For me, however, there are a couple of really big question marks over the Bill. The single biggest row in the water committee, and Deputy O'Sullivan will remember this, was a row between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Fine Gael wanted an excess charge based on average household consumption. Fianna Fáil wanted an excess charge or a fine, as it calls it, based on individual average consumption. In fact, in the final report, a very well paid senior counsel inserted a sentence which gave us both options and did not recommend one or the other.

From my reading of the Bill, Fine Gael has won-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: Five-person households.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: -----because the average household charge will be based on the dwelling.

Deputy Barry Cowen: How many in the house-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I will come to that in a second, but that was not the argument Deputy Cowen made during the committee. He wanted the basic threshold to be on average usage per person, not per household. Fine Gael has clearly won that and I believe Deputy Cowen has some explaining to do, particularly to his own colleagues who he marched up the hill on two or three occasions during the committee-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: It is five-person households.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: -----and back down again over this very issue.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: He was supporting Deputy Ó Broin at one stage.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: He was, when he could not get what he wanted from Fine Gael, although now he is conceding to its central point at the start of that row.

With regard to an allowance for households of five or more, where does that leave the four-person household, which is particularly disadvantaged under this proposal? It also creates perverse incentives for the one-person household which, if I read the legislation right, will have the same allowance as two-, three- and four-person households. It is not clear whether this charge will only apply to the 8% of households Deputy Cowen spoke about or a large percentage, which was Fine Gael's argument throughout the course of the committee. Deputy Cowen is right. The multiplier can only be reduced by this House, but it can only be reduced. For example, under the legislation this House is denied the opportunity to raise that multiplier if it so wished, so it is not the great saving grace Deputy Cowen believes.

We are also not clear whether this is a fine or a charge. My understanding of the legislation is that if there is excess usage there will be a metric charge depending on how much one is using. That means it is not a fine. It is a charge per unit of water used over a certain amount.

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That leads to another problem. What about all those households that do not have meters because not only has the metering programme stopped but Irish Water has reprofiled the €140 million of unspent money from phases 1 and 2 of the metering programme, sensibly in my view, into the overall capital budget. If we pass this legislation, we could have two households on the one street - one with a meter and one without - both using, according to this legislation, excessive amounts and one is hit with a charge and the other is not. That is a recipe for legal action against the State and Irish Water if ever I heard one.

I also have concerns around the medical exemption because it is not clear how it will operate. That is one of the things a committee would rightfully properly interrogate and I doubt it will have the opportunity to do that. Crucially, we started off in a discussion with Fianna Fáil in the committee on the future of water services around how to assist families to reduce leaks because nobody knows whether the idea that 8% of households are using 30% of water is because of excessive leaks in the piping system, excessive use, willful use, large family size, etc. There is no additional support post the first fix facility to assist those families, so let us say this legislation goes through because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael support it. Let us say my grandmother, for example, has a so-called excessive use. Let us say that is identified and there is a very significant capital cost required to fix that, and she has already had the first fix fee to fix something else on the property. Who will fix it for her? Instead of providing the assistance, which many of us discussed at the committee and thought was a good idea, we are going to hit her with a charge.

There are so many holes in this legislation that I have to say it is not comprehensive. It will not settle this matter once and for all and I believe people who support it will have to do an awful lot of explaining because those groups of people who will be particularly disadvantaged - families of four, people with leaks they cannot afford to fix and people with meters on the same street or neighbourhood as those without - will want to know.

My last point is that the water charges regime as introduced by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael is not dead. It has been badly damaged thanks to the hard-working campaign in which many of us were involved, but it is in retreat. One could almost say it is in hibernation. It may only affect 4%, 6%, 8% or 10% of households but that is today. If we allow this legislation to pass, the infrastructure for domestic metered water charges, with all of the negative consequences that come with that, remains in place and a future Government, which may even be after the next election - a fine coalition of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael - can come back and do exactly what it wants, which is to extend that charge out to ever-increasing numbers of people, commodify a valuable service that is water and revert to the bad model of water services delivery that is becoming the norm across the world. The consequences of that is that there will be water poverty, increased charges and poorer quality services, particularly for those in need. For those reasons, not only will Sinn Féin be absolutely opposing this legislation but we will be doing as much as we can to ensure that those problems with this Bill are fully exposed in committee so that when they start to hit people in the streets, they will know to blame Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will begin by thanking Deputy Cowen for the wonderful moral lecture about the fine qualities of courage, leadership, responsibility and so on. Quite frankly, what we have here is a complete fudge between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, none of that fine sentiment on which he lectured us----

Deputy Barry Cowen: That is a matter of opinion.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: -----as well as a very selective memory, pointed out already by Deputy Ó Broin, of Fianna Fáil’s role in instigating this whole thing and signing up to water charges with the troika. At least the Minister, Deputy Murphy, had the decency to say he is not personally proud of the legislation, and he should not be, but-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: Is the Deputy?

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

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: -----unfortunately, it is being presented to us by the other party to the agreement as if it were this wonderful, brave legislation, which of course it is not at all.

Regarding the first of the two recommendations of the committee, I did not vote for it but I fully support the first recommendation, as everyone does, which concerns public ownership and committing to a referendum in that regard. I know this was not going to be in this legislation, but the timing of eight referendums was announced after the Cabinet meeting this week and none of them was a referendum on the retention of the water network in public ownership. I would have thought we at least need that as the backdrop to whatever legislation we are dealing with because it was something on which we all agreed and was the very first recommendation. It is needed in order to assure the public that the water network will not be privatised, even though legislation was introduced that would in some ways copper-fasten it in so far as it was provided that if there were any suggestion of privatisation, the proposal would have to go to the people. Having said that, we support the recommendation, but I do not understand why we do not have a date for a referendum on public ownership of the water network.

The second issue that was addressed by the committee was funding and security of funding. It was clearly stated that this would be needed in order to satisfy our obligations under the Water Framework Directive and our other EU obligations. The recommendation was to introduce a long-term multi-annual budgetary cycle that “must be clearly identifiable within existing taxation to meet the cost of domestic water services for the water utility in order to comply with Ireland’s EU obligations”. However, the Bill, specifically on page 17, in sections 19 and 20, refers to an obligation on Irish Water to prepare a strategic funding plan and submit it to the Minister. Further on, in section 20, the Bill states: “Without prejudice to the generality of subsection (1), the Minister may, subject to such conditions as he or she sees fit in each financial year, make grants to Irish Water to such extent as may be sanctioned by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform out of moneys provided by the Oireachtas towards the expenditure incurred by Irish Water in the provision of water services to a dwelling.” Essentially, that is the usual round of Estimates whereby water services will have to compete with other public spending. I do not see any ring-fencing of the money or any security into the future that would satisfy either those committee members who wanted that security or the European Union. Therefore, I do not think the Bill satisfies the first or second recommendations, or indeed others.

One of the other recommendations concerns conservation, which has been referred to by previous speakers. There was a very strong commitment to conservation measures in the committee - we spent quite a long time debating it - and I cannot see anything much in the way of incentives in this regard in the Bill, even though the Minister in his concluding remarks said: “The Bill provides for retention of the incentive among households to conserve water and will help Ireland to meet the objectives of the Water Framework Directive and other water directives.” There is very little about conservation in the Bill. These are some of the direct recommendations of the committee. There are passing references to the river basin management plan, EU

rules and the Water Framework Directive but there is nothing to suggest how all of these will be complied with, apart from putting most of the onus on the Commission for Energy Regulation to ensure that happens. That is all I can see in the Bill, and I am concerned it will not satisfy the requirements of the European Union.

Another issue, one that has been raised by Deputy Ó Broin, is the charges applied to those who exceed the average rate multiplied by 1.7. Of course, Deputy Ó Broin is right about this. It is a win for Fine Gael. Fianna Fáil clearly argued for the individual multiplier rather than the household multiplier. The other issue is that it does not at all address how the 48% of the population who do not have meters can be measured accurately and charged for use above the threshold. I suspect that people who have meters and get charged might well have a case to make that they are being unduly punished when those who do not have meters and cannot be as accurately assessed may well escape any kind of penalty or charge. Again, a big play was made by Fianna Fáil in the committee of the 2007 Act and the importance of using it, and terms, fines, levies and charges were bandied about. Clearly, the Fine Gael side of the House wanted charges and that is what it is getting. I wish to be quite clear that we support charging people who use water excessively, with the exemptions regarding issues of health, family size and so on being taken into account.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Beyond the average.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: We are quite upfront about this. We have suffered because of our position.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Does Deputy O’Sullivan know what the average is? She does not even know what the average is.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O’Sullivan, without interruption.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: We believe people should be charged for excessive use of water. We are quite direct about that and we believe it is a principled, left-wing position that is taken in most other European countries by principled, left-wing parties so we disagree with others on the left in that regard.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Labour Party is not a principled, left-wing party.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: I also agree that the issues of rural dwellings, group schemes and so on are not adequately dealt with. Again, that was a recommendation in the “Equity and fairness” section of the report of the Oireachtas committee.

This is a kicking of the can down the road, specifically down the road of charging people until certain elections are completed.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Correct.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: If I read the Bill correctly, the first bills will go out in January 2019. We may well have had a general election by then. That will be up to confidence and supply, etc. Then there will be six months for the Government to straighten out its affairs, which, I presume, will bring us beyond the local elections as well. I think there might be a political agenda in the timetable here that is again related to kicking the can down the road.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They would never do that, would they?

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: No, they would never do that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: I have made the main points I wanted to make. I also agree that until Friday is a very short period in which we can propose amendments. Our objections to the Bill are different from those of other Deputies. In some areas they are the same, as Deputy Ó Broin has outlined. Obviously, we have a different position on charging for excess water and we are quite upfront about that but, overall, this really is a fudge and an attempt to get off a political hook and it is not satisfactory legislation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We now move on to Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett, who I understand is sharing time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am sharing time with Deputy Paul Murphy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Whoever is in possession at 10.15 p.m. will move the adjournment.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We should commence our contribution by taking a drink of water because the people who wanted to bring in water charges - Fianna Fáil first and then Fine Gael - wanted to put a price tag on this glass of water. In fact, there has been a running joke with the ushers here. Every time we have asked for a glass of water over the past four years, they have said, “Have a glass now before they put a price tag on it or we will charge you.”

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We could have a Dáil tap-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Exactly, although there probably would have been subsidised prices for water in the Dáil.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No bilaterals. Please address the Chair.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They might have been subsidised prices here but they would have been charging us for the water. That is what people recognised.

Setting aside all the disingenuous propaganda from the Government about the environmental reasons for bringing in water charges, people knew, and they were right, that the real agenda was to put a price tag on this in order that, at some point, someone could profit out of it. That was the agenda. The Government tried to cover over this fact with constant talk of the need to, and its concern to, invest in the decrepit water infrastructure and to ensure water conservation. It tried to create an equation that as there is 47% of water leaking out of the pipes, which is true, therefore what we need to do is put meters on people’s households to reduce their water usage. It was claimed that the reason we have 47% of the water leaking out of our water system is because of excessive usage - people drinking too much water, having too many baths, flushing the toilet too often or, my favourite one, swimming pools, because there were apparently tens of thousands of people with swimming pools. It was all nonsense.

Belatedly, after all the expenditure on water meters, all the political confrontation, debate and so on, the expert group finally confirmed something we had been saying right from the beginning, which was that ordinary householders were not excessive users of water and that, in fact, we used less water per household and per person than people did in the UK, where they

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have water charges and privatisation, and that we are low users of household water compared with most of our European counterparts. All the justification was nonsense. The real reason we had decrepit water infrastructure was decades of underinvestment by Fianna Fáil-led and Fine Gael-led Governments, because they are the only Governments we have had in this State. It was Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael chronically underinvesting in the water infrastructure and failing to address the massive leaks in the mains, not excessive use in individual households or even leaks. Even Irish Water finally confirmed belatedly that only 7% of the leakage out of the system was to do with households. The vast majority of the leakage was in the mains and the reason this was not addressed was because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, quite often propped up by the Labour Party, had failed to invest sufficiently in the water infrastructure.

That situation worsened after the economic collapse in 2008 when one of the first things to be hit was spending on infrastructure, including water infrastructure. The big drop in investment came post 2008 courtesy of Fianna Fáil and the Green Party and was then followed on by Fine Gael and the Labour Party, when average investment in water infrastructure dropped by about €100 million. It is thanks to those guys. It is not thanks to excessive users or these mythical people with swimming pools, but thanks to the Government decision to axe investment in that area. The people did not believe them because it was not true.

It was not pragmatic politics that finally resolved this. It is almost three years to the day since the political establishment of this country were shocked on 11 October 2014 by a demonstration of 100,000 people taking to the streets, a demonstration, by the way, not characterised by political thuggery, but by grandparents, children, mothers with prams and every sector of society mobilising the length and breadth of the country to come to Dublin in an unprecedented demonstration and saying, “Water is a human right and we reject your agenda to turn it into a commodity out of which someone can make profit.” That shocked the political establishment and forced the beginning of a retreat which has finally culminated in the Bill before us today, which is going to repeal the water charges and pay back these people who were bullied by the establishment into paying the charges that were forced out of them.

While I often criticise this place as being at bit of a talking shop that does not achieve much, the first meeting of the Right2Water campaign happened in LH2000. I organised the meeting and it was attended by Sinn Féin, the Socialist Party, Deputy Seamus Healy, the Independents 4 Change, the Mandate trade union, the Unite trade union and the Communications Workers Union. We came up with the name Right2Water and said that water is a human right and that we were going to resist this, and we named the date for the 11 October demonstration. We did not know at that time how big it was going to be or how historic that movement was going to be. The battle was won by the people on the streets in mass peaceful demonstrations, forcing retreat after retreat on the political establishment.

Then we come to this Bill. Finally, the establishment is forced to capitulate but is trying to leave the door open, still using the same disingenuous arguments about water conservation and excessive use. What I find incredible is that, in all the time the Government has talked about water conservation, it never put in place an actual water conservation grant to encourage or assist people to conserve water. It is still not here in this Bill. It gave €100, which was a bribe and which was not attached in any way at all to having to undertake any water conservation measures, and even now in this Bill there is no water conservation. We bothered to put in our pre-budget submissions for the past three years extra money to help householders who have leaks but cannot afford to fix them, and we put in other water conservation measures. It is proof positive that the Government never cared about water conservation and that it was never the

issue for it. It was always about getting the charging regime going, getting a revenue stream going, getting all the private consultants in, getting our friend, Denis O'Brien, to have the contracts to put in the water meters, and all these people at the big honey pot and the big cash cow. They could make a fortune out of it and the people would pay. Even still, the Government will not put in a water conservation grant. It wants to leave the door open to the future reintroduction of water charges with this excessive charge and by having some billing structure which it can expand later, in a few years, after 2019, when it thinks the political environment might have changed for the better.

All the way along, dishonesty and disingenuousness has characterised the Government's approach but the people found it out and they defeated it. We will resist the attempt in this Bill to leave the door open. Indeed, if the Government makes the mistake of trying to reintroduce water charges in the future, it will feel the wrath of people power and the people's movement that defeated it over the past four years. If the Government cares about water conservation, I look forward to its support for our amendments to this Bill.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will split my speech in half. I will deal with the details of the Bill in the second half tomorrow and will deal now with the question of how far we have come in the debate on water charges. I remember very well when we would be met in here every day, and in the media, by Ministers from Fine Gael and the Labour Party who would tell us that everyone would have to pay their water charges and that, "Come what may, you will be paying your water charges." It is more than three years since Phil Hogan told us that those who did not pay their water charges would have their water turned down to a trickle. It is two years since the Taoiseach, Deputy Leo Varadkar, said that after the concessions were made at the end of 2014 those "reasonable people" would now definitely be joining the payers. All has changed and changed utterly. We have legislation before us that abolishes the water charges as they were and abolishes any arrears people may have faced. The late payment fees and all the attempts to force people to pay are all gone, as we said they could be gone. We now have refunds for those who were bullied into paying. We were the first to raise this and to argue that refunds should be paid. These represent very important victories for the anti-water charges movement.

A big question in this debate, and it was reflected in Deputy Cowen's comments, is how and why this happened. Why did it happen? What lessons are to be drawn about how politics works? For any objective observer who looks at the positions of the different political parties the answer is clear. Water charges, as they were, were defeated by a mass movement of protests. Deputy Cowen shamefully smears this as street thuggery. There were hundreds of thousands of people on the streets, along with community organisations. There was resistance and opposition to the imposition of meters. Centrally there was mass organised non-payment, which ultimately saw 73% of people refusing to pay. One of the consequences of such a movement, and one of the indications of the pressure that was built by that movement, was the shift in positions - as has been pointed out by Fianna Fáil - to the point that at the last general election a significant majority of Deputies were elected to the House on a platform of the abolition of Irish Water and the abolition of water charges, despite the fact Fianna Fáil originally signed this country up for water charges.

What could have been a total and unambiguous victory, with the complete abolition of water charges and the referendum to enshrine public ownership of Irish Water into the Constitution, was turned into something less than that. It was turned into something less than that by Fianna Fáil. It was not turned into it by Fine Gael because Fine Gael are still for water charges and never pretended otherwise. It was turned into something less by Fianna Fáil in three stages.

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The first stage was in the post-election negotiations with Fine Gael where it gave up on its election commitment, contained in the Fianna Fáil election manifesto, of which I still have a copy, that called for the abolition of Irish Water and water charges. It gave up on the commitment to abolish Irish Water then.

The second stage was in the dying stages of the committee on which we had a working majority in regard to the decision to get rid of water charges and to have no consumption charges for water. This was on 5 April. The next day, or the following week, we had legal advice that contradicted the legal advice of Fianna Fáil and that was all it needed to go and do a very dodgy, backroom deal with Fine Gael to fit back in some form of charge for the usage of water. It was called excess usage but it was a consumption charge for water.

The third stage may be ahead of us but I worry very much about it. I listened to the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, in the Chamber yesterday. He said that the referendum on public ownership of Irish Water is no longer a priority for the Government like it once was. Is Fianna Fáil going to acquiesce in that also, despite jumping up and down previously? The lesson is really clear and one that most people knew beforehand, namely, never, ever trust Fianna Fáil. Fianna Fáil will always make election promises and it will break those election promises. Fianna Fáil will suggest making a deal with some side of a committee and it will break that in order to make a deal that sells out the aspirations of many of those who voted for Fianna Fáil.

The other lesson is that regardless of the machinations of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, we can beat them anyway. They have been beaten before and they will be beaten again. The lesson for people is the people power of organisation.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.15 p.m. until 12 noon on Thursday, 28 September 2017.