



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 16 Eanáir 2018

Tuesday, 16 January 2018

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: Over the recent period, the number of patients on trolleys in our accident and emergency departments has broken all records and fairly and objectively represents a damning indictment of the Government's lack of planning in respect of this crisis, its lack of urgency, its lack of prioritisation of a phenomenon that has caused significant distress to many patients and families throughout the country, and much more. The Irish Association for Emergency Medicine reasonably asked how many more patients would have to die needlessly while inertia prevailed. This is in a context in which it is estimated that 350 to 400 deaths per year are directly attributable to emergency department overcrowding.

This situation is interesting, given what happens in Scotland and England. In Scotland, just 6% of patients waited for longer than four hours. In Ireland, 19% of patients waited for longer than nine hours, which is a considerable difference. In England, commentators describe people waiting longer than four hours as a shocking lapse. Ms Susan Mitchell recently put it well in her article in the *Sunday Business Post*, which stated: "What passes for inexcusable in Britain would represent a huge improvement for the Irish health system."

Three years ago, the Taoiseach as Minister for Health said that he was "sick to death" of the problem and that he would solve it once and for all. He referenced a long-term plan to solve it. Three years on and that plan has never materialised. As we know, the situation has become much worse since that announcement by the Taoiseach. This reflects a continuing unacceptable approach, a fundamental lack of urgency in respect of this issue and, sometimes, an attempt to normalise it. The toleration threshold relating to people waiting in accident and emergency departments is simply unacceptable and too high. The level of complacency is shocking.

In terms of some of the Government's own metrics and targets, the capital provision is woefully inadequate and does not provide for any meaningful response to the awaited bed capacity review. On the GP contract talks, we have been told for the past two or three years that something would materialise but it has not. Nothing is happening. Community intervention teams have not been established and providing diagnostics in the community is another aspiration.

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There is a lack of home support and so on and the crisis is all round. The budget is passed in October and the HSE's service plan is published in late December. There is an absence of transparency in the lead up to the budget. The Government takes it on trust that adequate provision will be made for acute services but that never materialises.

Does the Taoiseach accept that the Government did not adequately prepare for the current crisis and that this is why there were record numbers on trolleys, which caused enormous distress to people throughout the country? Will he confirm that real, meaningful funding will be provided to underpin the recommendations of the bed capacity review in terms of extra beds in 2018?

The Taoiseach: I would like to start by welcoming everyone back to the House after the December and January recess. I also want to begin by paying tribute to Dolores O'Riordan who died yesterday. For so many of us, especially those of us who grew up in the 1990s, she was the voice of a generation. No matter where one was in the world in recent times, it would not be long before one heard a Cranberries song on the radio, even in the most far-flung places. Dolores blazed a trail across the world with her unique voice and song-writing talent. Our thoughts are with her children, family, friends and the people of Limerick in particular. Guth glúine ab ea Dolores O'Riordan. Beidh a hoidhreacht ceoil linn go deo. Go ndéana Dia trócaire ar a hanam.

Regarding hospital overcrowding, which was raised by the leader of the Opposition just now, according to the HSE, 415 patients were on trolleys in emergency departments and on wards this morning. We expect that number to fall throughout the day, as it usually does, to approximately 250. It is important to say that two thirds of people who attend an emergency department are through it within nine hours. In other words, from the time that he or she registers, a patient is either in a hospital bed or discharged home within nine hours. That is the experience for two thirds of patients but, of course, the experience for many others is much worse and can sometimes involve prolonged periods spent in emergency departments or on trolleys while waiting for beds. That is something I do not seek to defend in the House today because it is not defensible.

If this was simply a matter of political will or finance, we would have resolved this problem a long time ago. Indeed, in 2006, Deputy Micheál Martin was a member of the Government which declared this a national emergency. The Deputy's party was in government for a further five years after that. That was-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Taoiseach served as Minister of Health in the intervening period.

Deputy Dara Calleary: What is this Government's plan?

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: If it was simply a matter of political will on the part of any party or of providing Government funding, the matter would have been resolved by now. That is particularly obvious when one considers that there has been an almost 20% increase in health funding in the past three years. The population has increased and there are now more older people here. There has also been pay restoration but certainly not in the region of 20%. Depending on whose figures one accepts, funding for our health service puts Ireland in the top six or top three in the world on a *per-capita* basis. As a doctor who worked for seven years in our health service, including in emergency departments, as a former Minister for Health, as a politician

who represents tens of thousands of constituents and as somebody who has elderly relatives who, on occasion, have had to spend time on hospital trolleys, I can say that the Government is doing everything it can to alleviate both the short-term and longer-term issues involved. I do not want any citizen to face the indignity or the clinical risk that comes with a prolonged stay on a hospital trolley.

In terms of what is being done, the Cabinet discussed this matter in detail last week. We are going to continue to press ahead with increasing our hospital bed capacity - increasing the number of acute beds in our system. That is under way already. Almost 200 new beds have come into the system in the last year. The number of beds in the system increased in the previous year as well. The Minister for Health will bring the bed capacity review to the Cabinet before the end of the week. We have approved the resumption of talks with GPs on a new contract. Obviously, it takes two to tango. We are very keen to have the new contract agreed this year in order that implementation can begin. The position of director of health service reform, as head of the Sláintecare office, was advertised on Friday. I hope we get good applicants for that position.

We want a particular focus on mainstreaming best practice across our health service because there are huge variations. Hospitals like Beaumont Hospital, St. Vincent's University Hospital, Connolly Hospital, Cavan General Hospital and Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda have seen considerable reductions in hospital overcrowding. Interestingly, figures from the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation for the eastern region show that last year, overcrowding across the hospitals in Dublin and Naas was at its lowest level since records began, even though there has been a big increase in population and in ageing in that region. There are huge variations across hospitals. I suggest that in the future, we should place a greater focus on mainstreaming best practice where it occurs in the health service, as it often does. We need to make sure best practice is mainstreamed. We need to ensure additional resources are put into rewarding good performance and best practice. We should not always put more resources into systems that do not work.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On a point of order, I would like an opportunity on the Order of Business to pay tribute to Dolores O'Riordan. I thought that was the opportunity we were going to be afforded.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I was Minister for Health from 2000 to 2004. Some 1,600 extra beds were provided between 2000 and 2005. That occurred under my watch. Contrary to what the Minister, Deputy Harris, has been saying on the radio, there was massive investment in acute hospitals at that time. I will leave that to one side because people are interested in the issues we are facing here and now.

I will explain why I have said there is a lack of urgency. Last summer, Letterkenny University Hospital made a submission to the HSE and the Government for an extra 20 beds at a cost of €1.8 million. It did this last summer so that it would be ready for Christmas and the winter initiative. It did not receive a reply. Deputy McConalogue raised the matter with the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Harris, and as a topical issue, but no action was taken. As a result, there are 36 people waiting on trolleys at the hospital for admission today. Last week, Letterkenny University Hospital had the unenviable claim of having the highest number of people on trolleys - 45 - which is an illustration of how chronic this issue is. I understand there were 2,000 people on trolleys at the hospital in 2016. According to Deputy McConalogue, that

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figure increased to 5,000 in 2017. The hospital had a solution and it made a submission, but it did not receive a response. When Deputy Kelleher raised this matter at the health committee some months ago, he was assured that things would be looked after and that we would not have record numbers of people on trolleys. We are beating those records every year.

The Taoiseach and his Fine Gael colleagues have been in government for seven years. It is about time they took responsibility for their time in government in respect of issues like this. The failure to respond to cases like Letterkenny resulted in the exacerbated crisis we witnessed this Christmas. There are other examples across the country of submissions being made to the Minister in plenty of time. Hospitals sought funding to try to alleviate the worst of the crisis but they simply were not responded to. The Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Harris, were alerted to the Letterkenny submission but there was no response to it.

The Taoiseach: Funding for Letterkenny University Hospital has increased from €94 million five years ago to €121 million this year.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am talking about capital provision for beds.

The Taoiseach: Its budget has increased by almost €30 million.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: What about the 20 beds and the 36 people on trolleys today?

The Taoiseach: We need to have a health service in which such a level of increase in funding and investment results in better outcomes for patients.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not the issue.

The Taoiseach: If that does not happen, we will continue to do more of the same.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Is that a threat to close wards?

The Taoiseach: We know that more of the same does not work.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Government controls the HSE. It should have got rid of the board.

The Taoiseach: I did not bring up the fact that Deputy Martin is a former Minister for Health. I brought up a different fact, which I think is important. I mentioned a decision that was taken. It is important for us to double back a bit when we analyse these issues. In 2007, it was decided to start reducing our hospital bed stock. That decision was not made at the time because we were short of money. It was made during the boom.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not true.

The Taoiseach: From 2007 onwards, the number of acute beds was reduced.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No. The Taoiseach is wrong.

The Taoiseach: Fianna Fáil, the Progressive Democrats and the Green Party made an ideological decision-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is factually incorrect.

The Taoiseach: It is not factually incorrect.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have the figures.

The Taoiseach: If Deputy Micheál Martin wants to see the figures, they are available in the key trends in health document published by the Department at the end of each year. From 2007 onwards, the number of acute hospital beds was reduced every year. In 2015, however, as Minister for Health, I took the decision to reverse that trend and started to increase the number of acute hospital beds again. The figure increased in 2016 and 2017 and additional beds will be provided this year in Beaumont Hospital, St. James's Hospital, St. Luke's Hospital, Kilkenny, Drogheda hospital, Limerick hospital and Galway hospital, with a modular build under way at Clonmel hospital. It is not the case that this is a simple matter. Where we have put more beds into the system, it has not always resulted in reduced overcrowding, yet significant changes to practices have made a big difference in other places. The Government will do all it can in the short to medium term to alleviate the problem.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Aontaím leis an Taoiseach i dtaca lena fhocail chomhbhróin faoi bhás Dolores O'Riordan. Tá ár smaointí lena teaghlach agus a cairde ag an am brónach seo.

On the questions put by the leader of Fianna Fáil, perhaps Deputy Micheál Martin will support Sinn Féin's Private Members' motion this evening on the trolley crisis.

I return to the issue of the absence of adequate respite care services for children living with a disability. The Taoiseach has often said he welcomes constructive proposals from the Opposition. On 6 December last year, when I put to him a modest, costed proposal to increase respite care services, he committed to examine it. I also sent him a detailed copy of my proposal in writing, but he has yet to respond to me. One week after I made my proposal, the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Finian McGrath, announced that he had secured an additional €10 million for respite care services. As I told the Taoiseach many times, there are no emergency services and only a limited number of respite care beds in my constituency of Louth. While the Minister of State's announcement was presented in part as an urgent response to this issue, it has since emerged that the additional funding is grossly inadequate and a task force to examine the matter has not yet met.

In most cases, this involves citizens in a family setting. However, it has emerged that children with a disability who are in the care of the State are being denied respite care facilities. An investigation by the Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, has found that the State has been denying the necessary supports to a woman who has been fostering for 14 years Molly, a teenager with Down's syndrome and severe autism. Molly's carer accused the Health Service Executive and Tusla of abandoning her and leaving her financially, emotionally and physically drained. The Ombudsman for Children found the HSE had abdicated its responsibility to Molly's foster mother by refusing to fund respite care for her. As I am sure the Taoiseach knows, this has caused horrific stress. The report of the Ombudsman for Children is damning. It found that the State's actions had a negative effect on Molly who did not have the opportunity to reach her full potential and that the actions of the State were contrary to fair and sound practice. There are 472 children, including Molly, with disabilities in the care of the State. Among his recommendations, the Ombudsman for Children calls for a respite care action plan for children with a disability in the care of the State and the community at large. While these recommendations have been accepted by the HSE and Tusla, the former has pointed out that its commitment in this area is ultimately resource dependent, in other words, it is now over to the Taoiseach.

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This is not another shameful, historical episode of neglect or ill treatment of children in the care of the State. It is occurring now and we will not be able to blame anybody else if it continues because it is taking place on our watch. Does the Taoiseach accept that the report is damning? Does he accept its recommendations and will he provide the resources needed?

The Taoiseach: The Government decided this morning that we would not oppose the Sinn Féin motion on hospital overcrowding. We want to be in solutions mode and will discuss solutions. For this reason, we will table an amendment, but will not oppose the motion. We hope the debate on the matter this week will be solutions-focused, something I believe we all want.

The proposal Deputy Gerry Adams made to me before Christmas did not add up because, as he knows, Sinn Féin's alternative budget proposed a smaller increase in funding for health and disability services than we had allocated. We responded in kind, which is more important, by providing an extra €10 million for respite care services in the year ahead. Later this year we will also provide a statutory right for all those in receipt of carer's allowance to see their general practitioner for free. This comes on top of our decision last year to provide all children with a severe disability with a full medical card as a statutory right for the first time.

I was asked about the report on the case of Molly. Tusla and the HSE accept the Ombudsman for Children's report in full and are committed to implementing its recommendations. I know that the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Finian McGrath, with whom I discussed the matter this morning and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Katherine Zappone, take the findings very seriously. The investigation highlights a gap in the provision and co-ordination of supports and services by Tusla and the HSE for children in foster care with a diagnosed moderate or severe disability. We all respect and value the role of foster carers, particularly foster parents who take on children with special needs, additional needs or disabilities. The report published by the Ombudsman for Children on the complaint which was made in 2014 by a foster carer on behalf of her foster daughter is of real concern to the Government. Action is already under way, including a review of the supports available to Molly and monitoring her care to ensure her needs will be met into the future. Furthermore, Tusla and the HSE are reviewing all similar cases of children with moderate or severe disabilities who are in foster care with a view to maximising the level of co-ordination, co-operation and support. There must be many other Mollys and we want to ensure the State agencies will review all similar cases.

We must continue to support foster carers who, like Molly's family, have opened their homes to children who cannot live with their own families. As I mentioned prior to Christmas, we provided an additional €10 million for respite care services to support people with disabilities throughout the State and their carers. A joint working protocol has been agreed between Tusla and the HSE. It has been in place since last year and is to ensure Tusla and the HSE will work more closely together. However, it only came into effect on 1 January this year, only a number of days ago. Both agencies are absolutely committed to ongoing implementation of the protocol throughout the country.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I am disappointed with the Taoiseach's answer. Will he send me a detailed considered response in writing to the written proposal I put to him? I will respond to it at that time.

It is welcome that the Taoiseach is saying he will not oppose our Private Members' motion. Ná habair é, déan é. He should not simply talk about it but act on the recommendations we are

putting forward.

The Taoiseach says Ministers are taking the report mentioned seriously. That is an understatement. It is a damning report that indicts the State and its agencies for the way it has treated the child in question and her foster mother. I am calling on the Taoiseach to act on the report and provide resources. He did not answer that point. Those involved in the HSE say they are dependent on the resources they are receiving.

The Taoiseach should know that workers in section 39 agencies are balloting on industrial action because they are being denied pay restoration. He needs to give these workers their entitlements, otherwise, added to all of the other problems, the strike will go ahead and the crisis will be compounded.

This is all about rights. Children with disabilities, whether those being cared for by carers in the community or in the care of the State, have rights. The State is actively denying them their rights and I am asking the Taoiseach to correct the position.

The Taoiseach: We are providing additional resources all the time for the health service and people with disabilities. Obviously, we need to establish what additional resources may be required to implement the report in full and apply it to other similar cases. Certainly that is what we intend to do. Sometimes, even when we provide financial resources, we can have difficulty in finding staff. That is something on which we will continue to work and improve. I will offer one small example in the provision of special needs assistants. There are now approximately 14,000 in the State. We have more special needs assistants than gardaí or doctors. Some seven or eight years ago that would not have been the case. It is one small example of the Government meeting its commitment to provide people with disabilities with the opportunity they deserve to be equal citizens of the State.

I have discussed the matter of section 39 agencies before with Deputy Gerry Adams. I have answered in the House the question of how we intend to proceed in dealing with it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I would like to associate myself and the Labour Party with the expressions of sympathy for the family and friends of Dolores O’Riordan, and the people of Limerick, on her sudden and tragic passing.

The past two weeks have been dominated by what is now an annual crisis in accident and emergency departments. It is a sad reflection on our society that news of hundreds of sick people on trolleys is no longer shocking. According to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, there are 541 people on trolleys, 413 in emergency departments and a further 128 on wards today. Last year almost 100,000 people spent at least one night on a trolley. That is a shocking number. Our hospitals are operating at an occupancy rate of 95%, which is well above international safe levels.

The Government has almost perfected the management of the news cycle as this annual crisis erupts. There are many myths about the trolley crisis and many proposed solutions. I think the Taoiseach will agree with me that it is important that we do not talk down our health service. There are real problems that we need to resolve. Immense work is being done every day and every night in our hospitals treating sick people. Our population is growing. It is ageing and health problems have become more complex. Diseases that once killed are now being managed and new solutions are being provided to manage complicated illnesses. Progress is being made. Our health service staff are national heroes who save lives every day and we have much to be

proud of but we must address the problems.

The Government has perfected the line that it is not a matter of money or resources and we heard that again today. At the heart of the trolley crisis is a lack of capacity and staff and to solve that requires money. Government makes choices and its choice in the last budget was to provide tax cuts rather than to move every cent we had into addressing the crises we face. We should have almost 4,000 consultants but we have fewer than 3,000. Everybody is in agreement that we also need more acute hospital beds. A bed capacity review is still awaited but the number of beds needed has been estimated from up to 9,000, or at a minimum 2,500, over the next ten years if the Sláintecare project agreed in this House is to be implemented.

What is the Taoiseach's plan and what is the actual target to hire more doctors in the coming 12 months? Is the Government going to close the accident and emergency department in Portlaoise hospital and reduce accident and emergency capacity further? How many extra acute beds will the Government put in place this year and each year up to 2021?

The Taoiseach: I am still shocked by the overcrowding in our hospitals. I am also shocked that it has taken and is taking so long to resolve it. The figure of 100,000 the Deputy gives does not refer to people who spent the night on a trolley. That is a count done at 8 a.m. and could include people on a trolley for fewer than nine hours, maybe even one hour or two hours. The figures collated by the INMO by its own explanation, on its website, include patients who are not on trolleys but are in the wrong sort of bed in, for example, an overflow ward or a unit that should have 12 beds but now has 14 and so on. As more categories of patients are added to that count inevitably the number will go up. That is how these things work.

I very much agree with what the Deputy said, there are many good things happening in our health service and we should recognise them. Life expectancy in Ireland is improving, we are living longer than ever before. That is because of improved public health and a better health service. Irish people when asked about their health rate it as being better than in any other country in the western world. Death rates from cancer, cardiovascular disease and stroke are falling. Those are real positives too and would not be happening if we did not have a well-functioning health service at least in some parts.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Good long-term strategies.

The Taoiseach: In respect of patient experience surveys, when 14,000 Irish patients were asked what they thought of their experience in the health service, never mind what we think, 85% said they had a good or very good experience of our health service. That does not diminish for one second the fact that some patients have a very bad experience of the health service. That is something we need to change.

In pressing ahead, yes, there will be more beds.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: How many?

The Taoiseach: There will also be more staff and money. The increase in the number of beds is happening. I think the figure for this year is 190 additional beds. We do not yet have a figure for next year, but we are working on it as part of the capital plan. There will be more beds this year, as there were last year and the year before. To give the Deputy the figures - in 2017 the number of inpatient beds was 12,123. By 2011 it had been cut to 10,849.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach should go before and beyond that year.

The Taoiseach: More than 1,200 inpatient beds were taken out of the system by previous Governments-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach is incredible.

The Taoiseach: -----which involved Fianna Fáil, the Progressive Democrats and the Green Party.

Deputy Simon Harris: Why did Fianna Fáil let them do it?

The Taoiseach: We are reversing that trend.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is a disgrace.

The Taoiseach: We have more staff in the health service. I think the number is now 110,000, up by 10,000 on the figure five years ago. Notwithstanding the problems we are having in recruitment, we now have nearly 10,000 doctors working in the public health service and more consultants than ever before.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The central spin office is paying off.

The Taoiseach: The figure will increase. We have about 1,500 or 2,000 more nurses than we had two years ago. Therefore, there are more beds and staff. There is also more money and there will be more beds, staff and money.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: There are more patients on trolleys. What is this about? What is missing?

The Taoiseach: The point the Government and I continuously make is not that we do not need more resources but that more resources on their own are clearly not enough. Increased resources have not produced the results we want.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: There is a report in today's edition of *The Irish Times* that emergency care services may be removed from hospitals in the Dublin-Midlands hospital group. I have a simple question to ask. Is that true? On the specific questions I asked, does the Taoiseach accept that there is a need for between 2,500 and 9,000 more beds? Providing 190 additional beds in the coming 12 months will go nowhere near addressing the issues. Will the Taoiseach answer the question as to what he thinks is the correct number of consultants who need to be recruited in the next 12 months?

The Taoiseach: We do not have any plan to close any emergency department in the State, not least because to do so properly, one would need to make sure patients would be adequately provided for in the next centre, the new hospital or the adjoining hospital and that they would have the capacity to deal with the additional workload. We saw the difficulties faced by St. Vincent's University Hospital when St. Columcille's Hospital had its emergency department closed. We also saw the difficulties in Limerick arising from the closures in Ennis and Nenagh. It is not that it was the wrong thing to do. Clinically, it was the right thing to do. However, one needs to make sure the new central hospitals have adequate capacity to deal with the additional patient loads and evidently they do not. That is something we need to take into account.

The bed capacity review indicates that, with reform, we will need 2,500 additional inpatient

beds by 2031. As I have no reason to dispute that figure, I am happy to accept the recommendation made in the report. It is not the provision of 2,500 additional inpatient beds yesterday or tomorrow but between now and 2031, which works out at about 200 or 250 a year. We would like to front-load that number, but one cannot build hospital wings and new hospitals all that quickly. As I mentioned, we will have about 190 additional beds in hospitals this year and we are working to see how quickly we can front-load that number, if possible. It is being worked on as part of the capital plan.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Spin.

The Taoiseach: When it comes to consultants, I think it was the Hanly report that recommended we needed about 4,000. As that is probably a little out of date at this stage, we will need to update it also. It takes a long time to train a consultant and having trained so long, a lot of them do not want to do certain jobs. We need to be realistic about how many we can recruit on an ongoing basis and advertise posts for which people will actually apply. Unfortunately, while there will be a lot of applicants for some posts in the big Dublin hospitals, there will not be for others. We need to be realistic about that, too. There are places where people want to work and places where they do not. That is just the reality.

There was one other part to the Deputy's question. I am sorry, but I have forgotten the next part.

Deputy Michael Lowry: In the 1970s a group of forward-thinking individuals set up a voluntary committee to meet the needs of children with special needs in south Tipperary who were at home and not receiving an education. The town of Cashel now boasts that it has the invaluable service provided by two special schools, Scoil Chormaic and Scoil Aonghusa. Some 320 special needs pupils from all over County Tipperary and parts of the bordering counties of Waterford, Kilkenny, Cork, Limerick and Offaly attend both schools.

Scoil Aonghusa is experiencing a major crisis at present. A child attending the school will have little or no speech and may never acquire it. He or she will find it very difficult to learn new skills and will need support with daily activities such as mobility, toileting, eating, dressing, washing and keeping safe. The children have health problems including seizures and dietary and digestive issues. They have sensory issues such as visual impairment and-or hearing impairment. They have psychiatric conditions and difficulties with social skills. Without a doubt, these are some of the most vulnerable children in our society, yet there is shameful neglect and under resourcing of special schools.

Scoil Aonghusa has 97 students with intellectual, physical and huge complex needs in a building which is totally unfit and unsuitable. It was originally built in 1985. Some 80% of the students are non-verbal, 30% are physically disabled and 50% present with varying degrees of aggressive and destructive challenging behaviour, with the ability to cause injury to themselves and others. Due to overcrowding, four classrooms have been rented from an adjacent property. Some 19 junior ASD pupils have to be transported on a daily basis from the school to another rented building in the town, which is a mile away. Ten students, who have life-limiting conditions, are sharing a classroom which was built for six. There is no proper PE hall or assembly area. There is one changing facility in the school with a hoist for the needs of the children. There is no longer a dining room because it has been turned into a classroom. The children are eating in their classrooms.

Traffic congestion is a huge issue. The area is an accident waiting to happen. It is chaotic because 27 buses use the only entrance to the school building to enter and exit twice daily. Some 60 staff enter and exit through the same entrance. A boxroom is called a doctor's consultation area, but it is simply too small and unfit for purpose. The school is relying on the generosity of staff, parents and friends of the school to fundraise in order to meet the small shortfall from the Department. Parents have told us of their frustration, desperation and sense of isolation due to the fact that their special children cannot access adequate supports and services.

Children with special needs in our society do not have a voice. Scoil Aonghusa, on behalf of its pupils, is appealing to the Taoiseach to intervene and recognise the ongoing crisis it is living with on a daily basis. I ask the Taoiseach to ensure that we can expedite a new building and facilities on the Scoil Aonghusa site.

The Taoiseach: The Government's aim is to ensure that every child, especially those with special educational needs, can fulfil his or her potential and avail of all of the educational opportunities available to him or her. During the worst years of the recession when public spending was cut across the board, it was one of the areas which was protected from spending reductions. In fact, resources grew throughout the recession and continue to do so.

The Department targets policies and supports for students with special educational needs to support their participation and progression across the continuum of education. For example, last year the Department of Education and Skills invested €1.78 billion in the special education budget, which is now almost a fifth of the entire education budget and is more than we invest in higher education. There has been a 44% increase since 2011, when the change of Government occurred.

The number of special needs assistants increased during the same period by 32%, from 10,575 to 13,990. As I said, we now have more special needs assistants in the country than we have gardaí or doctors. The number of special classes has also increased by 120%, with over 600 new special classes opened since 2011. We now have 1,100 special classes. The new model for allocating resource teachers to schools has been successfully introduced, with 900 additional teachers allocated from September last year to support the model and ensure that children with special needs can access the teaching supports they need. That is a reflection of the enormous needs that exist in our community but also of the Government's very large and robust response.

I understand that Scoil Aonghusa has applied for major capital funding for the provision of 12 new classrooms, a general purpose hall and additional ASD facilities, together with improvements to mechanical and electrical services. The application is currently being considered by the Department of Education and Skills. Arrangements are being made by the Department to carry out a technical site visit in the near future in order to assess the existing accommodation and how best to provide the accommodation required to meet the long-term needs of this particular school. I will ask the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Bruton, to update Deputy Lowry once the site visit has taken place.

Deputy Michael Lowry: It is important for the Minister for Education and Skills to understand that the school building committee has sourced and purchased land adjacent to the current site. The school committee has also privately funded the drawing up of plans which have been submitted to the Department. The principal of the school has clearly stated that the current situation cannot continue and that all possible adaptations of the existing building have already

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been exhausted. The critical state of the existing building means that staff are in constant and imminent danger. Already this year, three members of staff at the school are on injury leave. That cannot be allowed to continue. I ask that the Minister for Education and Skills address the chronic overcrowding and the unacceptable lack of facilities at Scoil Aonghusa. What we need is an urgent action plan to address and remedy what is an intolerable situation for management and staff at the school and the pupils who attend it.

The Taoiseach: I am informed that the enrolment of the school for 2017 and 2018 is 97 pupils. That represents a 28% increase over the past five years, so this is clearly an expanding school - with a growing number of pupils - that is responding to the needs that exist in the local community. In terms of the Department's capital budget, its first priority when it comes to school building is what it has to be, namely, building new schools in areas of increasing population. This is because we cannot have a situation whereby there are children looking into empty fields and not having schools to go to at all. A huge amount of the budget is now being taken up by building new schools, very often in rapidly expanding areas where there are new families and no schools at all. That has to be the priority. Obviously, once that is covered, we can then move on to improving, upgrading and extending older schools. As I said, what is intended now is that a site visit will take place. When that happens, the Minister for Education and Skills will update the Deputy on the progress being made.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Leaders' Questions which, again, have run significantly over time.

Order of Business

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh): Today's business shall be No. 30, post-European Council statements; No. 31, Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2017 - Second Stage (resumed); and Private Members' business shall be No. 168, motion re trolley crisis, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be statements on the Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution; No. 31, Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2017 - Second Stage (resumed); and Private Members' business shall be No. 169, motion re reimbursing staff of section 39 agencies, selected by Fianna Fáil.

Thursday's business shall be No. 31, Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2017 - Second Stage (resumed), if not previously concluded; and No. 32, statements on the report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution (resumed), if not previously concluded.

I refer to the second revised report of the Business Committee dated 15 January 2018 in respect of today's business. It is proposed that:

(1) post-European Council statements shall commence immediately after Taoiseach's Questions and will be followed by Questions to the Minister for Rural and Community Development. The statements will be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour and 45 minutes, if not previously concluded, and shall be confined to a single round for An Taoiseach and the main spokespersons for parties or groups, or a member nominated in their stead, for a period not exceeding ten minutes each. A Minister or Minister of State shall take questions and answers for a period not exceeding 20 minutes, with a five-minute response from the

Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time;

(2) Notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 143F, the rota for Private Members' business on 16 to 23 January, shall be in the following temporary sequence: Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, Social Democrats-Green Party group, whereupon the sequence in the Standing Order shall continue; and

(3) Private Members' business shall be taken at 8 p.m., or on the conclusion of the Topical Issue debate, whichever is the later, for two hours and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of Private Members' business.

With regard to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

(1) there shall be no Taoiseach's questions and the sos, in accordance with Standing Order 25(1), shall take place on the conclusion of Questions on Promised Legislation; and

(2) the opening round of statements on the Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution shall be confined to a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties or groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, for a period not exceeding 20 minutes each. In the following round, statements shall be confined to members of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution for a period not exceeding 20 minutes each. All other Members shall have 20 minutes each, with a ten-minute response from the Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time. The statements shall adjourn at 8.15 p.m., if not previously concluded, to take Second Stage, resumed, of the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2017, unless previously concluded. If the proceedings on Second Stage of the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2017 conclude before 10.15 p.m., the statements shall resume.

With regard to Thursday's business, it is proposed that:

(1) the proceedings on Second Stage of the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2017 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 4.30 p.m. and any division demanded on the conclusion of Second Stage on Thursday shall be taken on Tuesday 23 January 2017 after the Order of Business;

(2) the Topical Issue debate shall take place not later than 7 p.m.; and

(3) no Private Members' Bill shall be taken under Standing Order 140A and no committee report shall be taken under Standing Order 91(2).

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three proposals to put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with today's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to?

Deputy Bríd Smith: It is not agreed. I would like an explanation from the Chief Whip as to why the decision taken by the Business Committee last week to allow each Member a ten-minute slot in the debate on the referendum on the eighth amendment was changed to allow for 20-minute slots. Could he explain why it is necessary for each speaker to have 20 minutes? My understanding is that both the Chief Whip and the Minister for Health contacted the business office to seek a doubling of the time allocated. I also understand that every Deputy in this House is entitled to speak for 20 minutes. That would effectively allow for 52.3 hours of debate on the joint committee's report if every Deputy wanted to use his or her 20 minutes. It just does not

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make sense. How much can one say about this issue, which we have been debating for years? Women's health has waited long enough. Could we please accept the proposal from Solidarity—People Before Profit to revert to the original decision of the Business Committee, that is, to allow for ten-minute slots?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. She has made her point. No one else wants to contribute on this particular matter. Has the Minister of State anything to add?

Deputy Joe McHugh: On a very important matter, a number of people from different parties made a request for extra time. On a very important matter such as this, the debate should not be stifled.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Does that mean we are to have 52 hours of debate on this potentially?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not envisaged.

Deputy Joe McHugh: For clarification, Members may share time in their 20-minute slots.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On behalf of the Rural Independent Group, I, for one, was incensed when I saw we were to deal with such an important issue by allowing Members slots of only ten minutes when we have 20 minutes slots for any other issue, from climate change to a fly going up a wall. This is a very important issue and should not be rushed with indecent haste. I contacted the Whip's office, as did the Ceann Comhairle, to demand that we would have adequate time to discuss the momentous decision to repeal the eighth amendment, which has stood the country in good stead for so many decades.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have no compromise proposals.

Deputy Bríd Smith: May I ask a question?

An Ceann Comhairle: No. The Deputy has contributed twice. Is the proposal for dealing with-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: It is just a question on the Order of Business.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go on.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Does this also mean that when the Bill to provide for a referendum comes before the Dáil, each Deputy will be entitled to 20 minutes then also?

Deputy Joe McHugh: That is a matter for the Business Committee.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is an entirely separate matter. It is a new departure to be talking about curtailing people's ability to contribute here. That really is a new departure.

Deputy Bríd Smith: No, this is not about curtailing; it is about ensuring that we get an early referendum as the Taoiseach indicated-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Five or six people.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to? Agreed. We will proceed to questions on promised legislation. I will call the party leaders who have indicated and then I will use the card system to identify other contributors.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Déanaim mo chomhbhrón le clanna Dolores O’Riordan faoina bás. Ceoltóir agus amhránaí den scoth ab ea í. Bhí tionchar faoi leith aici ar chúrsaí ceoil agus clú agus cáil uirthi ar fud an domhain.

I want to send my personal sympathies to the children and the family of Dolores O’Riordan, a world-class musician and singer, a great ambassador for Irish music and creativity, who had a huge impact on many generations. She also spoke frankly and gave important insights into life itself. While world famous, she retained throughout that time a great commitment and connection to her native city, Limerick, her family and tradition. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam dílis.

May I raise an issue on the Order of Business?

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, if the Deputy is brief.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I did not realise there would be expressions of sympathy at the beginning.

An Ceann Comhairle: Neither did I which makes two of us.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We were told it was arranged for the Order of Business. That is why I was waiting. Obviously, there has been a miscommunication somewhere.

Deputy Lowry raised the difficult plight of Scoil Aonghusa in Tipperary which I visited with Deputy Jackie Cahill. I must comment on the wonderful telepathy between the Taoiseach and Deputy Lowry on the needs of Scoil Aonghusa, needs which I support and endorse. I hope the same telepathy will apply to other Deputies across the country for their specific projects in their constituencies.

It brings to mind the wider issue, despite what the Taoiseach has said, concerning the significant disconnect between the rhetoric and reality for many special needs children across the country in accessing to physiotherapy, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, as well as mental health services. Will he outline when the sections of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act relating to the rights of children with special needs will be commenced? It is over a decade since the relevant sections, which will give rights to children with special needs, were enacted but never commenced. We have this significant debate about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, to a large extent, it is meaningless when we are not prepared to commence the relevant sections of legislation we passed in the Oireachtas over a decade ago.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Taoiseach spelled out the work done in the Department with a 44% increase in the resources being invested in this area, a massive expansion in the number of resource teachers with 3,000 extra special needs assistants, SNAs, and 1,500 extra resource teachers in the past two years.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I did not ask about that.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It has always been indicated that until the service has been developed further that the cost of implementing this would be significant. The Department has not been in a position to date to implement the terms to which the Deputy referred. That does not in any way diminish the commitment in this area to develop programmes and to see that children with special needs are not only welcomed but fulfil their potential.

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Deputy Micheál Martin: We cannot commence our own Act while fighting about the UN convention. This is dreadful hypocrisy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. I call Deputy Adams.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I am sorry for interrupting the leader of Fianna Fáil as he waffles on and on.

In 2016, the Government committed to a hospital bed capacity review. This is crucial in the context of the trolley crisis in our emergency departments. It became so serious last week that Tallaght hospital had to place adults in a children's ward. According to trolley watch, 98,981 admitted patients were on trolleys in 2017. That is a record figure and a damning indictment of the Government's health policy.

In November, we were told that the bed capacity review would be published by the end of the year. Last week, we were told that it would be at the end of this month. In the meantime, *The Irish Times* has carried extracts from the review. Instead of leaking the review to the media, will the Government publish it in advance of discussion at Cabinet in order Members can scrutinise it? When will the health service capacity review be published?

The Taoiseach: It will be published this month. The Minister for Health has not brought it to Cabinet yet but he intends to do so in the next week or two. As Deputy Adams correctly pointed out, it has been widely leaked to the newspapers. The content should come as no surprise to anyone.

Deputy Gerry Adams: That is not the point.

The Taoiseach: It proposes, alongside reforms to our health service, that we will need 2,500 additional acute beds between now and 2021. I should repeat what I said. The Government did not need a bed capacity review report to tell it that we need additional beds in hospitals. We have been increasing the number of beds for the past two years at the rate of approximately 150 to 200 a year. That work was under way, even before the report was produced. Even if there was no overcrowding in hospitals, we would still need to increase bed capacity because of our growing and ageing population and the new things the health service can do.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am sure it was inadvertent, but the Taoiseach's comments in the past week on the eighth amendment of the Constitution have produced a little confusion. Therefore, I ask him to clarify what he said. There are two issues at stake, one of which is the holding of a referendum to repeal the eighth amendment of the Constitution, while the second is the nature of any legislation that would flow in the event that the referendum to repeal is passed. In the case of the first issue, is it the Government's intention to bring before the House a repeal *simpliciter* resolution, or is work ongoing to amend the recommendation of the all-party committee?

The Taoiseach: The Government and the Cabinet have not yet made a decision on the issue. I am keen to hear people's views. We had a good discussion at the Cabinet last week. I also attended a meeting yesterday of my parliamentary party which lasted for five hours to hear views across the parliamentary party on the issue. There will be a debate on it in the Dáil and the Seanad in the next couple of days. At that point, having listened to the views of Members

and the public, a proposal will be brought to the Cabinet. It will need to have two elements, including a referendum Bill to allow for the repeal of the eighth amendment. The Government does not propose to come up with a new wording, but one thing that has to be considered is the proposal of the Citizens' Assembly to have an enabling provision specifying that legislation in this area would be the sole prerogative of the Oireachtas, not the courts, because, as the Deputy knows, there are other rights listed in the Constitution. We are awaiting advice from the Attorney General on that issue because we would find ourselves in a very strange position if we were to repeal the eighth amendment only to find that there were other rights to life in other parts of the Constitution that might make any legislation we would pass unconstitutional. We have to obtain the Attorney General's advice on that issue. The Government will also produce the heads - a detailed draft scheme - of any legislation which would be brought before this House after a referendum should it be passed. We need to bear in mind that once, or if, the eighth amendment is removed from the Constitution, the legislation would then be in the purview of the Oireachtas and that the Government does not have a majority in the House.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On the same subject, the Taoiseach has stated his desire, which we share, that the referendum take place in May. A significant concern we have which is partially expressed by Deputy Bríd Smith's concerns about the time the various debates could take to complete relates to whether it will happen and that we will actually have the referendum in May. I do not see in anything the Taoiseach has said or any issue he has raised any reason the legislation required to ensure the referendum will take place should not be published and placed in front of us. Regardless of all of the other ancillary issues involved, where is the legislation to enable the referendum to be held? It is simple legislation which does not require major consultation. It is just to allow for the holding of a referendum. If the Government is having difficulty in drafting it, there is legislation on the Statute Book which was debated in this House. We need the legislation and a clear commitment that there will not be any delay, excuses, technicalities, obstacles, filibustering or anything else that will prevent the referendum from taking place in May which is when we will hear the voice of the public. We have had enough debate here. We need to hear the voice of the public in a referendum.

The Taoiseach: With the greatest of respect to the Deputy, he is one of the champion filibusters in the House.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: I hope he will not filibuster on this or any other legislation in 2018.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Rubbish.

The Taoiseach: The process of having a Citizens' Assembly, referring matters to an Oireachtas committee and making decisions at the Cabinet and in this House was established by the Government.

Despite what other people may think, it was never about delaying tactics or long-fingering this issue. I do not want to long finger it either.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It has been going for three decades. Is the Taoiseach kidding?

The Taoiseach: I am committed to having a referendum in May or June if possible. How-

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ever, I answered the Deputy's question in my previous reply. Before members of the public vote in a referendum, they will want to have some indication as to what legislation this House will enact if the eighth amendment is repealed. As the Deputy is aware, if the amendment was repealed tomorrow, it would not change the law. The Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013 would remain in place.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We are aware of that.

The Taoiseach: People would like to see, at the very least, a detailed, general scheme in order that they might have some understanding as to what might be the new law.

We need to check the position. The Citizens' Assembly differed from the all-party committee as to whether there needs to be an enabling provision which makes it clear that only the Oireachtas can make the law on this issue because there is another right to life in the Constitution. There are also rights to privacy, children's rights and rights to bodily autonomy. We need to consider the possibility - and we have sought the Attorney General's advice on this - that the Citizens' Assembly may have been correct in suggesting that an enabling amendment will also be needed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: None of that prevents a referendum being held in May.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach mentioned that he is shocked about the trolley crisis, about the numbers involved and about how slowly the matter is being dealt with. It is a pity the Minister for Health has left. Mary Street Medical Centre in Clonmel is a fine facility and has excellent diagnostic equipment. The Minister visited the centre and saw this with his own two eyes. After three years, the HSE gave the centre a 14-day contract to carry out diagnoses. That worked to relieve the numbers waiting on trolleys in South Tipperary General Hospital but, after eight days, the HSE pulled the contract, despite two and a half years of negotiations and even a visit from the Minister. That is the kind of incompetence that is going on in the HSE and why we have what we have. The Taoiseach need not be shocked at all because he is a former incumbent in the Department and he should know all about the trolley crisis. The medical centre in question has the capacity and an excellent team of doctors and staff connected to University Hospital Limerick to read scans, which would keep people away from the emergency department. It is a simple solution. There is an excellent team in the centre and it has made a huge investment in equipment. It was given a 14-day contract, which was the shortest ever. The HSE pulled the contract after eight days saying that it did not have the money to pay for it. Money is being channelled in the wrong direction and anybody can see that. Will the Taoiseach please try to insist that common sense prevails in the HSE or the Department of Health?

The Taoiseach: I do not have any information on that particular contract but I will ask the Minister for Health to respond to the Deputy.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Additional responsibilities were given to the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, regarding protected disclosures and a business case was sent to Government to ensure that resources were available to carry out the work in the context of protected disclosures. The chairperson of GSOC, Ms Justice Mary Ellen Ring, was forthright in an RTÉ interview last Sunday about the inadequacy of resources, with less than was sought in the business case provided. She made the point that the organisation could not carry out the work that it is required to do. Will the Taoiseach revisit this issue as a matter of urgency? Will

he also consider the independence of GSOC, which is also an issue that the chairperson articulated in that interview?

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that GSOC has sufficient resources to ensure that it does its most important task in society. I listened to the interview referred to by the Deputy and I have been in contact with GSOC. I am keen to ensure that any issues are resolved. As far as the proposed change to legislation is concerned, I remind her and, indeed, the House that we have established a commission on the future of policing, which will deal with a range of issues pertaining to An Garda Síochána, one of which is the future role and function of GSOC. The commission is due to report later in the year and I look forward to receiving that report when issues can be revisited in the context of any proposed change to legislation.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I add my words of sympathy to the family of the late Dolores O’Riordan who was a great artist. As John F. Kennedy said, great artists are often solitary figures who have a lover’s quarrel with the world, but we will miss her now that she is gone. We think of her family who must miss her the most.

Ten days ago the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, announced a major review of the local property tax. I would appreciate it if the Taoiseach set out some details of the nature of that review. Does it have scope to be a full review in which we look at switching to, say, a site value tax which might help us to tackle the housing crisis and have really good, dense, high quality development? What is the timing involved? Has the Cabinet looked at this issue? What about the plans announced in the newspapers by the Minister? When can we expect the review to take place and come to fruition?

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, the local property tax is principally a tax matter. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, brought a memo to the Cabinet today to ask for permission to commence the review. As that permission was granted, he will be making a statement in the next short while on the details.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. Who has the next question?

Deputy Shane Cassells: Check.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Did the Deputy come in on Friday in order to be ready?

Deputy Shane Cassells: I am always up early, a Cheann Comhairle.

The programme for Government committed the Government to introducing a new national drugs strategy and it was launched by the Taoiseach last summer. He said at the launch that the treatment of abuse as a public health issue rather than as a criminal justice issue helps communities. I ask him whether the small rural community in Ballivor, County Meath will be helped by the attempt by the Church of Scientology to establish a Narconon drug programme in an old national school in the tiny village. I further ask whether the cult’s wacky drug rehabilitation programme is legally permitted to operate in the State. Would the Taoiseach like to send a message of support, both as Taoiseach and a doctor, to the concerned parents who will protest outside the school tomorrow at 2 p.m? They are petrified about the safety of their children.

The Taoiseach: I have read a little about this matter in the newspapers, but I do not know all of the details or the facts. I am absolutely of the view that the only people who should provide

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addiction services are those who are appropriately qualified and licensed to do so. On occasion, these services can be provided by religious groups. I know that a number of Catholic groups provide alcohol counselling services and do so very well.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is not a religion but a scam.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Is the programme legally permitted?

The Taoiseach: No matter from what background they come, it is essential that such services only be provided by those who are qualified and legally permitted to provide them.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I address my question to the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Damien English. Under the programme for Government, he committed to enhancing the fishing industry. Why then did he sign off on a licence to allow the mechanical harvesting of 1,806 acres of native kelp in Bantry Bay, which will have a detrimental effect on the fishing industry and the broader economy there?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): The question refers to a condition that was signed off on by a Minister in the Fianna Fáil-Green Party Government back in 2011. It was again signed off on-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Not true.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: It was the Minister of State who signed off on it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Damien English: It was further administered by the then Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, at a later stage. We upgraded the condition recently. I am happy to meet the Deputy to discuss the issue, but it is a long-standing condition attached to a licence granted a long time ago. My role concerns the conditions attached to the licence in the past couple of months.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: Will the Minister of State meet me to discuss the issue?

Deputy Damien English: It is important that we monitor, control and keep an eye on the licence. I will be happy to discuss the issue with the Deputy at any stage.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: Will the Minister of State meet me?

An Ceann Comhairle: He has said he will.

Deputy John Brady: Yesterday we received the news that Carillion, the company that had won the tender to construct, maintain and manage six new schools in the State, had gone into voluntary liquidation. This has left huge fear in the schools among the teachers, principals, parents and children. Two of the schools - Coláiste Ráithín and St. Philomena's - happen to be located in my constituency. There has been a lot of uncertainty in recent months. Those involved in the schools were supposed to move into the new buildings - they are substantially completed - in October and November last year, but that date was pushed back to December. They were then due to move in on 22 January. There is considerable uncertainty and fear. Christmas exams have been interrupted, we are heading into the mock exams period and additional teachers have been taken on in order to serve the schools in their new buildings. Will the Minister assure

the House that the deadlines will be met, that the schools can move into their new premises and that whatever work is necessary will be completed so as to ensure a continuation of service?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Thomas Byrne on the same matter.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I endorse Deputy Brady's comments because people in Kells are concerned. Five schools are affected. However, an issue has reared its head in the years that these projects have been running, with subcontractors and local businesses in Kells in my constituency left short numerous times by contractors and other subcontractors above them. They are worried that this will become a major problem for them with Carillion going into liquidation.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Deputies are correct in that one of the companies involved in the joint venture to build a number of PPP schools has gone into liquidation. At this point, the National Development Finance Agency, NDFA, is dealing with the remaining shareholder and has expressed confidence that there should not be significant delays in the execution of these projects given that they are 90% built. It must complete its discussions so as to ensure that the work continues. It should be mentioned that not only are the projects 90% built, but the State has not made any payment beyond a small element of site cost. The only way in which the value to the developer can be obtained is if the State issues the licences. The State is in a relatively strong position. The NDFA is dealing with this issue and is determined to ensure that there will be no disruption to the work.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Due to the continuous wet weather since last August, many farmers are in a bad way. Having fed animals for four and a half months, most of their feed is gone. Land is saturated and no one knows when it will recover or when farmers will be able to let their animals out again.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Climate change.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: GLAS payments are being held up again. If one person on a commonage has a problem with land and has a payment delayed, the rest of the farmers will not be paid either.

At the end of 2016, €106 million returned to the Exchequer from the agriculture Vote. I ask the Taoiseach to ensure that farmers will not be left without assistance, especially those who run out of fodder. People with grain had no incomes in 2016. They received very little help and they had to fight hard just to get that. Will the Taoiseach ensure that farmers do not go through the same hardship this year? Many more are involved. They must be looked after and given help.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies McConalogue and Michael Healy-Rae may speak on the same matter briefly.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Early in the morning on the Friday before Christmas, I spoke early to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine about this important subject. We are being told that IT issues are stopping GLAS payments from being made. It was the same story last year and the year before. I will explain to the Taoiseach what a GLAS payment is. It is the farmer's lifeline and is needed desperately to keep a household going. It is the difference between making ends meet and not. Why are IT issues for the third year in a row-----

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Deputy Mattie McGrath: Scandalous.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----stopping farmers from receiving this payment? It is their money. They are entitled to it. They should have it, but it is being delayed. They owe contractors for last year's work. They owe creameries and co-ops.

An Ceann Comhairle: The point has been made.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: They need their cheques now.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae indicated that there was €106 million of an underspend in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in 2016. According to a reply I received to a parliamentary question, there was a €75 million underspend in that Department last year.

Like me, the Taoiseach will attend the IFA's annual general meeting, AGM, this evening. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine attended a meeting of the fodder action group yesterday but the farming organisation representatives left that empty-handed and with no sense of how the Government intends to respond. Will the Taoiseach and the Minister once again leave farming representatives empty-handed tonight and in the coming weeks or will the Taoiseach, once and for all, show some leadership in this regard and deliver a meal voucher scheme, which is required in those areas of the country experiencing an acute fodder shortage?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Michael Healy-Rae will be delighted to know that I know exactly what GLAS is. I am aware of the detail of all sorts of payments-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Will we get an answer to the question?

The Taoiseach: -----that I do not receive-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: If the Taoiseach solved the problem, he would be a better man.

The Taoiseach: -----as is, I think, everyone in this House. That is the nature of our work. As Deputy McConalogue pointed out, the Minister, Deputy Creed, and I will be attending the IFA AGM this evening.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Do not go with empty pockets.

The Taoiseach: I will certainly bring it up-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach will bring it up.

The Taoiseach: I will certainly raise it with the IFA and ensure that it gets a response.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Niamh Smyth: That is their-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: That about sums it up, Taoiseach.

An Ceann Comhairle: Could we have order, please?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Will the Taoiseach bring up the money?

An Ceann Comhairle: That completes the Order of Business. I am afraid that time has run out. We must proceed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is the classic commentator role.

The Taoiseach: With the Minister, obviously, not with the IFA.

Messages from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Electoral (Amendment) (Dáil Constituencies) Bill 2017, without amendment, and has accepted the Appropriation Bill 2017, without recommendation.

Trade Union Representation (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2018: First Stage

Deputy David Cullinane: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Trade Union Act 1941 and the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2001 to confer on authorised unions the right to have their representative duties to their members for collective bargaining and disciplinary matters recognised by employers and to provide for related matters.

This is the seventh Bill that Sinn Féin has introduced to strengthen workers' rights. The right to belong to a trade union is a fundamental human right recognised by the United Nations and the European Union and can only be realised through collective bargaining between employers and unions. However, a right is not a right unless it is recognised as such in law. This State has a voluntary system of collective bargaining. While that has brought some benefits and works in certain circumstances, it does not work for everyone, including employees of companies that do not accept or recognise the trade unions involved. There have been too many examples of large and profitable companies not recognising trade unions and dictating to their workforces who should or should not represent them. That is not fair. In a court case, it would be like an opponent having a veto over who should represent the other side. We would not tolerate that in a legal scenario and we should not tolerate it in the world of industrial relations.

We have good industrial relations machinery in the State and some moves have been made in recent times to ensure that all sides are at least involved in any mediation or court hearing on achieving resolutions. However, a worker should have the right not only to join a trade union, as is the case currently, but to be represented by that trade union. Trade unionists are skilled people who can represent those who are not in a position to represent themselves or do not have the means to employ barristers, solicitors and so on. After people join trade unions and pay fees, trade union representatives give them the support they need if and when a conflict arises in the workplace.

We must bring ourselves into line with the majority of states in the EU and around the world in ensuring that workers have the right not only to join a trade union, but to bargain collectively and be represented by their trade unions.

Too many Bills on workers' rights that we have introduced have been knocked back by the

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Government. As an Teachta Adams stated, this and the previous Taoiseach always said that they wanted solutions from the Opposition but, when we provided any, they would not accept what was progressive, relevant and necessary legislation on protecting workers because they did not like it or were ideologically opposed to workers' rights.

Before I hand over to my colleague, an Teachta Munster, to conclude, I call on the Government to support this Bill when we move it in Private Members' time.

Deputy Imelda Munster: A successful employment rights infrastructure is one that operates on the basis of equality and a level playing field between workers and their employers. One cannot claim to support the right of workers to collectively bargain if one does not support the right to trade union recognition because both are inextricably linked. This Bill will give practical effect to the right of workers to be represented by a trade union. It will make it a legal right that must be respected by employers. The current voluntary system works for some but for many, it fails. Everyone here is aware of the rise in low-paid and precarious work and in zero-hour or low-hour contracts. We also know that this is a deliberate practice and is part of the race to the bottom. We have seen the ongoing practice of replacing reasonably paid workers on decent contracts with lower paid workers on inferior contracts. This is done by denying the right to trade union representation within the workplace. Why do employers do this? They do it because they can. We have seen it happening in the financial services, hospitality, retail and many other sectors. We have also seen some employers engaging in campaigns of bullying and harassment. Those who seek to bully and who ignore industrial relations laws and mechanisms do so to protect their interests while exploiting their employees. They are denying workers their right to choose who should represent them. There is not a level playing field between workers and employers but this Bill seeks to correct that.

Those who value their employees have absolutely nothing to fear from strengthened labour laws. Last month Ryanair finally accepted the principles that are outlined in this Bill when it agreed to engage with unions for the first time ever. Now is the time for this Bill so that ordinary workers will have the right to choose who should represent them in their workplace, both for collective bargaining and disciplinary matters and to have that right recognised by their employers. This Republic is only a republic in name if we do not protect the rights of our citizens and central to that protection are the rights of workers in the workplace.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Dáil Éireann
Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committee Meetings

1. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet Committee B, social policy and public services, last met; and when it will meet again. [52001/17]

2. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet Committee B, social policy and public services, last met; and when it is scheduled to meet again. [52880/17]

3. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet Committee B, social policy and public services, will next meet. [1831/18]

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

Cabinet Committee B last met on 16 November. While the date of its next meeting is not yet scheduled, I expect it will be within the next few weeks. The committee oversees the areas of social policy and public service reform including education, children, social inclusion, the Irish language, arts and culture, and continued improvements and reforms to public services. The committee seeks to co-ordinate work across Government on planning and implementing policies that contribute to a more equal and socially inclusive society. Some of the particular initiatives this committee will focus on include the roll-out of improved child care services and subsidised child care, targeting educational disadvantage and improving services for people with disabilities.

The Government is committed to bringing forward policies and programmes in line with the programme for Government that improve people's lives and support individuals and families through targeted and efficient public services. Implementing fair policies alongside budget measures to increase the minimum wage, social welfare and pension payments and reduce the burden of taxation on working people helpS to ensure that everyone can benefit from our improving economy. The Cabinet committee provides the opportunity to shape proposals on issues such as equality, disability or poverty which might require input from multiple Departments.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: This is obviously a very important Cabinet committee dealing, as it does, with social policy. Is the committee looking at the issue of the pension anomaly that currently exists that disproportionately adversely affects women? When will we see proposals emerging on this? There are two elements to this issue. The most obvious one is the impact of averaging on women who spent periods outside of the workplace, particularly for child rearing and specifically the impact of calculating the average from the first day worked. The second issue is the impact of raising the pension age for people who have contracted to finish work at 65 and how the gap between the formal ending of work and qualification for a State pension will be addressed.

I wish to raise one other issue with the Taoiseach. Last September a campaign called Make Way Day was run by the Disability Federation of Ireland. It was a very simple campaign involving people with disabilities, particularly people in wheelchairs and those who are visually impaired, making their way around our thoroughfares, footpaths and streets and putting stickers on obstacles including things like sandwich boards, improperly placed seating and signage,

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in order to make us all aware of how such things negatively impact on the freedom of people with disabilities to move about our towns and streets. Would the Government consider examining this campaign with a view to formally promoting it? The Cabinet social policy committee might be the vehicle through which Government could determine how it could become a national campaign that would have meaning, possibly leading to legislation to improve accessibility and mobility for people with disabilities in our country.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I am just trying to figure out how this committee could work and am looking at some of the contradictions that arise. One of the contradictions arising relates to the significant increase in cyberbullying directed at children as well as in online predators. The Taoiseach knows that digital technology plays an increasingly major role in the lives of young people and is a tremendous educational resource. There seems to be a contradiction between the position set against the Taoiseach's name with regard to bringing forward a digital safety commissioner and the position articulated by the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten. Just before Christmas the Taoiseach called on international technology firms to do more to protect children from these threats but indicated that he was cancelling plans to create a digital safety commissioner who would have the power to impose substantial fines on social media firms that permit harmful or illegal material to be published on their platforms. It seems from what he said that the Taoiseach thinks the onus should be on the technology companies themselves to police their services. However, the Law Reform Commission has recommended an online safety watchdog and the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, ISPCC, supports the introduction of a digital safety commissioner, as does the relevant Minister.

There seems to be a lack of co-ordination in the Government's position on this issue. While I do not want my remarks to be misinterpreted, these technology companies are lobbying against EU proposals to strengthen online privacy rules which would affect the money they make from online advertising. Is this the type of issue that deserves the attention of the Cabinet committee? Sinn Féin supports the creation of a digital safety commissioner and Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire brought forward a very good Bill on same. We believe that an office of a commissioner for digital safety could promote safety online, review and regulate harmful digital communications and so on. Is this the type of issue that would be put before the committee to make sure that the Government has a joined-up position on it? Could the Taoiseach indicate his current position regarding a digital safety commissioner?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Any hopes I had that 2018 would see an improvement in the dire housing situation were dashed when a flood of people in dire circumstances attended my clinics over the first couple of weeks of the new year. I suggest that the report produced yesterday by the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, which claims successes in exceeding targets in the delivery of social housing, is misleading propaganda. When we look more closely at the claim in the report that the housing needs of 25,000 people have been met, we see that 75% of the successes in meeting people's housing needs involved housing assistance payments, the rental accommodation scheme or leasing from the private sector.

I will give an example. Gemma, who is a mother of two children, is included in the Government's success figures because she got a housing assistance payment, HAP, tenancy last February. After her landlord pulled out of the agreement in April, Gemma and her two children, aged four and two, had to go into emergency accommodation. They are now living with Gemma's grandmother, her three uncles and her aunt, which means that eight people across four generations are sharing a two-bedroom house. Last year's statistics consider her to have had her hous-

ing needs met. The reliance on the HAP scheme, which is not meeting people's housing needs because it is precarious rather than permanent, means that the figures are not credible. There is evidence in last year's figures that many of the people in respect of whom we are claiming success are back in emergency or chronically overcrowded conditions. Are we looking at the facts of this crisis, or are we just spinning propaganda about it?

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is clear that in the public mind, access to public services is a major priority. During the 2016 general election campaign, we had a debate on whether to prioritise improving public services or introducing a United States-style tax system. The social policy and public services committee is a key conduit of Government policy in this regard. The bottom line is that public services in sectors like health and housing are getting worse. There are 500,000 patients on waiting lists. Over 8,000 people are in emergency accommodation. There are 95,000 people on the social housing list. The Taoiseach has a habit of trying to use figures to suit himself, but the bottom line with regard to health is that approximately 2,000 extra beds were provided between 2000 and 2010. I accept that approximately 800 beds were taken out when the recession hit in 2008.

The Taoiseach: It started going down in 2007. There was no recession in 2007.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No. According to figures we received from the Department, an extra 142 beds were provided in 2007. I am not into the detail. The point I am making is that over 2,000 beds were provided. The number of beds was then cut by 800. In fact, another 450 beds were taken out in 2011 and 2012. We can go into who was in charge in each of those years, but that is not the point. I do not know whether the Cabinet committee on social policy has any bearing on the preparations for the budget. In the run-up to the budget, surely we need far more transparency about what it will take to deal with something like an accident and emergency crisis. When I asked the Taoiseach about Letterkenny University Hospital, I did not get any answer from him other than the general kind of stuff that drives people mad. He spoke about an allocation of €30 million. The fate of the specific bed capacity proposal that was made by Letterkenny University Hospital is a concrete example and illustration of the inertia in the system. The hospital authorities asked last summer for €1.8 million to open 20 beds. If that money had been provided, it would have enabled the hospital to do substantial work during this winter's crisis. It is alarming that this money was not provided and, as a result, we drifted into the crisis and people experienced significant distress.

I could not agree more with what Deputy Boyd Barrett has said about housing, which was raised repeatedly during the first clinics of January. It is awful that mothers and other young women who are doing everything they can to give something to their kids do not know where they will be in two months' time. I do not get a sense that the Government understands the gravity of the housing crisis. People with housing difficulties must go bananas when they see the figures and hear suggestions that targets are being exceeded. If we talk to people on the ground and go into their houses-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We have to go to the Taoiseach to get answers.

The Taoiseach: The matter of pension policy generally, and pension policy reform in particular, falls under the remit of this Cabinet committee and is on its agenda and work programme for this year. There are many pension anomalies, but the pension anomaly about which people most often speak is often not as well understood as it might be. The anomaly is that some people get a full pension after paying PRSI for just ten years, whereas other people who

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have made payments for 30 or 40 years do not get a full pension. It is anomalous that someone who entered the workforce at the age of 55 might work for ten years until the age of 65 and get a full pension at that stage, whereas someone who worked for 30 or 40 years might not get a full pension. If we are to correct this anomaly, we need to move towards the total contributions approach, which will be a completely new system.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Not necessarily. The Government did not have to do what it did in 2012.

The Taoiseach: That means giving people a full pension for paying contributions for 35 or 40 of the 50 years for which they could have worked. It is inevitable that such a change could cause some people to lose out while others gain.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Government could recognise child-rearing and things of that sort.

The Taoiseach: All of those things need to be taken into account in any change that may occur.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We are talking about the contributory old age pension. There is nothing between the two pensions in any event. It is a stupid debate.

The Taoiseach: By the way, these rules date from the 1960s rather than from 2012. A return to the pre-2012 situation would not correct this anomaly because the pre-2012 rules were unfair as well. There were people getting full pensions after working for just ten years while people who had worked for 30 years got 98% of their pensions rather than full pensions.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government could change the number of contributions.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Yes, it could change the number of contributions

The Taoiseach: I do not think we should mislead the public in this regard. It is certainly not practical to give people full pensions after paying in for just 20 years. Fundamentally, pensions have to be-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Non-contributory pensions do not have to be paid at all.

The Taoiseach: We are talking about contributory pensions here.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The gap between the two is not huge, so it is an academic argument.

The Taoiseach: I am trying to answer, a Cheann Comhairle. I assumed Deputy Howlin was referring to the State contributory pension.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Yes.

The Taoiseach: I assumed he was not proposing to abolish the State contributory pension. Perhaps he was.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Of course not.

The Taoiseach: I would be totally opposed to any proposal from the Labour Party or any-

one else to abolish the State contributory pension.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That is stupid. It is a stupid thing to say.

The Taoiseach: I would oppose any suggestion that people who have paid PRSI for many years of their lives should lose their pensions.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach should not demean himself. The serious question we have raised deserves better than that.

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Finance has already expressed his intention to extend public sector workers' right to work to the age of 70. It will not be a requirement that everyone will have to work up to the age of 70. It is proposed to allow people who are currently required to retire at the age of 65 to work until the age of 66, or even until the age of 70 if they so wish. The Government has given the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform approval to go ahead with that legislation and publish it as soon as possible. The State pension age is increasing. Legislation introduced by the last Government, of which I was a member, increased the State pension age to 67 and subsequently to 68. It would be difficult to justify paying a State pension to some categories of workers who retire early but not to others. It is a complicated issue.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is transitional.

The Taoiseach: The transitional pension was abolished by the last Government, of which Deputy Howlin and I were members.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Yes.

The Taoiseach: I may have misspoken in December when I commented on the issue of the digital safety commissioner at a press conference. To the best of my recollection, the Government has not made a decision on whether to legislate to establish a digital safety commissioner. As I may well be incorrect in that regard, I will double-check it. I do not recall a Government decision being made. Obviously, any proposal would have to come to the Cabinet. It could come to this Cabinet committee first. I am certainly not opposed to the proposal. I just do not recall having seen a proposal, or its having been approved by the Government to date. Having said that, I am very conscious of the issue of digital safety. When we are talking about the Internet, we are talking about a worldwide web. We need to be realistic about what can be achieved by an Irish commission or Irish laws, which of course would have no extra-territorial effect whatsoever. That is why I have been putting pressure on the companies themselves, which operate on an international basis outside this country, to be more responsible and to mediate and edit the content that is on their websites.

On housing numbers, HAP works for many people. Deputy Micheál Martin cited an individual case and I have no doubt that what he said about it is true. However, I have encountered individual cases in my constituency involving people in receipt of HAP or rent supplement who do not accept social housing when it is offered to them because they would prefer to stay where they are. Even though they receive the HAP or rent supplement, they like the houses they are in, believe they are secure in them and do not want to move to different roads, parishes or school districts. It is important to bear in mind that every individual's experience is different and that the housing assistance payment works for many people. The evidence can be seen in the number of people in receipt of rent supplement or HAP who decline offers of social housing.

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In terms of solutions, as the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, has indicated, we will move more and more towards direct build and increasing the social housing stock in the years ahead. While HAP will be a solution for many people, the focus in the capital programme is already shifting towards building more. In 2016, only 657 houses were built and added to the social housing stock. The figure rose to 2,245 last year, which was an almost threefold increase. These figures include direct builds from local authorities, houses built by approved housing bodies, such as the Peter McVerry Trust and the Iveagh Trust, and houses acquired through Part V. The increase from 657 to 2,245 is significant and our target for this year is to have 3,800 social houses built. Building can only be ramped up at a realistic pace because there are only so many construction workers and firms in the country. We ramped up the number of social houses built from 657 in 2016 to 2,245 in 2017, a significant increase. We will continue to ramp up activity in the years ahead.

Last year, 2,266 acquisitions and 1,757 voids were brought back into use. If one leaves out HAP and the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, the social housing stock increased by approximately 7,000 last year. While this was a significant increase, the figure needs to be closer to 10,000.

Cabinet Committees

4. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach his plans to ensure a whole-of-Government approach to policy development and problem-solving by his Ministers; and the way in which he plans to encourage co-operation between Ministers in respect of issues as they arise across Government. [52725/17]

81. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach the position regarding policy formulation in his Department; and the way in which co-operation with other Ministers and Departments is co-ordinated. [2115/18]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 4 and 81 together.

The Government acts collectively and any work done by a Minister within a Department is done with a whole-of-Government approach. A Programme for a Partnership Government sets out the Government's ambitious programme of work and shared aims and we will continue to deliver on this programme.

The primary mechanism for ensuring a whole-of-Government approach is the weekly Cabinet meeting at which all major policy issues are discussed and co-ordinated implementation is agreed. On occasion, special Cabinet meetings are held to focus on key strategic issues such as, for example, climate change and health reform.

Cabinet committees are also used to ensure a whole-of-Government, co-ordinated approach to issues as necessary. The Government has established the following Cabinet committees, all of which I chair: Cabinet committee A, which deals principally with the economy; Cabinet committee B, which deals with social policy and public services; Cabinet committee C on the European Union, specifically Brexit; Cabinet committee D, dealing with infrastructure, including housing; Cabinet committee E, which deals with health; Cabinet committee F, which deals with national security; and the newly established Cabinet committee G, which deals with justice and equality issues.

I also hold regular bilateral meetings with Ministers to focus on issues in their areas of responsibility and to identify how the Government can support the delivery of priorities and commitments. Co-ordination also takes place at official level through interdepartmental and senior officials groups, a number of which are chaired by my officials.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Working in a collegiate manner is both an important aspect of government and a constitutional requirement. However, we have not seen this approach taken on every issue, including in respect of the constitutional amendment.

I will return to what all speakers have agreed is the most important social issue facing the country, namely, the housing crisis. I had the privilege of serving in three Cabinets. One of the difficulties at Cabinet is that Ministers become preoccupied with the particular focus and affairs of their respective Departments. We need to think outside the box if we are to solve the affordable housing problem. Based on my experience in government and on foot of my dealings with the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, at close quarters, I made a proposal almost two years ago that the latter be transformed into a housing delivery agency. It has the skill set and landbank, as well as access to capital and direct relations with developers and builders. While in government, we started, in a small way, to push a social and affordable housing agenda. Are discussions taking place between the Department of Finance, the Department of the Taoiseach and other Departments to ensure a new housing delivery agency is created from the NAMA framework? Has this important proposal been considered and, if not, will it be considered? I welcome the statement by the Fianna Fáil Party last week, which made more or less the same proposal.

The Taoiseach spoke of the number of social houses built in 2017. These houses were built under the allocation of €2.2 billion we made in government in 2015. Given the significant lead-in period for house building, we need to mobilise more than the local authorities and voluntary housing agencies to tackle the imperative of solving the social housing crisis.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There have been occasions in the past two years when Ministers have differed on certain Government policies and some have approached the media to express these differences. The planned trip to North Korea comes to mind but there have been other examples of differences on policy and the approach to be taken to particular issues. I was struck by the comment made by the Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Halligan, that the Korean adventure was triggered by an off-the-cuff comment by the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Finian McGrath. It would be alarming if the frequent off-the-cuff remarks of the latter Minister of State were to become the basis for formulating Government policy in future.

Be that as it may, the absence of joined-up Government is a critical weakness in the delivery and execution of policy. This applies in areas such as disability and special educational needs where individual Ministers operate in silos.

The strategic communications unit, SCU, illustrates the obsession with spin, announcements and pronouncements as opposed to substance, delivery and Government action. For example, while a new campaign manager for Healthy Ireland and four or five other campaigns, including a new hospital campaign, has been appointed to the SCU, the latter will not have any involvement in explaining what is being done about the hundreds of extra patients on trolleys. I do not believe the unit will ever speak about trolleys or children with special needs who have been fostered or are not receiving the supports they need from the Health Service Executive

and Tusla.

There needs to be a focus on cross-departmental co-ordination and delivery of targets in the programme for Government. People are fed up with announcements, reviews, strategies and so forth and are much more concerned about the absence of delivery on these core issues. This remains a significant weakness in terms of the Government's delivery of the aspirations contained in its programme.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The woeful lack of effective, joined-up action on the housing crisis has prompted civil society to take the sort of joined-up action that is necessary. That will be made manifest on 7 April when trade unionists, civil society groups, homeless groups, construction workers and all those affected by the housing crisis - these are the same people who can offer solutions to the crisis - will be mobilising on the streets of Dublin to demand action on housing.

I appeal to the Government to think about this. One problem with the housing crisis - it is a feature of some of the crises in other public services as well - is that we cannot get the workers to do the work that is necessary to solve the crises. We talk about capacity problems in housing. We cannot get nurses and teachers in a range of areas. Why is that? Part of the answer was outside the Dáil today. A construction worker, who is also involved in the national housing and homelessness coalition organising the march, was protesting along with other construction workers because they work for agencies on zero-hour contracts. They literally do not know from day to day or from week to week whether they will have a week's work or a day's work. They maintain they do not want to work in construction anymore. Why would they? Thousands of construction workers have walked away from construction, but they would come back if they did not have to put up with zero-hour contracts and agencies that treat them like dirt.

If the Government wants to solve some of the crises like those in housing, health and education, it should do something about people who are working for these agencies on zero-hour contracts. These people do not have proper jobs or proper pay. That is why we cannot get people in who could help to fix these crises.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Obviously, the whole-of-government approach, as it is described, is a perfectly sensible way to come at things. However, what we want is delivery, action and a joined-up approach. There has been failure to deal with these major crises. I keep coming back to this point - I imagine every other Deputy has the same experience. There is unnecessary stress in the lives of people, especially women, because of the crisis in our emergency services, the homelessness crisis, the issue of people being on trolleys, the issue of children who are homeless and the report from the Ombudsman for Children that lifts another lid on what is another stressful situation for the children involved as well as their carers.

We do not have a joined-up approach. The Ombudsman for Children report shows that each of the Government and State agencies did not know what the others were doing. No one knew the strategy of the others. We see this all the time at local level. The various Departments or agencies are working in slightly different silos and there is no joined-up approach.

There is also a major issue around the ideological basis on which the Government moves forward. If the Government decided to make it a priority to tackle and resolve the housing crisis, health crisis or any of these issues, then there would have to be a whole-of-government approach. There is no evidence of that. There is evidence of public relations and of a Govern-

ment of Ireland approach, mar dhea, to these things. It is a matter of the substance, action and delivery that is required.

The Taoiseach: Reference was made to affordable housing. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Murphy, will be making an announcement on a new scheme and a revised scheme in the next days or weeks. That will come as welcome news to many people who do not qualify for social housing but who are unable to secure a mortgage because their income is higher than the social housing limit but lower than what is realistically required to get a mortgage. Details of the scheme will be announced shortly.

Deputies are right to raise the whole issue of affordable housing. When it comes to discourse in the House and public discourse the focus tends to be on homelessness and social housing because those issues are so important. However, we should not forget that the vast majority of people in the country provide their own housing and most people want to buy and own their own houses. We need to ensure that is possible for the vast majority of people. That requires measures such as the affordable housing scheme and ensuring that it is affordable to build houses. That is why new regulations are coming to reduce the cost of building apartment blocks. This will allow us to build more of them in our cities and towns and give people the opportunity to buy apartments and to get on the housing ladder again. Programmes like the local infrastructure housing activation fund use public money to provide services and access sites on which we can build houses.

It is important for parties to be aware that when it comes to NAMA we have an agreement and an understanding with the European Union on the role of NAMA. The understanding covers what is not and what is required to keep it off-balance-sheet. If Deputies were not aware, they should now be aware that any proposals to change the role or remit of NAMA, or to transform NAMA, following discussions with the European Commission could run into significant difficulties. Changing the remit of NAMA may force the agency to go on-balance-sheet or we could run into issues around state aid. If NAMA was competing with the private construction sector in the private rental market and the private housing construction market, that could constitute state aid. I am keen to ensure everyone is aware of that if they are developing policies for the future.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That was a Fine Gael proposal.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: NAMA is already building social housing now.

The Taoiseach: I repeat that if NAMA were to get involved in the private rented sector or the private construction sector, that could constitute state aid. I want to make everyone aware of that as they develop policies in the coming months and years. Any such change could backfire badly on the State if suddenly NAMA was transformed into a body that was on-balance sheet or one that had to seek state aid approval to compete in the private housing and rental markets.

The Government has decided to do something different. We announced some months ago the establishment of home building finance Ireland. Provision for this is made in the new legislative programme on the A list. We anticipate bringing the legislation through the House in the coming months. That body will take the staff and expertise from NAMA and will be capitalised from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund. In many ways, it will do what Deputies are suggesting, that is to say, taking the expertise, knowledge and staff from NAMA as it is wound down. It will be capitalised from the State using ISIF and will be able to do certain things.

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However, Deputies should bear in mind my warning on what some people are suggesting about NAMA and how it could backfire badly on our State and community.

Healthy Ireland is very much a cross-government initiative. It is not simply an initiative of the Department of Health. It involves the Department of Education and Skills and what happens in schools. It involves the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport as well. That is one of the reasons the strategic communications unit is assisting with Healthy Ireland. It is a cross-government initiative and involves many different Departments. It is a very positive initiative and I welcome the campaigns under way at present to encourage people to make small changes to their health which, in turn, can make such a major difference for them. Ireland now has more people who have given up smoking than those who are smokers. We are seeing some evidence of increase in physical activity. These campaigns are welcome.

4 o'clock

Deputy Micheál Martin: By the way, the question was on joined-up government.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Where will we get the workers?

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time.

The Taoiseach: A total of 2 million people are at work now.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We do not have enough working in construction. That is why we cannot build enough houses.

Cabinet Committees

5. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the newly formed Cabinet Committee G, justice and equality. [52726/17]

6. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if Cabinet Committee G, justice and equality, has been established; if it has met; and when it is scheduled to meet again. [52881/17]

7. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet Committee G, justice and equality, last met; and when it will next meet. [1839/18]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 5 to 7, inclusive, together.

Cabinet Committee G was formally established by the Government last week and is scheduled to have its first meeting on Thursday. The Cabinet committee will provide political oversight of developments on justice and equality issues, including implementation of the Government's programme of reform for the justice sector as well as Government measures on gender equality.

Establishment of a dedicated Cabinet committee will allow for a dedicated focus on the substantial reform of the policing and justice systems that the Government is determined to achieve. This will build on the work already completed or under way, including the establishment of the Policing Authority, which is overseeing implementation of the existing Garda modernisation and renewal plan.

The Government expects to see further progress in the year ahead in areas such as civilian-

sation, a new divisional model of policing, improved information and communications technology, ICT, systems, and victim support services. The Government has also approved arrangements for a competition to recruit a new Garda Commissioner.

In addition, the Commission on the Future of Policing is due to report later this year and will no doubt make recommendations for further change. I intend that this committee will monitor its implementation. The committee will also ensure that further reforms are implemented in the Department of Justice and Equality and the Government will shortly finalise the terms of reference and membership of an independent change management group to follow through on this.

I expect that the committee will also consider reforms in other aspects of the justice system, and I have also indicated that it will pay particular attention to the Government's ambitious plans on gender equality and reform of the Judiciary, including the Judicial Council Bill 2017 and the Judicial Appointments Commission Bill 2017, both of which are before the House.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Among the reform measures the Taoiseach has mentioned the most urgent goes back to the Toland report, the fundamental restructuring of the Department of Justice and Equality. It is important that the Taoiseach leads on this. What is his view? The Government's stated view is to have a division of functions within the existing Department, each reporting to a separate Secretary General whereas I think the strong view now is there should be two separate Departments. The Taoiseach said that the Constitution restricts us to having 15 Ministers but it does not restrict us to having 15 Departments of State. It is important to have a stand-alone Department, ideally with a stand-alone Minister for each but that might not be possible. We need to move fairly rapidly to that structural reform.

I am interested in the recruitment campaign the Taoiseach mentioned for the new Garda Commissioner. What salary scale has been approved by Cabinet for the new Garda Commissioner to be recruited?

I wrote to the Taoiseach in the past two weeks about the Kenneally case in Waterford and I have received an acknowledgement from him. I received a fuller reply from the Minister for Justice and Equality and thank him for that. I have been asked to ask the Taoiseach if he will agree to meet the victims of the convicted abuser Bill Kenneally.

Deputy Gerry Adams: It has been revealed that almost 50 additional boxes of files have been supplied in recent weeks to the Charleton tribunal. I know that is a result of the Taoiseach's directing that all relevant files be sent to the tribunal. I am sure, however, that he was surprised at the volume, and perhaps he was alarmed at revelations that some hearings of the tribunal had to be rescheduled because dozens of additional boxes were delivered from the Department of Justice and Equality. Does the Taoiseach acknowledge and accept that this reflects badly on the Department? It took his intervention as Taoiseach to get co-operation with this tribunal. Mr. Justice Charleton asked everyone to bring forward information to help him understand who did what, who said what when and in what terms and who communicated with whom, by whatever means. This is a vindication of those Deputies who persisted in challenging the narrative from the previous Minister for Justice and Equality that the tribunal was receiving full support. Will the Taoiseach share his view on that with us?

I have tabled parliamentary questions on the resourcing of the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, and I am waiting for replies. It was very striking that Ms Justice Ring

has been unable to bring a single protected disclosure investigation to a satisfactory conclusion because of chronic understaffing. This issue has affected and contaminated this Government as it did the last one. GSOC is saying it cannot bring a single protected disclosure investigation to a satisfactory conclusion because it does not have the staff. Ms Justice Ring has also called for GSOC to be independent of the Department of Justice and Equality, to be answerable to the Committee of Public Accounts and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality. She said GSOC has failed people who came to it to make protected disclosures and has warned that without resources, it would not be able to meet its central objective of ensuring that all investigations are conducted effectively, efficiently and fairly.

We spoke earlier about a whole-of-government approach. Is this issue of lack of accountability, of scandal, of allegations and so on, not by ordinary citizens but affecting them, and of allegations discrediting those who come forward, not at the root of the discomfiture, cynicism and disillusionment with public affairs and politics? The sum is relatively small, €900,000. It costs much more to set up tribunals and investigations. Does the Taoiseach accept that GSOC needs this funding and does he accept that this is another serious example of mismanagement by the Department of Justice and Equality which undermines public confidence in our system of justice?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Toland review is very pressing. Nothing has happened since 2014 on its fundamental recommendations *vis-à-vis* separation of units within the Department. Where are we in respect of that and the group that we discussed before Christmas to oversee implementation of the Toland report? When will the Government appoint the three individuals who will assist the incoming Secretary General to ensure the programme of reform for the Department is implemented?

Are there established protocols for political officeholders and those within State agencies and institutions, just as in An Garda Síochána, on the use of personal email addresses to communicate official policy or for official communications between officeholders? Unwittingly, people could circumvent freedom of information as a consequence of using two channels of communication on official and policy issues.

The separation of the Department from An Garda Síochána has not happened, notwithstanding the establishment of the Policing Authority. Has a review been undertaken in respect of the statutory remit of the Policing Authority and is the Government of a mind to revisit this? We suggested that it should be revisited in respect of the powers and the statutory nature of the Policing Authority and the relationship between An Garda Síochána, the Policing Authority and the Department, in respect of lines of demarcation and whether the authority has sufficient capacity and authority to deal comprehensively with the full range of issues.

I agree that the unprecedented articulation by the former judge, Ms Justice Mary Ellen Ring, on GSOC that despite the Protected Disclosures Act 2014 nothing has been done to give GSOC the capacity to follow through on protected disclosures is alarming. To an extent the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement has similar issues, which Deputy Howlin raised some time ago, in respect of the delay and procrastination in recruiting and providing it with sufficient staff to follow through on corporate crime in an effective and comprehensive way. All this illustrates the huge disconnect between the rhetoric and announcements and subsequent delivery on the ground.

The Taoiseach: The Toland report recommends that the Department of Justice and Equality

have one Secretary General and be one Department but two divisions, each headed by a deputy Secretary General. That is the proposal and the report has been accepted by the Government. Deputy Brendan Howlin rightly says it is possible to have two Secretaries General and two Departments under the one Cabinet Minister. That is what we have under the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform. I have asked the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Charles Flanagan, and the head of the Civil Service, Mr. Martin Fraser, to examine this as a possibility. We have to advertise for a new Secretary General of the Department of Justice and Equality. If we are to go the whole hog and split it into two Departments, this would be the appropriate time to advertise for two Secretaries General, rather than one. That is being scoped out as an option. We must bear in mind, however, that it would be a deviation from the Toland report which recommended having a single Secretary General of a single Department, with two deputy Secretaries General heading up different divisions.

The Cabinet has not yet agreed a salary scale for the new Garda Commissioner. That issue has not yet been considered by the Cabinet.

On the Kenneally case, the Government is very keen to allow the commission of investigation to begin its work as soon as possible. We have no interest in delaying the commission's work. At the same time, we do not want to jeopardise potential future prosecutions. The Attorney General and the Minister for Justice and Equality are working on the issue and the Minister will meet the families as soon as he has some news. We are working towards a solution that will allow the commission to begin its work. It might not be able to do all of its work, but it would at least be able to commence it. The Minister for Justice and Equality certainly speaks for me and all of Government on these matters.

On the additional documents provided by the Department of Justice and Equality for the tribunal, I am not sure what their volume is. I have heard reports that the volume is great, but I do not know that for a fact. I directed the Department of Justice and Equality to provide all documents for the tribunal and in doing so asked it to err on the side of generosity. If the officials were unsure about whether a document fell within the terms of reference, I asked that they send it anyway. It may be the case that many of the additional documents handed over do not fall within the remit of the tribunal. We will see that matter play out in the coming weeks and months as the tribunal does its work.

The budget of GSOC for this year has been increased to just over €10 million, up from €9.6 million last year, or an increase of over €400,000. The number of staff was 77 in 2015 and 2016. This figure increased to 84 in 2017 and will rise to 94 in 2018. That is not rhetoric; they are the facts. Consideration is also being given to additional staffing for the new protected disclosures unit once it is up and running. GSOC is already being given a bigger budget and more staff and may need a bigger budget and more staff into the future. However, the Government has to be prudent. We always have to bear in mind that we are dealing with taxpayers' money. Every public body states it is understaffed. I have yet to come across a public body since the foundation of the State that has stated it has enough or too many staff. Public bodies always seek additional staff. We have a job as a Government and custodians of taxpayers' money to validate requests or bids for additional staff; to prioritise, given the fact that even with an expanding budget, budgets are limited; and also to understand what the outcomes would actually be for taxpayers and society.

On changing the role of the Policing Authority and the independence of GSOC, these matters are being considered by the commission on the future of policing, which will report this

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year. Rather than make changes now to the role and remit of the Policing Authority or to whom GSOC reports, it would be appropriate to allow the O'Toole commission to make its recommendations. When we have them, we can make decisions on policy changes.

I do not know if there is a protocol on the use of personal email accounts. If there is not, there probably should be. I will check to see what the position is.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Of course, there should be.

European Council: Statements

The Taoiseach: Tá áthas orm labhairt os comhair na Dála inniu faoi chruinniú Chomhairle an Aontais Eorpaigh a bhí ar siúl sa Bhruiséal an 14 Nollaig agus an 15 Nollaig. Bhuail an Chomhairle le chéile i gceithre bhfoirm difriúla le linn an dá lá. Bhí an phríomhchruinniú ar siúl Déardaoin, 14 Nollaig, agus dhírigh sé ar chomhoibriú sóisialta, oideachais agus cultúrtha, chomh maith le cúrsaí slándála agus cosanta. Níos déanaí an tráthnóna sin, bhuaileamar le chéile mar chuid de chlár oibre na gceannairí ar thodhchaí na hEorpa. Bhí béim ar an imirce, ach phléamar cúrsaí eile freisin, ina measc caidrimh sheachtrach agus trádáil. Maidin Dé hAoine, 15 Nollaig, bhí cruinniú mullaigh an euro i bhfoirm leathan leis an 27 ballstát chun an aontas eacnamaíoch agus airgeadaíochta a phlé. Ina dhiaidh sin, bhuaileamar le chéile i bhfoirm Airteagal 50, gan an Bhreatain, le dul chun cinn maidir le Brexit a phlé.

The Thursday afternoon meeting opened with a short exchange of views with President Tajani of the European Parliament. I look forward to meeting President Tajani again tomorrow in Strasbourg where I will be the first EU Head of Government to address the European Parliament as part of its debate series on the future of Europe.

The European Council then moved on to review security and defence. As on previous occasions, the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, attended the meeting and in his remarks underlined the importance of complementarity between his organisation and the European Union and the need for strong European defence. A Europe worth building is a Europe worth defending and Europe should not rely on the United States and the United Kingdom to do it for it. Within the European Union work has moved forward with the launch of the permanent structured co-operation, PESCO, arrangement. I am happy that Ireland is among the 25 member states to participate from the beginning. We are a founder member of PESCO, just as we were of the euro and the Single Market. PESCO provides a mechanism through which crisis management capabilities can be developed by member states in support of common security and defence operations. As I have said previously, participation in PESCO in no way changes our policy of military neutrality. We will continue to make our distinctive contribution based on our own traditions and strengths. However, we should also recognise that there are new challenges that confront all countries, including Ireland, such as terrorism, uncontrolled mass migration, cybercrime and drug and human trafficking and that it makes sense to work together to respond to them. No nation state can do so on its own. I look forward to Ireland participating in projects that are suited to our particular capabilities and position. I restate my view that our military neutrality and non-membership of NATO are a foreign policy strength and enhance our position as an honest broker and as UN peacekeepers in Lebanon and other parts of the world.

The next item for discussion was social, educational and cultural co-operation, following on from the successful social summit in Gothenberg in November. While member states remain

primarily responsible for these areas, much can be achieved by working together. A number of interesting points were raised such as including the social agenda as part of the European Semester, although a decision on this was not taken at the European Council. The concept of European universities was also raised and we are very enthusiastic about exploring it further. The Commission will report back in the coming months on how some of these ideas might be brought forward. I see real opportunities in this for one or more Irish universities in becoming part of a European university. We also had a short discussion on climate change and the One Planet summit held in Paris last month.

In our evening session we had an extensive discussion on migration. While there were no formal conclusions, there was a clear recognition that much had been accomplished on the external dimension, with a sense around the table that the European Union needed to take further action externally to tackle the root causes of mass migration. On the internal dimension, different positions were aired and it was agreed that we would return to the discussion later in the year. Europe needs an effective and sustainable policy which will respect the responsibility and solidarity of member states. We also discussed a range of external relations items, including Russia and Ukraine and Jerusalem. The Minister of State, Deputy Helen McEntee, will provide more detail on some of these issues and the social dimension in her remarks.

On Mercosur, we heard a presentation by the Iberian countries on the advantages of a trade deal for Europe. As the House is aware, while Ireland recognises the potential for a deal to be of great benefit to Irish industry and the economy, we have some concerns about the beef industry, in particular. France shares this position and both President Macron and I intervened to give our strong views on what should and should not be included in such a deal.

The Friday morning euro summit which met in its extended format took place in the presence of outgoing President of the Eurogroup Jeroen Dijsselbloem and the President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, whom I welcomed to Dublin late last year. Both noted that the economic situation across Europe was much improved, how the single currency was in better shape and, in contrast to previous years, that there was greater convergence among eurozone economies. However, both called for this period of relative calm to be used to make European Monetary Union more resilient. I supported this call in my remarks, pointing out that the European Council did not predict the last financial crisis and that there could be no room for complacency about the future. We agreed that the banking union should be completed, although the timing and sequencing, particularly of risk reduction, was still being worked out. I expressed strong support for completing the capital markets union.

There was some discussion about institutional change, including the possibility of establishing a European monetary fund to replace the troika and a possible Finance Minister for the eurozone. Ireland has an open mind on these proposals and would welcome more detail before making a decision. It was also agreed that Finance Ministers should advance their work on these issues, with the European Council retaining oversight. President Tusk has announced that he will convene another eurozone summit in March, at which we will consider these matters further. The European Council met in Article 50 format, without Prime Minister May, and formally took the decision that sufficient progress had been made in phase 1 of the Brexit negotiations to allow us to move on to phase 2. As the House is aware, Ireland was able to rely on the strong support and solidarity of our partners in ensuring what was agreed represented an acceptable outcome on issues related to Ireland and Northern Ireland. I expressed our thanks to my colleagues around the table and they, in turn, assured me that we could continue to rely on their support as the negotiations continued.

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As we move into phase 2, when transitional arrangements and the framework for the United Kingdom's future relationship with the European Union will be considered, it will be important to remain vigilant to ensure the commitments entered into in December are delivered in full. There can be no back-sliding. I am pleased that we agreed to negotiate a transition period and prioritise discussion of it in the first part of phase 2. Such an arrangement is essential if we are to provide certainty for businesses and citizens and enable them to plan for permanent changes that may occur as a result of Brexit.

In addition, internal preparatory discussions among the EU 27 on further guidelines at the European Council in March on the framework for the future relationship will begin. In parallel, the European Council called on the EU and UK negotiators to complete their work on withdrawal issues and start drafting the relevant parts of the legally binding withdrawal agreement. Later this month the General Affairs Council which will be attended by the Minister of State, Deputy Helen McEntee, will adopt additional negotiating directives on transitional arrangements and discussions with the United Kingdom on agreeing these transitional arrangements will then begin. This could be a *status quo* agreement, with the aim of avoiding gaps or cliff edge effects between the United Kingdom leaving the European Union and the entry into force of the future relationship agreement.

In parallel to the negotiations and related work in Brussels, the Government's detailed planning to prepare for the United Kingdom's exit, including contingency planning for all possible scenarios, will continue at home. We have already taken some important steps to prepare the domestic economy, including the Action Plan for Jobs and the trade and investment strategy. Several dedicated measures were announced in budget 2018, including a loan scheme for business and additional supports for capital investment in the food industry. The House can be assured that, as we have done up to now in the negotiations, the Government will continue to advance and defend Ireland's interests and seek to mitigate the negative effects of Brexit for the country and exploit opportunities. I look forward to hearing Deputies' views.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is léir nach raibh cruinniú na Comhairle Eorpaí i mí Dheireadh Fómhair chomh práinneach agus a cheapamar roimhe sin, cé go raibh ceist Brexit beagnach réitithe roimh an gcruinniú. Is maith an rud é sin ach bhí go leor rudaí tábhachtacha le plé ag na rialtais éagsúla ag an gcruinniú chomh maith.

December's Council meeting was, at one point, likely to be a dramatic event with tough decisions coming down to the wire. In the end, it was low key and simply confirmed decisions which had already been announced. In advance of the summit we discussed the outcome of the first round of Brexit negotiations. Now that some of the smoke and hubris which surrounded the agreement have passed, there is much greater clarity on where we find ourselves. A transition deal followed by a comprehensive free trade agreement is the only negotiated outcome which is compatible with the core positions of both sides.

For the European Union, the bottom line is that the United Kingdom will not be given preferential treatment which will undermine the basic legal foundations of the Union. For the United Kingdom, it is about not being subject to the European Union's judicial mechanisms and being able to conduct an independent free trade policy. It is ridiculous that it took the United Kingdom 18 months to recognise the reality that it no longer had the ability to intimidate the European Union by threatening a barrage of tabloid headlines and a possible veto.

Michel Barnier and his team have done an excellent job so far in their overall approach to

the negotiations and we should have confidence in them to conclude a common-sense deal in the next ten months. The situation as it affects Ireland is far less clear. As we have said before, Fianna Fáil strongly welcomes the reassertion of the continued EU citizenship of Northern Ireland residents post-Brexit. This is a matter which we raised first and which was, for us, an absolute red line. However, we are very concerned about the basic contradiction within the agreement about the introduction of new economic divisions on the island. The final text repeats the assertions of the UK Government from very early in the process about its intentions to avoid new barriers. This is contradicted by its new statement that all parts of the United Kingdom will be treated exactly the same. All of the commentary we have heard from the government in London and much of what appears to be the focus of the Irish Government concerns the absence of physical barriers on the Border. The Taoiseach, reflecting what is, unfortunately, his very partisan way of presenting history, has emphasised the issue of physical barriers. The fact is that what is being discussed is a differently managed border, not the absence of a border, and it appears that the Government has gone all-in on a strategy of emphasising the overall UK-EU agreement rather than a special arrangement for this island. This is exactly the opposite of the self-aggrandising claim to be the first leader in 95 years to care about the North. As we have said many times before, some special economic zone is likely to be the only means of mitigating the full impact of Brexit on this island.

The final negotiations revealed a breakdown in relations between the Government and the May Administration, with a display of negotiation through the media not seen for over 30 years. Building close relationships and setting out detailed proposals are much more difficult than focusing on the public dimension, but if anything concrete is to be achieved this year, we need greater urgency and a greater focus than we have seen to date. As President Tusk said in December, what was agreed was the easy part of the process. It is time to put in place an approach which will be capable of delivering a substantive result for Ireland in the negotiations this year.

The bulk of the summit was concerned with other matters. We strongly support the Council's opposition to the unjustified and damaging decision of the Trump Administration to take steps to move the embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and recognise Jerusalem as the capital. I note that the Taoiseach did not refer to what he had stated at the meeting, but I presume the Minister of State will elaborate on that issue. There is no positive dimension to this decision for anyone who supports a fair peace based on a two-state solution. The continued drift of the Netanyahu Government towards a position of undermining any potential Palestinian state has been escalated by this decision. Ireland should continue to stand with its European partners in supporting a fair peace and opposing moves which entrench and promote long-term conflict.

The summit also formally addressed the PESCO defence agreement. As has been shown time and again, EU defence co-operation has respected the positions of members that are not in NATO. PESCO is about developing capacities. In our case, it will help us to continue to develop defence forces which have unique skills in peacekeeping and civil protection. Therefore, we welcome it. However, let no one be in any doubt that the principal issue in hand for us is whether we treat members of the Defence Forces decently with fair pay and fair conditions. In the seven years since the Department of Defence had its own separate full member of the Cabinet there have been drift and neglect. Dealing with this issue should be a priority.

In regard to the Commission's action on Poland and the rule of law, there is a vital principle at stake. The European Union is not just an economic entity, it is also fundamentally based on the values of liberal democracy which include fair elections, a balance of powers and respect for rights. The attempt by the Polish Government to take direct charge of the judiciary is clearly

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against these core values. That said, the various illiberal decisions of the Orbán Government in Hungary, including taking political control of every independent state institution, seem to have gone even further and been subject to no intervention. Before this matter proceeds, it would be a good idea to have a wider discussion on where it is going and the specific objectives involved. I do not think we have had sufficient debate on these issues in this House in terms of the drift in the direction Hungary and Poland are taking or as fully fledged members of the European Union in enshrining the values the European Union espouses. To a certain extent, there has been silence and a brushing under the carpet in the domestic debate here and at European level. That said, I welcome the more recent initiatives on that front at European level.

The euro summit which accompanied the full summit had no substantive outcome. The upturn in the euro economy is very positive, but the last thing it should lead to is complacency or a sense that the need for reform has been removed. The banking union is far from complete and the full separation of banking debt and sovereign debt has not been achieved. A unified system of control and a unified currency require a broad-based system for risk sharing and bank resolution. Continued German objections to it are holding back an essential reform. We are unconvinced by the Commission's proposal to subsume the mechanism for aiding states with borrowing problems under its oversight.

We repeat our call on the Taoiseach to state exactly what Ireland is proposing on the digital taxation initiative. During Taoiseach's questions I repeatedly asked him to clarify his strategy for the March summit which is due to decide the issue, yet he has repeatedly refused to say anything. The more he does that the more it will look like he is simply waiting to see what will happen.

While leaders noted actions concerning migration, there was no substantive discussion of the continued humanitarian catastrophe in Syria. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, there are 5.4 million registered refugees from Syria. Of these, 1 million have sought asylum in the European Union. Ireland has, rightly, agreed to participate in the resettlement of refugees, but we should also acknowledge the generosity of Germany and Sweden which have, between them, taken fully 64% of all refugees. The political bravery of their leaders, particularly Chancellor Merkel, in standing for humanitarian values in the face of intolerance is something we should acknowledge and honour. However, more needs to be done. First, there should be a significant increase in support for basic facilities for refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and other countries in the region. The UNHCR states there is a €2 billion gap in the budget for 2018. Ireland and the European Union should take immediate steps to help to close the gap. Second, we should continue to speak up for the victims of war crimes committed during the Syrian conflict. That Russia has repeatedly vetoed the efforts of the United Nations to investigate likely gas attacks by the Syrian regime against its own people is a shocking reflection of how far it is willing to go in supporting a dictatorship and playing geopolitics.

This year will be dominated by the Brexit negotiations. In the journey from generalities to a hard agreement an enormous amount of work must be undertaken. For Ireland, the challenge is to build the missing constructive relationships and be willing to start proposing specific solutions to at least limit the inevitable damage caused by Brexit. Deputy Donnelly is in London with Deputies Niall Collins and Darragh O'Brien. It is interesting that the perspective on Brexit they are getting from British interlocutors is far different from the message and sense of what the agreement means here. I met the Scottish Minister responsible for Brexit, Mr. Mike Russell, in Killarney at the weekend, with Mr. Mark Drakeford from Wales, and they were very surprised by my explanation of our understanding of what the phase 1 agreement constituted

vis-à-vis what they were hearing from the Westminster Government on the same issue. That indicates clearly the need to be vigilant in the months and years ahead.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Beidh mé ag roinnt ama leis an Teachta David Cullinane.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Aontaithe.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Cuirim fáilte ar ais roimh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Tá súil agam go raibh sos maith aige i dTír Chonaill.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sin ceart, bhí.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Bhí mé ann fosta, leis an fhearhainn. Ahead of the crucial meeting of the European Council last month, Sinn Féin made it clear that it was vital that the Government secure additional guarantees from the British Prime Minister about the legal standing of the joint report issued by the European Commission and the British Government in December. We said that additional guarantees were needed because at the very heart of the report was a set of fundamental contradictions. Contradiction No. 1 is that there will be no hard border on the island of Ireland but that the North will be dragged out of the customs union and the Single Market. Contradiction No. 2 is that there is no threat to the Good Friday Agreement, yet there 142 areas of all-Ireland co-operation that could be adversely affected by the Tory Brexit. Contradiction No. 3 is that there will be no erosion of rights for citizens living in the North but Britain is to push ahead with its withdrawal from the European Court of Justice. Contradiction No. 4 is that the people of the North voted to remain in the European Union, but that decision that has been ignored by the British Government, the DUP and others.

Sinn Féin flagged the contradictions with the Government and advised that it needed to be very careful in its dealings with the British Government. I note the Taoiseach's warning today that we need to remain vigilant to deliver on the commitments made in December, to ensure they will be delivered on in full and that there will be no backsliding. I have learned from decades of experience that British Governments are adept at ensuring the text of agreements is written in such a way that they allow for various interpretations on another date. The interpretation they adopt is always the one which advances British interests over all others. They argue that that is their job. In fact, a senior civil servant once said it was their job to allow for whatever interpretation was required.

The job of the Taoiseach and the Government is to protect, defend and advance the national interest. For too long the Government has seen itself purely as acting in the interests of the State. It is welcome that the Taoiseach is looking out for the interests of the people, North and South. It is a source of some bemusement for me that at this time the Fine Gael leader is more sound on issues to do with the national question than the Fianna Fáil leader.

Deputy David Cullinane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Gerry Adams: We want the Taoiseach to move beyond the rhetoric. We want him to drill down and ensure there is delivery on some of what he has been saying.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Are we warming up for a coalition?

Deputy Gerry Adams: Rock solid, iron-clad guarantees that resolve the contradictions were required to allow the negotiations to move to the next phase with the approval of the Irish Government. That is what has happened, but the question is whether we have rock solid, iron

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clad guarantees. I can only assume that the Taoiseach sought them. We could ask him whether he secured legal assurances from his British counterparts and European colleagues. I assume that they delivered the necessary clarity, certainty and confidence that are so lacking in the joint report. Will the Taoiseach tell the Dáil what additional legal assurances he sought and secured, as opposed to it being a matter of the Irish interpretation or the European Union and British interpretation? Will he give a commitment to publish assurances he may have received in order that Members of the Oireachtas can take the time to examine them?

I also wish to take a moment to address remarks made by the DUP leader, Ms Arlene Foster, in Killarney at the weekend. I acknowledge and welcome her statement that she is opposed to a hard border. The problem is that while Ms Foster and the DUP state they are opposed to a hard border, they are also demanding that the North leave both the customs unions and the Single Market. If that happens, it will guarantee the imposition of a hard border. We have been championing a practical solution, namely, for the North to have special designated status within the European Union. That is the only and best solution. It would also respect the vote of the people in the North and is endorsed by the majority of MLAs. It is endorsed, in particular, by the people of the North and also by the Dáil. I commend it to the Government and also the DUP. There should be no shying away from this because it came from Sinn Féin. We do not care who gets ownership of it or what it is called. I urge An Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, and Ms Foster to examine once again the proposals contained in the various policy documents and discussion documents produced by Sinn Féin.

Deputy David Cullinane: Three issues emerged from the last European Council meeting: Brexit, defence and monetary reform. All three are crucial and central to the future of the people of this island. All of these Council meetings are at a time when there is a focus on the future of Europe and discussion on the type of Europe we want to build. We all now recognise that this future will be without Britain and that Britain is intent on leaving the European Union. It is the job of the Irish Government to ensure we protect our interests and those of Irish people.

With regard to Brexit, we welcomed, as the Taoiseach knows, the relative progress made in recent times in the joint agreement and joint report agreed by all member states regarding the Irish issues and others also. We are now entering a second round of talks at which the heavy lifting will be done, at which the flesh will be put on the bones of all these issues and where the real negotiations will begin. The caveat and background to all that is that the other member states will be really focused on the big issue of whether there will be a trade agreement between Britain and the European Union. Obviously, we want such an agreement and, if possible, Britain to stay within the customs union and the Single Market. The difficulty we have is that there are real contradictions. By “we”, I mean everybody on the island of Ireland, particularly those who want to avoid a hard border and those who want to ensure we protect the rights of citizens, be they Irish citizens or citizens from other member states living in the North or South, and protect the Good Friday Agreement.

What we are hearing from the Tory party depends on what wing one is listening to. It is very difficult when one is negotiating with three wings, or possibly four, of another political party, but that is what the member states are trying to do. If one listens to the British Government and British Prime Minister, however, one notes they are saying that Britain and the North will come out of the customs union, Single Market and legal framework of the European Union. That means the Good Friday Agreement also. Thus, we do not have assurances that citizens in the North will enjoy exactly the same rights as European citizens in the South when the North is taken out of the European Union. These are contradictions that cannot be squared unless we

have absolutely firm commitments that the North will stay in the customs union and the Single Market and remain subject to the Good Friday Agreement.

We have consistently said all of this is possible. We, and even members of the Taoiseach's Government and the former Taoiseach, heard that any kind of special solution for Ireland was not possible. It is possible. It is possible for the North to remain within the European Union. It is possible to have special status. It is possible for the North to stay in the customs union and Single Market if the political will exists. If the political will exists, anything is possible. All of this is unprecedented in terms of Britain leaving the European Union anyway. Let me state my words of caution to the Taoiseach. I doubt that he needs them. He has been described as being a bit greener than previous Fianna Fáil leaders in the past, which some might regard as quite ironic. Even leaving that aside, I do not need to remind the Taoiseach that when the heavy lifting will be done over the coming months and when we begin to negotiate the actual detail, the British Government will act in British interests, as Teachta Adams said. That is what it would be expected to do. The Taoiseach must act in the interest of Irish citizens in the North and South. He has to make sure he gets the best possible deal for us and make sure full alignment means full alignment. The only way he can achieve full alignment is by having the North stay in the customs union and Single Market. If he comes back with something less, if there is a hardening of the Border, if the Good Friday Agreement is not protected and if EU citizens who live in the North do not have the same rights that they have now, it will be a problem and a matter for which his Government will have to account. As long as the Taoiseach is acting in the national interest for all people who live on the island of Ireland, he will enjoy the support of Sinn Féin. I am sure he will enjoy the support of many people across the island.

We are very focused on the time ahead. We want to get the best possible deal and result but that will require considerable diligent, hard work and attention over the coming weeks and months. My party will not be found wanting in making sure we do whatever we can to achieve the best possible outcome for everybody. As I stated, that means the North staying in the European Union, the customs union, the Single Market, the political framework and legal framework, in addition to remaining subject to the Good Friday Agreement.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Brendan Howlin.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Fáilte romhat ar ais.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is nearly a month since the December European Council meeting. Significant progress was made on Brexit and on the leaders' agenda, discussed prior to Christmas. It is unfortunate that debate on many of the changes under way in Europe has been limited and more often lost in the understandable focus on Brexit. Europe is changing, however. The rush to advance the defence agenda just prior to Christmas is just one example.

For six months, I called in this House for a debate on PESCO. I listened to the leader of Fianna Fáil give his view on it. It was perfectly reasonable but we should have the debate and a full, open discussion on these matters.

Permanent structured co-operation on defence and security matters has been central to the changes under way in Europe. It is a shame, therefore, that these matters were rushed through in two hours. We were not to have any debate at all in this House on the matter until I insisted

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on it. It was a joke of a reference to the defence committee of the House when the debate on its report was scheduled for the next day. Thus, there was no opportunity to hear any expert witnesses on important matters. That is not the way we bring people with us in an important debate on the future of Europe. We have made such mistakes in the past. Any changes will be subject to referendum in the future. Therefore, let us bring our people on a journey of understanding as we discuss fundamental issues pertaining to the future of Europe, including this country.

As I said in December, Ireland should have taken the same position as Malta, which adopted a wait-and-see approach because it believed certain operations may be in breach of the neutrality clause in its constitution. The Irish Government has still not informed us which of the 17 joint projects under PESCO it intends to sign up to. There should be no fear about an open and reasonable debate on these matters.

On foreign policy in the Middle East, I welcome the firm commitment by leaders reiterating support for a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine and the fact that the EU position on Jerusalem remains unchanged. It is three years since the Dáil unanimously voted to recognise the state of Palestine. The Irish Government should now move to declare its recognition of Palestine as a state, and more efforts are needed to stop and reverse the development by Israel of illegal settlements. This is an important item for the agenda of the European Union. It seems we are moving away from peace as opposed to towards it, as we had hoped. So many of the problems of the world have their genesis in the conflict in the Middle East.

The Council welcomed the progress on climate change and the outcome of the One Planet Summit in Paris. That work now needs to be progressed further.

In the context of the next EU budget, there is an interesting proposal from the Commission that proceeds and profits of the EU emissions trading system should move from state level to EU level. This is one of the proposals put forward to fill the EU budget gap that will be created when the UK leaves the Union. The Government's view on this proposal and the other financial proposals should be set out clearly for us and we should have an opportunity to debate that also.

More than likely Ireland will be asked to make a larger contribution to the EU budget. There should be an open public debate on that. Again, we need to address that matter and explain, if there are to be increased contributions, what they are for and how they are to be constructed.

The second agenda item for the Council was the social dimension, education and culture. Last month, I flagged a number of ideas proposed by the Party of European Socialists. I hoped then that the Government would consider those. A key agenda item at the Council was extending the ERASMUS programme on its 30th anniversary. It is timely, as we recall with sadness the death of Peter Sutherland, to remember the work he did to create that ground-breaking programme when he was a European Commissioner. It is one of the really important instruments that brought European citizens together. The proposal from the leaders' agenda to envisage an ERASMUS programme for young artists would be a fitting legacy to and expansion of his work, as well as a tangible benefit for all EU citizens. The outcomes of the Council also refer to a proposal to encourage the emergence by 2024 of some 20 European universities. Will the Government outline what this will mean and if an Irish university will be encouraged to pursue this goal?

The last Council was dominated by Brexit. I was sceptical as to whether progress could be made. It went to the wire but, thankfully, agreement was reached. We would be under an illu-

sion if we were to think that significant challenges do not remain. It is a challenge for all of us when we are asked how the apparent opposite objectives of the UK Government's commitment to have no border on the island of Ireland while leaving the customs union at the same time can be achieved. We need to get down to concrete detail ourselves, as well as those in the discussions taking place between Michel Barnier and UK Government, to ensure we have a deeper step-by-step understanding as how this will be envisaged and achieved.

The December Council meeting agreed to begin work on the type of transition agreement that will be put in place for approximately two years. It also will open discussions on the type of framework for the future relationship of the EU and the UK. In advance of the March Council meeting, the detail of both the transition and the future relationship will have to be worked out. Some details are beginning to emerge. I believe that only the UK staying in the Single Market and customs union can deliver the type of border and future trade arrangements that Ireland needs. Having listened to some Members earlier, I do not want a customs union barrier between Rosslare and Holyhead or Fishguard or Dublin and Liverpool. While the issues discussed in some detail about the Border are important, the bulk of our trade is east-west and it is critical for all of us.

The recent move by the UK Labour Party to acknowledge the need to stay in the customs union, as well as some form of linkage to the Single Market, is welcome. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. However, the news that Norway would seek radical changes to the European Economic Area, EEA, agreement in the event of special UK access to parts of the Single Market is a further reflection of the constraints on the UK's manoeuvrability in this regard.

Moves are under way to identify funding for the next EU budget. Where will the EU go when the UK exits? The debate started by the French President has been added to in Germany by the Social Democratic Party of Germany, in the context of coalition discussions. The future of Europe is a core concern for the Labour Party and for all social democrats, as well as democrats, on the Continent. Across Europe, parties of the left fought long and hard to advance this political project and the benefits it would bring to all Europeans. Laws, like the working time directive, parental leave and women's rights, have been an enormous advance for EU citizens. As I said in December, we need the debate on how we can bring Europe closer to all our citizens, and that it is not merely some economic or trading entity but has an impact on the quality of lives of everybody else.

We need to have a view on how Europe will be structured in the future. Due to our understandable focus on Brexit, the future of Europe debate has been somewhat put to one side. I note the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, has been pivotal in this discussion but I share the concerns expressed in the House about the drift away from liberal democracy and adherence to the European Convention on Human Rights, which were the drivers of the European project in the aftermath of the Second World War. We need to understand what kind of European Union we want in the future. Ireland should be a leader in that. Although we have interests, we have also got values. Those values should be clearly articulated in all discussions about the next steps to be taken about Europe's future.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am sharing time with Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

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Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to raise the question of Palestine and the EU's relationship with Israel. I know it was on the Council agenda.

I must say goodbye to the Taoiseach. I note his regular departure once Solidarity-People Before Profit Members start to speak.

The Taoiseach: I have been here for the past four hours. How long has Deputy Paul Murphy been here?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Has the Taoiseach ever stayed for any of our contributions in any of the debates he leads off on?

The Taoiseach: Regularly.

Deputy Paul Murphy: No. For every single European Council debate, the Taoiseach stays until the Labour Party, with its seven Members, speaks, as he rightly should. Then he leaves when Solidarity-People Before Profit, with six Members, starts to speak because our ideas are not worth listening to. I am sure he can read the Official Report later.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Rural Independent Group has seven Members. I do not get the Deputy's point.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach should also stay and listen to Deputy Mattie McGrath's group. He should stay to listen to what all Members have to say in these debates in which he leads off.

Obviously, the question of Jerusalem was on the agenda of the European Council meeting. The European Union is not like the US or Donald Trump in enthusiastically endorsing and cheering on Israeli oppression with, for example, the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem. The EU can try to bask in an inverted reflected glory of not being Donald Trump and look as if it is somehow friends of the Palestinian people. However, the reality is different. While the EU has a different approach in how it puts the case forward and sheds crocodile tears for Palestinians, the same complicity exists between the EU and Israel. The relationship between the EU and Israel has actually deepened over the past several months.

A graphic demonstration of why this is absolutely abhorrent, morally wrong and outrageous as a foreign policy is the treatment of the 16 year old Ahed Tamimi over the course of the past several months. She is a Palestinian activist and a recognised human rights defender who was arrested in the early hours of 19 December. She was taken from her home by Israeli soldiers, put into a military jeep and has been held in a military prison, Ofer Prison, since. Her mother was detained on the same day when she went to a detention centre to ask of her daughter's whereabouts.

One day, prior to her arrest, Ahed Tamimi was protesting against occupation soldiers who shot her 15 year old cousin in the face, putting him in a critical condition. During the raid, soldiers forcibly entered her home, physically assaulted her mother and her siblings and confiscated electronic devices including laptops, cameras and mobile telephones. Her treatment comes after her challenging the presence of the Israeli Defence Forces in her family's courtyard, following the injury of her 15 year old cousin. The village in which he lives has been the location of regular protest in which she has played a role because it is illustrative of the growing occupation by Israel, forcing people out of their homes. For example, water was redirected to

a local Israeli settlement, leading to a lack of water for Palestinian farms. Ahed Tamimi faces 12 charges in a military court, which have grown over time, as a result of her being involved in protests.

The reaction of the right wing is appalling. The education minister stated that she should end her life in prison. Ahed Tamimi is still in prison, as is her mother. She should be released. Their case illustrates the treatment of Palestinian children by the Israeli occupation. Some 8,000 have been arrested, detained or charged with offences in military courts since 2000. Three out of four of those detained by the Israel Defense Forces experience violence and are the subject of conviction rates of 99% in military courts. When I was in Gaza seven years ago, I saw some of the instruments of torture used against these children.

The reality of the relationship between the EU and Israel is demonstrated by a so-called informal meeting at the end of December involving all of the EU ministers for foreign affairs and Benjamin Netanyahu. It is an incredible relationship which would not happen anywhere else and illustrates that, with the EU-Israel association agreement, Israel is incorporated into the Single Market. Israeli companies, including military companies, have been the beneficiaries of over \$2 billion in the past 20 years in the context of research funding. That is public funding, some of which ends up with those arms industries. That relationship has to end. Ahed Tamimi and her family must be released immediately.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I also want to raise the issue of Palestine. I echo the comments about Ahed Tamimi and the horrendous treatment of a child and her mother protesting against the illegal and immoral occupation of Palestinian territory in defiance of any notion of a two-state solution or international law and yet we continue to allow Israel to effectively act with impunity.

I want to talk about Gaza, the other part of Palestinian territory, and the shocking humanitarian crisis that is unfolding and worsening there. We often only talk about Palestine when there is war and places are being bombed to bits. We talk little about what the disastrous humanitarian consequences are afterwards and the impact that the siege is having on nearly 2 million people in a tiny pocket of land in Gaza. The facts are shocking. Some 20% of the housing stock has been destroyed as a result of various Israeli assaults. A total of 1.3 million people - 70% of the population - are dependent on humanitarian assistance. Nearly 50% of the people there are food insecure, 55% do not have a consistent energy supply and fewer than 5% have potable piped water. There is a horrific situation regarding patients trying to get out of Gaza to get medical treatment whereby the number that Israel or the el-Sisi regime in Egypt allows out has been slashed. Many people in desperate need of medical treatment simply cannot get out of Gaza. There is no medicine or medical equipment in the hospitals. The goods that can be transported in or out are tightly controlled, which impacts on medical supplies in particular since Israel claims they are dual-use and could be used as weapons. This is a nonsense used to strangle the population into an appalling situation. Fishermen are only allowed to fish in one third of the fishing waters in which they were supposed to be allowed to fish under the Oslo Accords. The international community sits by and does nothing.

The Minister, Deputy Coveney, went to the region last week. He met Benjamin Netanyahu, the person who is illegally occupying Palestinian territory in defiance of international law and the Geneva Convention. As a result of the occupation, 2 million people in Gaza are the subject of collective punishment. The Minister was happy to meet Mr. Netanyahu. When he went to Gaza, and wrote a very moving blog about what he saw there, he refused to meet the demo-

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cratically-elected members of the Gaza Parliament. One line in his blog states that Hamas is deemed an international terrorist group and that we do not deal directly with them. Benjamin Netanyahu, in the context of what he is doing, is a terrorist by any definition. Our representatives can meet him no problem and yet they go to Gaza and will not meet the democratically-elected representatives of the people of that territory. Let us remember that Gaza is in the current humanitarian mess because Israel refused to recognise the outcome of democratic elections over which there was international observation. They were shown to be absolutely free and fair elections, yet, when our Minister went there, he refused to talk to the representatives in question. I am not even referring to talking to Hamas.

I want to pass on a direct request from the Gaza Parliament, which has contacted me. It says it was delighted to see the Minister, Deputy Coveney, in Gaza, but wished that representatives of this democratically-elected Parliament would go and meet representatives of the democratically-elected parliament there or that we might invite the speaker of the Gaza Parliament to this Parliament to talk. We should listen to the elected representatives of the people of Gaza who are suffering this appalling situation have to say. That is elementary. If we can talk to Benjamin Netanyahu - I would rather we did not - then can we also talk to the people who represent the suffering millions in Gaza who are putting up with an appalling situation? That is a direct question to the Minister of State and the Government. Will they talk to the elected representatives of the people of Gaza about the disastrous humanitarian situation that the vast majority of that population is suffering?

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I am sharing time with Deputy Clare Daly. Looking at the agenda from the EU summit, we noticed that security and defence played a big role. I know we have had a debate on PESCO. Those of us who have reservations and criticisms about PESCO aired those views. I hope those reservations and criticism do not come back to haunt us because I believe we are playing with our neutrality. I do not believe we are respecting it and it has already been undermined by the misuse and abuse of Shannon airport. We have a significant reputation from our humanitarian role and also our work in securing agreement on the sustainable development goals. No matter what is said, PESCO is about military capabilities and projects. How will this be managed? What will the role of the Dáil be when it comes to these operations? What sort of say are we going to have? We have a different role and different relationship with the countries in Central and South America, in Africa and in south-east Asia. It is different from the relationship that other European countries have with them because many of those European countries were colonial powers and we have to recognise that.

We also see a greater link between security, defence and migration. We know we have an unprecedented migrant crisis in Europe and a global refugee crisis. At present, there are 65 million refugees and displaced persons across the globe, the largest number since the Second World War. President Tusk was talking about preventing new arrivals at external borders and tackling the root causes of migration. The latter is a very long-term goal but in the meantime we have migrants who are totally at the mercy of unscrupulous traffickers and they are still being returned to detention centres in Libya. Is there an update on what is happening in those centres in Libya?

Culture and education were discussed. I would make a particular plea for those migrant young people living in European countries, many of whom are disaffected, and for there to be a way to bring them into the education system because many are not engaging. The EU is committed to the two-state solution but while it is stating that commitment, as we are speaking here, there is more encroachment with the building of settlements. The viability of a Palestin-

ian state is being further encroached upon. I know there were talks and reconciliation is going on between Hamas and Fatah. I would like to see the EU supporting that and doing more than saying that it is committed to a two-state solution.

Ireland played a role in the Colombian peace process, as did the EU, and I want to bring up the issue of Honduras. I know it has been brought to the Minister, Deputy Coveney's, attention. The EU has a delegation in Honduras and there is an EU electoral observation mission there. It is due to release its report but not for some months and there is much violence in the meantime. The presidential candidate and Opposition Alliance leader, Salvador Nasralla, is shown by official data, backed up by considerable evidence, to have had an insurmountable lead prior to the electronic vote management system going offline. The EU electoral observer mission noted irregularities in the conduct of the election but is not releasing its official report. Unfortunately, some countries recognise the result even though there were irregularities with the election. The Organization of American States is calling for fresh elections.

While it was relatively calm over Christmas, violence has resumed. There has recently been very heavy-handed tactics from the state forces and militias. I know that the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade called on all sides to be respectful, but one side definitely is not. Recently eight regional leaders, with one Jesuit who is working with them, were called "an axis of evil". There is the intimidation and harassment of civil society, peasant leaders and environmentalists. Can Ireland be a progressive voice at EU and UN level in supporting democracy - there was an EU election observation mission - and the citizens of Honduras?

Deputy Clare Daly: At December's meeting the assembled Ministers discussed migration. Yet again, we are told the discussion was based on a note circulated by President Tusk which focused on "preventing mass arrivals at external borders and tackling the root causes of the migration crisis". In the short time available to me, I would like to raise two subjects that circle the questions of asylum and migration which often result in a red mist descending over western liberal eyes. They are the position of Julian Assange and the situation in Syria.

Since Julian Assange entered the Ecuadorian embassy in London five years ago and was granted asylum, the focus has drifted from him and his rights under international law; in its place there is a poisonous consensus in both the right-wing and left-wing media that he is in the embassy of his own free will, that he can walk away any time he likes, that the threat posed by the US Government is overstated, that he is just a publicity seeking narcissist and that people who are not great and who have character flaws do not deserve human rights. The media consensus on this issue is a complete distortion of the reality and an uncritical acceptance of what can only be called UK and US Government propaganda.

With the spotlight off Julian Assange's human rights, it is up to us to put the issue centre stage. In February 2016 the working group on arbitrary detentions which falls under the UN's Human Rights Council ruled that Julian Assange, effectively after more than five years of imprisonment, had been deprived of his rights under international law and was the subject of arbitrary detention. It called for him to be allowed to exercise his right to freedom of movement and be offered compensation for his detention. The UK and Swedish Governments responded by completing ignoring this call and, in doing so, ignored their obligations under international human rights law. When the same group issued a decision in 2008 that Aung San Suu Kyi was being held in arbitrary detention, the UK Government, with its European counterparts, were quick to condemn it and call for her release.

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Universal human rights do not mean one law for people we like and another for people we do not. We should remind our European counterparts of this. The working group's decision was made two years ago, but the issue of Julian Assange's human rights has faded from public discussion in favour of tidbits about celebrity visitors and involvement in publicising the Democratic National Committee leaks. There is little discussion of the basic fact that he is being detained arbitrarily by the United Kingdom in contravention of international law and his right to asylum. This is all the more surprising given that in April last year the director of the CIA called WikiLeaks "a hostile, non-state intelligence service" and Julian Assange a demon who had no right to the protections of the First Amendment. In the same month he confirmed that the United States had prepared a warrant for his arrest which it called "a priority". It is worrying that the United Kingdom and the United States have manufactured this consensus on human rights and international law and the right to asylum. The next time the Minister of State sits down with her European counterparts I ask her to make it known that Julian Assange must be allowed to leave the embassy with cast iron guarantees on his release that he can exercise his right to asylum in Ecuador without fearing extradition to an English or an American super-max prison.

One of the root causes of migration is the conflict in Syria. The way in which the debate is represented in Ireland and across Europe has been incredibly naive and simplistic, as it is portrayed as a debate between good and bad, with a demand that one has to take only one side. Deputy Mick Wallace and I were criticised for our visit to Syria and call for an end to sanctions which we based on our support for fundamental human rights and decades of evidence that sanctions hurt ordinary people far more than regimes. However, in some quarters that was somehow filtered through the Syrian distortion filter as expressing support for Bashar al-Assad. I hope that when the Government goes to the European Union, it will portray the reality of Syrian politics and society which is a kaleidoscope and not black and white. No society is black and white and it is profoundly wrong and short-sighted of those who are not part of Syrian society to assume entrenched positions on what is happening there. All we can do is listen to the people whose country it is and be guided by them to support them in their efforts. It is not for us to impose our will or conception of what is right for them. That is precisely the paternalism that drove 19th century imperialism and that is driving western interventions in sovereign states, which has led to 65 million people being driven out of their homes. If we want to help the Syrian people, our only choice is to embrace nuance and avoid at all costs the temptation to assume the right to speak for and represent them.

I refer to the words of a Syrian youth activist who is implacably opposed to both President Assad and ISIS and puts forward a view that is the way forward when he talks about those from outside deciding what is right. He said:

They are interested in high-politics, not grassroots struggles. They are dealing with grand ideologies and historical narratives, but they don't see people - the Syrian people aren't represented. They are holding on to depopulated discourses that don't represent human struggle ... We as a people are not merely a tool for the narratives of the western left. This is our country. We are not guests.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I wish the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the Minister of State a happy new year.

The outcomes of the European Council meeting before Christmas are important and cover many areas. As Chairman of the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, I will refer

mostly to the Brexit negotiations.

It is welcome that significant progress has been made to allow the negotiations to move from phase one to phase two. The negotiations are important for Ireland and likely to impact one way or another on every parish, workplace and home. While many in the United Kingdom believe that no deal is better than a bad one, I do not agree. We all know that the potential consequences of the United Kingdom crashing out of the European Union could be disastrous. The confirmation that the United Kingdom has proposed and the European Union has accepted a transition period of two years is good news. It gives all of our businesses time to get ready and prepare. This step was hugely significant for Ireland and the rest of the European Union. The impact of Brexit on Ireland will be significant because of geography, history, trade and so on; therefore every aspect of the negotiations is vital for all of us.

There are, however, issues that are unique to Ireland and they have been extremely well recognised by the other member states. I congratulate all those on the Irish side who worked so hard to explain the position and recognise the solidarity we received from all of these countries. The Government, the Civil Service and our diplomats played their parts, while Oireachtas Members also made every effort to talk to fellow parliamentarians in other member states to raise issues and explain their context every time they had an opportunity to do so. A strong consensus was built and our friends supported us, which ended up being important in getting us to where we are now. However, while all of that was complicated, the next phase will be more difficult as there will be negotiations on a transitional arrangement, a withdrawal agreement and the start of work on the framework for a future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. The full and final solution which takes into account the particulars of the Irish Border has not been found yet. We know what the parameters of it are but not how every little piece will work or what exactly regulatory alignment is and in what areas it is needed. The EU will need to go into all of this with the UK.

My sense is that if we are to look at the central parts, that is, the customs union and the Single Market, to ensure there is no hard border on this island, we might be better drawing up a list of what is not essential rather than trying to start with what is essential. We have all seen the reports on the trade, the number of people and, in particular, the volume of milk crossing the Border every day. There is the example of how Baileys is made, with movement backwards and forwards made possible partly because we all recognise the same standards. While the European Council noted in its position that the Brexit transition arrangements must suit the EU, it also highlighted its willingness to establish partnerships with the UK in other areas besides trade after Brexit. This is very helpful. At the end of the day, there is a lot of excitable talk about all of this but the islands are not moving. We are still going to be neighbours and we will need to work together on many issues. With regard to the rest of the issues that were dealt with at the European Council, it is always helpful to continue to co-operate with other member states. Some of the issues that were discussed are ones where, while it is important Ireland has a different focus and approach because of our military neutrality, we can still co-operate on them. We need to take care on all of these issues. The final issues of importance the Council looked at focus on improving co-operation on social, educational and cultural policies. While we all set our own policies in these areas, we can still learn from each other and try to improve.

I want to put on the record my compliments and gratitude to all of the members of the committee. I wish the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, continued success. The committee members look forward to working with her in a very proactive way in trying to deal with all of the issues of importance to Ireland post-Brexit.

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Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, the Minister of State and everyone in the House a happy new year. As there was no time to do so on the Order of Business, I did not sympathise on the sad passing of Dolores O’Riordan, the famous singer. She was an excellent ambassador for Ireland throughout the EU and, indeed, all over the world. She is a huge loss, not only to her own young children, her family and those in the music industry, but also to us and to her many admirers all over the world.

I am happy to speak on these statements. It can be taken as a given that, for the foreseeable future there will be only one topic dominating our engagement with the European Council and that, of course, is Brexit. The agreement reached in December on the first phase of the negotiations is to the credit of the Government. I have no hesitation in commending the work of the Irish team who worked so hard to get to that point, and I will always give credit where it is due. Up to that point, the entire process was marked by a chaotic and messy approach whereby both the UK and the EU sides seemed to be working in complete opposition to each other - they were like two horses on a plough that were pulling in different directions. This created very real fears in this country that the process would generate considerable long-term damage in terms of addressing the need for certainty.

I accept that it has not been easy trying to balance our clear national interests with maintaining respect for the delicate nature of the Good Friday Agreement, for example. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, made some very blunt statements in that regard and I think he was fully justified in being so candid at the time. It always amazes me when others, particularly those within the EU, seemed totally surprised that the Irish negotiating team would come out fighting for our national interests. What do they expect us to do? Are they so used to us asking “How high?” when they say “Jump” that they think we would kowtow to them altogether? I would remind them we are a sovereign country. We should not abandon diplomacy but we should certainly not pretend that this process will be anything other than brutal. I encourage the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and others to be absolutely up-front in their view that we will always put the interests of the Irish people first, as is our duty.

I note from the report on the phase one agreement that both parties, the EU and the UK, have reached agreement in principle across the following three areas under consideration in the first phase of negotiations: protecting the rights of Union citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the Union; the framework for addressing the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland; and the financial settlement. I also note that progress was made in achieving agreement on aspects of other separation issues under the caveat that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. Where have we heard that before? It is certainly the crux of the matter.

While progress is being made, there is still the potential for the whole thing to descend into another sorry spectacle. All it would take is for the ever-increasing political instability in the UK to get to the stage where the more hardline elements of the Leave campaign gain a stronger hold over the Conservative Party. All of that is outside our control, however. For now, the only responsible approach is to support the Government, where possible, and try to make the existing agreement as legally binding as we can, particularly with respect to the Border issue and the status of Northern Ireland. As Professor Cormac Lucey has noted:

Ireland’s economic priority is that the UK’s exit from the EU is as soft as possible. It is not in our interests for the UK to exit the single market. It would suit Ireland much better if, outside the EU, the UK opted for similar arrangements to those of Switzerland and Norway, both of which are inside the single market. It is clearly up to the UK to decide what it wants.

Yet it is of vital national interest that we and the EU encourage as soft a Brexit as possible.

I compliment Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, the Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs, Deputy Haughey and all the other members on the work they have done. It has been a very trying time and has not been easy. Deputy Healy-Rae met all the EU ambassadors and even brought some of them to Kerry, and he gave them a good outline of what is happening here in Ireland.

I see the Leas-Cheann Comhairle is wiggling his pen. I thought he might be a little easier on the draw in this new year period. I am only starting and am going at a nice slow pace. I am not really over time, as such.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You are being presumptuous but you have reminded me you are over time. To put some structure on this, there are 20 minutes for questions and answers and five minutes for the Minister of State to wind up. If Deputies who wish to ask questions would indicate, we will deal with them. I call Deputy Haughey.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I have two questions. Obviously, the main focus in this country in regard to the summit was the Article 50 negotiations, where it was decided that sufficient progress had been made during the first phase of the Brexit negotiations and where guidelines for the second phase of the negotiations were adopted. However, there were other issues discussed at the summit, including security and defence, the EU pillar of social rights, the EU action plan to tackle the gender pay gap, the concept of European universities, issues in regard to European languages, climate change, Jerusalem, the Russia-Ukraine situation, migration and economic and monetary union. Like other speakers, I believe we need to be very conscious of the debate taking place on the future of Europe at this time and I appreciate the work the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, is doing on that. I note she is briefing Oireachtas Members this week, there is a major conference in DCU in association with European Movement Ireland and, obviously, there are meetings taking place throughout the country as well.

As regards security and defence, PESCO was launched at the summit. Some 17 common projects have been agreed so far and I understand further work is needed in that regard. Will the Minister of State undertake to keep the House briefed on this and assure us that any projects in which we participate will not compromise Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality? The House needs to be informed every step of the way so that we can scrutinise these projects and give them our agreement if they are compatible with our traditional policy of military neutrality.

It seems that President Donald Tusk attempted to launch a major review of the EU's migration strategy. He suggested that we should abandon the mandatory relocation of asylum seekers. I understand that Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic were singled out for not sharing in the responsibility in this regard. It was agreed to set up a fund to stem the flow of illegal migration. A reform of the Dublin Convention is also envisaged.

We in this country are somewhat removed from the issues of migration, but I hope that, in any input into the debate that we have, our traditional humanitarian approach will be to the fore and we will seek a humanitarian solution to this problem. I hope that the Minister of State can give me an assurance in that regard.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): As there are so few of us and we have 20 minutes remaining, perhaps we might go

back and forth.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I wish everyone a happy new year and success throughout the year.

I will answer Deputy Haughey's two questions. The House agreed that Ireland would join PESCO at the initial stage so that we would have an input into what happened in future and not join later as a third party country. That was the right course to take. Since the co-operation involved is in line with the Lisbon treaty, it does not impact on our neutrality. Nor would we allow it to reach that point. Politically, there would have to be a referendum to put the question to the people if there were an impact. We have been clear that, similar to countries like Austria, Finland and Sweden, which are neutrals, the kinds of project in which we will be involved will be maritime surveillance, cybersecurity and strengthening of our current peacekeeping missions. Ireland and its soldiers have an excellent reputation on peacekeeping missions. We view PESCO as a mechanism to enhance that as well as our co-operation with other member states. The climate has changed. As the Taoiseach outlined, we need to be able to co-operate with other member states on tackling terrorism, cybercrime and drug trafficking.

I see no reason not to keep the House updated on those missions in which we take part. None of them will impact on our neutrality.

Regarding migration, the EU and Ireland as a part of it have adopted a broad range of measures. We are engaging with countries of origin and transit to try to address the root causes of migration. We have agreed to a plan relocating migrants in Italy and Greece across the EU. We have launched the EUNAVFOR Med, or Operation Sophia, and have provided substantial financial assistance to countries that are hosting large numbers of migrants.

At the European Council meeting, leaders held an informal discussion on migration. No conclusion was reached. Currently, the two schools of thought are whether countries that have given substantial amounts of funding should also have to take in substantial numbers of migrants and whether specific figures should be allocated to specific countries. There has been no resolution to that debate yet, but I hope for more definition in the coming Council meetings.

Ireland's view is that there should be a stand-alone solidarity instrument that is not attached to the Dublin review. That is the position that we have put forward and we will put it forward again at the next stage of discussions or negotiations.

An Ceann Comhairle: Next are Deputies Cullinane, Boyd Barrett and Mattie McGrath. Will we take the three together?

Deputy David Cullinane: I did not signal, so I do not need to speak.

An Ceann Comhairle: In that case, I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will follow up on my statement and the questions about Gaza with which I concluded. Jerusalem was discussed at the Council meeting, but I would like a response on the issue of Gaza. I do not know whether the Minister of State can tell us much about what the Minister, Deputy Coveney, did there last week. He met some people, but they were linked to one faction, namely, the Ramallah-based Government, and so he should have. However, that he did not meet elected representatives from Gaza itself is a problem. Let us

remember that Gaza was the trigger for the Israeli assaults. Israel did not accept the outcome of a democratic election and then attacked. Last week, the Minister saw some of the consequences of that. He was clearly aware of them, yet he has reinforced the Israeli position by not talking to the representatives of the people of Gaza. It legitimises Israel's position, which we should not do. At the very least, we should be balanced. Some reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah is now happening.

I have received a direct request from the Speaker of the elected representatives in the Gaza Parliament for us to send an all-party delegation to Gaza to meet them or for us to invite the Speaker to the Oireachtas. We should do that if we are serious about talking to all sides. According to the request, since Ireland has incredible credibility among all Palestinian factions, there is nothing that we could propose that they would not seriously consider. That puts us in a privileged position. We should use our credibility to talk to the political representatives in Gaza. The Government should consider doing so, given the appalling and intolerable humanitarian situation there. I was told about some of it and the statistics show more. Anecdotally, people are suffering bad health conditions - for example, kids and others in need of dialysis and new kidneys - but they cannot get out to get treatment. Apparently, kidneys are being sold for €30,000 and €40,000 in Cairo, but someone needs €5,000 to bribe an Egyptian guard to get out through Rafah. That is how it works. The number of people being allowed out for medical reasons has reduced significantly.

We need to intervene. We have a great deal of credibility. We should use it by engaging with the political representatives in Gaza. I hope that the Government will consider doing so, as this request comes straight from Gaza.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I cannot speak on the Minister's behalf, but I can send that request to him. If I outline some of what the Tánaiste did on his visit, perhaps the Deputy can ask him for more detail and about what happened at the next Question Time.

He met the Palestinian President and the foreign Minister, Dr. Malki. He also announced an increase of €200,000 in funding for Palestinian students seeking education and training in Ireland. This came during his meeting with the Palestinian Minister for education. Ireland's overall funding to the Palestinian people in 2017 amounted to €11.19 million, with €4 million of assistance for this year announced by the Tánaiste during his visit last week. He met the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, the UNRWA, and the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, a Gaza-based NGO.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I will raise a similar matter regarding PESCO. We debated it before the Christmas break. Assurances were given by the Tánaiste, the Minister of State and others. Will the Minister of State ensure that those commitments will be lived up to so that our personnel who are serving on UN missions will not be asked to do anything that would infringe upon the highly respected role that we have developed around the world? We are respected far and wide because we are a neutral country. I hope we will not be sucked into any of the areas against which we railed during that debate. I certainly opposed it and voted against it. In that context, I ask the Minister of State to reassure us that our personnel will be respected. I refer in particular to the Naval Service and commend it on the great work that it is doing out at sea, trying to rescue massive numbers of unfortunate people who have, in some cases, been tricked and duped and who had to pay money to get onto totally unsafe, makeshift boats. We have all seen the consequences of that and I commend the Naval Service on its work in that area.

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On the matter of Gaza, we need to take a more upfront role because of our respected position internationally. We must heed the humanitarian crisis that exists there and the Taoiseach, if he is visiting, must engage in an even handed fashion. We must respect the result of the election, unlike many other countries.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I can repeat and absolutely confirm that Ireland's neutrality will not be impacted by our membership of PESCO. In fact, we were one of the last countries to sign up to it and that was because officials in the Department were making absolutely sure that there was no possible way that our neutrality could be compromised or that the work we do could be impacted in any way by PESCO. I can give the Deputy that assurance. We will be focusing on continuing our peacekeeping missions, strengthening co-operation with member states and looking at projects in areas like maritime surveillance and cybersecurity. These are the types of missions on which we will be focusing while also enhancing the capabilities of our Defence Forces here in Ireland. I am happy to give the Deputy the reassurance he seeks.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will have two final supplementary questions from Deputies Haughey and Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I welcome the conclusions of the summit relating to Jerusalem. The European Council reaffirmed its firm commitment to the two state solution and confirmed that the EU's stance on Jerusalem is unchanged, which I welcome. My question relates to climate change. I note that the summit endorsed the One Planet summit conclusions in Paris and reaffirmed its commitment to the Paris Agreement. There is a reference to supporting and adopting a number of pending legislative proposals at EU level relating to climate change. I do not expect the Minister of State to have those proposals with her today but I ask her to give an undertaking that details of pending legislative changes at EU level would be brought before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Affairs so that members are fully briefed on matters relating to climate change.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will not rehearse the debate about PESCO again. As the Minister of State knows, we are against involvement because we believe it is the slippery slope towards involvement in a European army. The Minister of State and the Government dispute that but I will not get into that debate now. What exact commitments are we going to have to honour as a result of this? The Minister of State and the Taoiseach have identified specific areas but one that I worry about is terrorism because that is a catch-all term. What are our commitments in terms of "combatting terrorism"? That was the justification for the Iraq war. What exactly are we involved in, in the context of combatting so-called terrorism? That is a term that can be used to justify just about anything and to potentially involve us in just about anything. Will the Minister of State be precise about what commitments we have to give under the monitoring process for arms expenditure and the type of arms expenditure, which is referenced in what are described as the "binding" commitments in the annexe of the PESCO agreement. What exactly are our commitments in that regard? Do we have to produce an annual report on the nature and quantity of arms and military expenditure, which is then overseen or dictated by Europe? What is going to happen between us and this new European body with regard to arms expenditure, in terms of both the type and amount of such expenditure?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Regarding Deputy Haughey's question on climate action, it will not be a problem to provide the information to which the Deputy referred and I will engage with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment on that. As the Deputy said, the Minister, Deputy Naughten, represented Ireland at the One Planet summit in Paris on

12 December, the second anniversary of the conclusion of the Paris Agreement. He reaffirmed Ireland's commitment to the global objectives of that agreement and supported the call for ambitious contributions to managing global emissions from the international shipping sector. This was reaffirmed at the European Council meeting and member states reaffirmed the implementation of the Paris Agreement. We are happy to provide the relevant information to the Oireachtas committee.

In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett's questions on PESCO, involvement in various projects is on an opt-out basis. It is not that we are specifically tied to any of the programmes or projects; we can opt in or opt out. As I mentioned earlier, cybersecurity is an area in which we feel we can contribute in the context of combatting terrorism. We know that terrorism has changed in its format and is not what it was 20 years ago. There is a lot of terrorist activity happening online through cybersecurity attacks, through YouTube videos aimed at brainwashing people and so forth. We feel that we can co-operate and work with various member states in that regard.

On the question of expenditure, we are looking at a 2% increase of each individual member state's defence expenditure but that is an overall figure. Ireland will not necessarily have to increase its budget by 2%. If France, for example, were to increase its budget by more than 2%, then Ireland could increase its expenditure by less than 2%. However, we would seek to ensure that any money expended on our behalf is spent in areas that we feel fit with Ireland's profile, that such spending does not impact on our neutrality and that it is in line with what we have already agreed in signing up to PESCO.

I accompanied the Taoiseach to Brussels for the December European Council, as he indicated earlier. I will focus my concluding remarks on social, educational and cultural co-operation and migration, which were all discussed on Thursday, 14 December. Following on from the social summit in Gothenburg in November, discussions continued at the European Council on social, educational and cultural co-operation between member states. These are areas in which member states have primary responsibility but where the Union plays an important role in co-ordination, co-operation and sharing best practice while fully respecting the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. This debate is central to Europe's future. Education and culture are key to building inclusive and cohesive societies and to sustaining our competitiveness. The aim is to ensure that as we continue to develop and co-operate economically we also protect and promote social standards and labour rights. The Taoiseach intervened in the European Council on these issues, including to express his view that the social pillar allows us to go back to the founding principles of the social market economy. He highlighted several elements, including pension rights and student cards, noting the need to focus on specific initiatives, to set timelines for them to happen and to monitor implementation. President Macron of France has also been very vocal in this debate and the Taoiseach supported the President's proposal for a network of European universities. The European Council will come back to these matters in March 2018 to ensure that there is a follow up.

Migration was discussed over dinner and there was a useful exchange on the internal and external dimensions in an effort to explore how best to achieve and effect a substantial policy which would respect the concepts of responsibility and solidarity. Key to this is working with countries of origin and transit in Africa and the Middle East and building on our development assistance in order to do this. As intended, this was an open ended discussion with no conclusions but it was agreed to come back to this issue with an ambition to be able to take some decisions by June.

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The leaders also discussed President Trump's decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and agreed to restate the EU's common position, with which the Taoiseach agreed, that EU embassies will remain in Tel Aviv. The European Council also expressed its opposition to actions that undermine the viability of the two state solution. There was also a quick exchange about Russia and Ukraine, with the leaders agreeing to a roll over of the sanctions on Russia. These will now be renewed when they fall later this month.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes our discussion on the European Council meeting, pursuant to Standing Order No. 111.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Priority Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: We will now move on to questions to the Minister for Rural and Community Development. This is our first Question Time with the Minister.

Rural Recreation Policy

43. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development his priorities for the development of rural recreation in 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1840/18]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I welcome the Minister to the House. Given that he has already waited seven months, having to wait an extra 20 minutes beyond the scheduled time was not too much to ask of him. I know the Minister has been anxious to come in here to answer questions. I do not know what his colleagues were doing that prevented them from facilitating him before now. It appears that the enormous potential of rural recreation has not been exploited over the past seven years. We are not developing rural recreation at the pace we should be. I would be interested to hear what will be the Minister's priorities for 2018. We are starting with a clean slate at the beginning of a new year.

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Deputy knows I have never been afraid to come into this House. I have been a Member of this House for a long time. I believe in procedure. As the Deputy is aware, the Department of Rural and Community Development is less than a year old. It took quite a while to set it up. I am proud of my achievements in setting up a new Department within a short period. The Deputy will recall that before the summer, we had a day-long debate on these issues. I said on that occasion that I was trying to get legislation put in place to ensure I could come in here and answer all the questions Deputies want to put to me. I love coming to this House to answer questions as best I can and that is what I intend to do. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating that.

The Action Plan for Rural Development includes a series of measures to maximise Ireland's rural tourism and recreation potential in recognition of the contribution these sectors make to rural economies. Actions under this pillar are implemented across a number of Departments and agencies. The Department of Rural and Community Development is delivering a number of

funding initiatives which I will continue to deliver in 2018. For example, the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme provides funding for the development of new outdoor recreational infrastructure and for the maintenance, enhancement and promotion of existing outdoor recreation infrastructure. In 2016 and 2017, the scheme facilitated the development of greenways, blueways, walks and other trails across the country. This scheme will continue to support important local, regional and national rural recreation projects in 2018. In addition, the Department will work closely with Coillte to ensure the long-term maintenance and development of recreational infrastructure on Coillte lands for public use. My Department administers the walks scheme, under which landowners receive modest payments to maintain sections of national waymarked trails and other priority walks that cross their lands. Some 39 trails are covered by the scheme, under which approximately 1,900 landowners receive payments. A Programme for a Partnership Government includes a commitment to double the number of walks on the scheme. A review of the scheme will be undertaken in 2018 to examine how best to make progress with this commitment.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

My Department has been working with the State Claims Agency on the development and putting in place of a national indemnity scheme to strengthen the protection of landowners in respect of recreational users of private lands. It is a priority of my Department to finalise this work this year. I anticipate that a scheme will be agreed in 2018. I am conscious that there has been a significant growth in the number of people engaging in outdoor pursuits across a wider range of activities. I want to ensure the countryside recreation sector can grow sustainably to support rural economies. In this context, I will review the national countryside recreation strategy and supporting structures in 2018 and consider any updates which may be necessary to underpin its continued sustainable growth.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I thank the Minister for his reply. I understand that a review of Comhairle na Tuaithe was conducted in 2015-2016. It is now 2018. I understand that just one meeting of that body took place last year. I am of the view that it should meet regularly in order to create confidence, cohesion and co-operation between all the stakeholders. Why did Comhairle na Tuaithe meet just once last year? How often does the Minister expect it to meet this year? Does the Minister intend to attend its meetings, where possible, as I suggest he should?

Deputy Michael Ring: The Deputy is quite correct when he says that just one meeting was held last year. I intend to meet that organisation very shortly.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It is not an organisation, it is a committee of the Minister's Department.

Deputy Michael Ring: I know that the committee is chaired by my Department. I will meet it in the near future to discuss my proposals. I have no difficulty with that. The Deputy is quite correct when he says that a review of the organisation was carried out. I will meet it shortly to discuss the best way to move forward. I guarantee the Deputy that this meeting will take place in the coming weeks. I will then decide how I can move forward with it. I will have those discussions with the organisation in the near future.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: If there is one thing that bedevils this Government it is that everything needs to be reviewed. I remind the Minister that time is running out for this Government. It does not have an enormous amount of time in which to fulfil its promises. How many extra

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walks have been brought under the walks scheme since 2011? How long will this review take? There is a commitment in the programme for Government to double the number of walks. I presume it is intended that this will happen within the period for which the confidence and supply arrangement lasts. The Government is on borrowed time beyond that. How many extra walks does the Government expect to include under this scheme by the end of the year? It will be time up, in effect, at that stage. What progress does the Minister intend to make with the mountain access scheme? As someone who lives adjacent to one of the mountains in question, it seems to me that the scheme is in exactly the same place as it was when I left the Department on 23 March 2010.

Deputy Michael Ring: This new Department was set up last year. The Government committed in the programme for Government to double the number of walks covered by the walks scheme. Approximately 1,900 farmers are involved in the scheme at present, which I intend to review. We need to review it to see how we can bring more farmers and more walks into it. That is one of my priorities for this year. We have given a commitment. I want to bring more people into the scheme. The Deputy knows that many farmers in his local area and my local area are crying out to be included in the scheme. The reasons for this do not relate to the level of payment involved. The very small payment they receive supplements their income. They do a very good job of maintaining the walks and the scheme. I am going to review it this year. We have given a commitment that we are going to double the walks scheme. I am not giving a commitment that I am going to double the walks scheme, but I am certainly going to review it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Government has given such a commitment.

Deputy Michael Ring: I am going to ensure that more farmers are included in the scheme for the coming year.

Departmental Expenditure

44. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the funding allocated to his Department in 2017; the amount that was spent in 2017; the amount that has been carried forward to 2018; the amount surrendered to the Exchequer at the end of 2017; the amount paid to local authorities in 2016 and 2017 that has not been spent; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1841/18]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: All last year, I asked the then Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, and subsequently the new Department of Rural and Community Development, about the level of underspend in this area. I kept predicting a significant underspend by the end of the year and the Minister and his colleagues kept telling me that this was not going to occur. Despite the Minister's best efforts at the very end of the year - a late run with the local improvement scheme got rid of €17 million, and fair play to the Minister for that - the Department, which has a total budget of approximately €160 million, wound up with an underspend of €19 million. How can the Minister explain and account for such bad mismanagement of the Department's money?

Deputy Michael Ring: I thank the Deputy for raising the important issue of funding in my Department. I am committed to working with stakeholders, particularly local authorities, to provide vital services to communities throughout the State. This involves fully using the funding that is provided. The total amount of capital funding allocated to my Department in 2017

was approximately €77 million. This was accompanied by current funding of approximately €85.7 million. The total gross spend in 2017 was €136 million.

Sanction was sought and received from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to carry over €7.7 million in capital funding into 2018. Gross capital underspend of €18.3 million was reduced by the capital carryover of €7.7 million, resulting in the surrender of €10.6 million. The capital carryover will supplement capital expenditure in 2018.

In line with Leader programmes in other EU member states, there has been a lead-in period in ramping up and implementing the 2014-2020 Leader programme. The level of Leader activity in Ireland has increased greatly in recent months. I expect the level of expenditure to grow rapidly in 2018.

A number of other schemes, including the rural economic development zone scheme, the town and village renewal scheme, the outdoor rural recreation infrastructure scheme, the CLÁR programme and the local improvement scheme, provide support to local authorities for the development of rural communities.

My Department has requested updated expenditure information with regard to 2016 funding from individual local authorities. I expect that information to be available by the end of January.

Of the total amount of €28.4 million disbursed, approximately €18.6 million had been spent by October 2017. My Department is continuing to work closely with all relevant local authorities to ensure any remaining funding allocated to them is spent promptly and in accordance with the original project proposals.

In 2017, approximately €23 million in funding under these schemes was disbursed to local authorities subject to a number of drawdown conditions. In the case of the local improvement schemes, funding could be drawn down once it had been confirmed by a local authority that 50% of its works had been completed and that all works would be fully completed by 31 December 2017.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

In the case of the outdoor rural recreation infrastructure scheme, town and village renewal scheme and the CLÁR programme, local authorities were required to spend at least 20% of the total project cost before the first tranche payment of 50% of their allocation under the respective scheme could be drawn down. The balance of funding will only be paid on full completion of the projects in question.

The Revised Estimate for Public Services 2018 provides for gross expenditure of €239.2 million, comprising €144 million for current expenditure and €95.2 million for capital expenditure, including the €7.7 million carryover, in respect of the Department of Rural and Community Development. The large increase in current expenditure takes into account provision from the community services programme, which transferred at the beginning of this year to my Department from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

My Department will continue to work with key stakeholders, including local authorities, community and voluntary groups and key agencies, to support job creation, attract tourism investment and contribute to long-term economic development in rural Ireland. It will ensure

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full use is obtained from the resources allocated and value for money is delivered in respect of the 2018 allocation.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I understand €10 million on the capital side and €8 million on the current side that could have been spent on the ground in rural areas has been handed back to the Exchequer. Will the Minister explain how he managed to underspend the current *6 o'clock* allocation in the Department? Will he also confirm loud and clear that €10 million paid out to local authorities more than a year ago has not been spent on the ground? This seems to be a case of gross mismanagement. When one adds the €73 million the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine failed to spend last year, one finds that rural Ireland has been cheated of approximately €100 million.

Will the Minister explain what he intends to do to ensure this underspend does not reoccur? Not only does he have funding from last year available to him, but he also has a sum of €7.5 million that was brought forward available to him. On what will he spend the €7.5 million?

Deputy Michael Ring: Deputy Ó Cuív forewarned me earlier in the year. I have been in the Department for six months.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: He was a Minister of State in the Department before his appointment as Minister.

Deputy Michael Ring: No, I was not the overall Minister. I believe I did brilliantly with respect to the Leader programme.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: The Minister is starting to sound like Leo.

Deputy Michael Ring: If the Deputy looks at the underspend in the Leader programme and local authorities, he will see that I provided the funding. Deputy Ó Cuív is always quick to point out the inadequacies of my stewardship as Minister but he has a short memory. I can go back over underspends if the Deputy wishes to discuss them. In 2008, the Department of which the Deputy was Minister handed back €35 million to the Department of Finance. It then handed back €38 million to the Department in 2010 when he was a Minister for a full year. I have only been a Minister for six months. In fairness to the Deputy, he forewarned me.

I have introduced a number of schemes and I am very proud of the local improvement scheme. The Deputy's constituents were glad to receive some funding under the scheme. I was glad to be able to ensure the overspend in the Department was not greater. Will the Deputy explain how he allowed underspends of €35 million and €38 million to arise when he was Minister?

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister is wrong. I was not in the Department in 2010. He may remember that I was in the Department of Social Protection in 2010.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Deputy was finishing up in the Department.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I was not finishing up; I left the Department in 2010. I will answer the Minister's question on the underspend in 2008 as he appears to believe he is asking the questions today. I could have taken the net knowing that the appropriations-in-aid cannot be spent but did not do so. That is what happened in 2008 and the Minister should check the facts. He is very quick to play games with this issue but he had money which he did not spend. I warned in January that this would happen. On what will he spend the additional €7.5 million

his Department has carried forward?

Deputy Michael Ring: As I said, the Deputy forewarned me last year. Please God, I will be in the Department for the coming year. I guarantee the Deputy that he will not ask me questions about an underspend next year. I considered the option of pre-paying the local authorities again but I did not believe it would be wise to do so given all the questions the Deputy was asking. He was probably correct because I was not happy with the way in which the local authorities were spending the funding they received. I will examine this issue, however.

To give the Deputy a straight answer, I am looking at ways and means to spend the money, including through Údarás na Gaeltachta, the Leader companies and other State agencies that may be able to disburse it on our behalf. The local authorities do not have to progress local improvement schemes or outdoor recreation schemes. I provided funding to Waterways Ireland for a number of schemes which were tremendously successful. The agency received money in February or March and delivered projects in October, which local authorities were unable to do. I will monitor the position to ensure there is no underspend next year. I will give the Deputy a guarantee on that.

Banking Sector

45. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he will report on the outcome of the public banking investigation; when it will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1843/18]

Deputy Willie Penrose: For the past 18 months or thereabouts, I have been a strong advocate of a public banking model along the lines of the German Sparkassen model which has been in place for approximately 200 years. Under this model, public banks would be municipally owned, rather than being nationalised entities. They would be not-for-profit and restricted to lending into the regional economy for the promotion of businesses. They would fill the gap left by the demise of building societies, including the ICS. Post offices and credit unions could earn additional income from providing public bank services across the counter at their branches. The introduction of a public banking model would deliver multiple benefits. I would be grateful if the Minister would outline the current position in this regard.

Deputy Michael Ring: A Programme for a Partnership Government envisaged that An Post, the Irish League of Credit Unions and other interested stakeholders would be asked to investigate and propose a new model of community banking, similar to the Kiwibank model in New Zealand. The programme for Government also includes a commitment to investigate the German Sparkassen model for the development of local public banks.

A project team comprising officials from my Department and the Department of Finance was established last year to progress this commitment. The team carried out detailed research into the concept of a public banking model, with a particular focus on the Sparkassen model. In addition, a public consultation process seeking views on the concept of a community banking model ran for four weeks. A total of 16 replies from a range of stakeholders were received.

As part of their research, officials from both Departments met representatives from the Savings Banks Foundation for International Co-operation and Irish Rural Link. These organisations put forward a proposal as to how a local public bank, based on the Sparkassen model,

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could work in Ireland. Departmental officials have finalised their report and submitted their findings to the Minister for Finance and me. The report will be brought to Government shortly for consideration.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I thank the Minister for his reply. I am glad he is in the Chamber to answer questions. I have no doubt he is a fearless advocate for rural Ireland.

I also welcome the progress made in the investigation into a new model of public banking. The development of a network of regionally based public banks could be a game changer for small and medium enterprises, agribusiness and the regions.

IDA Ireland's efforts in the midlands, especially counties Westmeath and Longford, have been abysmal, shambolic and disappointing, to say the least. In 2017, only 2% of jobs related to foreign direct investment were located in the midlands, which also experienced the smallest increase in IDA Ireland supported jobs in the year. Of 210,000 IDA supported jobs nationwide, only 4,327 are in the midlands. This equates to 2% of total jobs and the figure appears to worsen every year. It is time the Government took urgent corrective action, particularly in the midlands region, including my constituency of Longford Westmeath. The proposal to establish a midlands public bank in Mullingar as a pilot for a national network of regional public banks would go a considerable way towards making up for the failures of IDA Ireland. As I stated, a regional public bank is not a nationalised bank like Allied Irish Banks.

Deputy Michael Ring: I understand the Deputy's frustration and that of many individuals and businesses who are trying to secure loans from and work with the banks. The programme for Government included a commitment to investigate what could be done to provide community banking. I am pleased a report on the issue has been completed. I received a copy of the report and the Minister for Finance and I will bring it to Government, after which it will be published. I will ensure this is done as quickly as possible. The good news is that the consultation has taken place, the report has been completed and the Minister for Finance and I will bring the report to Government, after which it will be published.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I thank the Minister for that, and I have no doubt about his commitment. This project for a public banking model is a no-brainer. What concerns me is that the dead hand of the bureaucrats at the Department of Finance will scuttle it. I know what they were like when we brought forward the Bankruptcy (Amendment) Bill. By hell, they resisted it. I am afraid they will resist anything new or novel or anything that represents something away from their cosy arrangements. They got their hands and fingers burned following the economic collapse and the crisis, when they took their eyes off of the ball together with the regulators. I am concerned that they are afraid or are reticent in this regard and that they will kill this before it gets out of the traps. I am keen to give the Minister 150% support. The Minister should shake them up in the way he always shakes people up. He should not be afraid to take on the mandarins, who will try to kill this before it gets out of the traps.

Deputy Michael Ring: I might want to bring Deputy Penrose into the Cabinet meeting with me. Certainly, this will be brought to the Cabinet as quickly as possible. I do not disagree with what Deputy Penrose has said, but at the same time we gave a commitment and I was given the responsibility to put the matter out for consultation. I did my part of the job. It is now a matter for the Department of Finance and myself. We will bring this to Government. There will be a discussion at Government. As soon as we bring this to Government, I will ensure that the report is published. We will do that as quickly as it can be done.

Community Development Projects

46. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development to outline his plans for the development of the community services scheme in 2018 in view of the fact that responsibility for this scheme has transferred to his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1842/18]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I understand the Minister has taken over responsibility for the community services programme. The programme has major potential. The first thing the Minister will need is money to expand it. It has the potential to use many of the facilities that the State has invested in to keep them open all day every day. What are the Minister's plans to avail of this unique opportunity to expand the scheme rather than simply run it on a maintenance basis?

Deputy Michael Ring: The community services programme was transferred to my Department on 1 January 2018. The CSP supports community organisations to provide local services through a social enterprise model. Funding is provided towards the costs of employing a manager and a specified number of full-time employees. The funding allocation for the programme in 2018 is €46.2 million.

My immediate priority for the community services programme is to ensure its smooth transfer to my Department and to maintain the level of service for the 425 organisations funded under the programme. Thereafter, the intention is to monitor the programme's progress over the next six months and, working closely with Pobal, undertake a thorough review, to commence in early autumn 2018. The review will consider, among other things, how the programme fits with overall Government priorities as well as my Department's other community programmes and its policy objectives. In particular, the review will consider potential crossover with my Department's forthcoming national policy on social enterprise.

In the meantime, I expect to approve total funding of €1 million in the coming weeks for social enterprises providing employment to specified disadvantaged groups. The funding will be allocated to new social enterprises selected following a call for applications issued in 2017 under strand 3 of the programme. I also expect to approve funding for additional social enterprises during the year as space and funding become available as part of the ongoing management of the programme.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: How many reviews does the Minister have going on at one time in the Department? It seems every answer to every question put to this Government involves doing a review. How many reviews is the Department carrying out at the moment?

How does the budget of €46 million compare to the budget for the same programme last year? Has it been increased or is it the same money?

Deputy Michael Ring: Deputy Ó Cuív will have to agree that we need a review of this programme. I have only taken over this scheme in the past three weeks. I certainly need a review to see where the programme is going and what it is about.

The budget for this year is €46.2 million.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What was it last year?

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Deputy Michael Ring: This supports over 1,600 positions. As Deputy Ó Cuív knows more than anyone, the community services programme provides vital services for the community. I truly believe this programme is one that I need to review in the coming months to see how it fits in with other programme, as I said in my earlier reply.

There is one thing I want to do. I know Deputy Ó Cuív tried to do the same thing when he was in office. We have many schemes and programmes that involve people drawing funding from this pool, that pool and the other pool. I am keen to ensure that the communities and the people who need this money most get the funding. The scheme has come over from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. The most important thing is that there is a smooth transfer. I am keen to ensure that I can review the scheme to see how I can improve and enhance it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I will ask the question again: how does the money provided this year compare to the money provided last year? Simply put, the Minister knows he cannot dramatically increase the scheme if the money has not increased. How does the money this year compare to last year?

Mayo would claim to have great prowess at Gaelic football. However, it seems to me that the Minister is becoming keen on rugby, because all he does with everything is kick to touch. Will the Minister explain the rocket science aspect to this programme? Surely the Minister is familiar with the programme from his work as a Deputy. It runs community centres, including the centre in Cong beside me and so on. The programme has schemes for the disadvantaged, for Travellers and so on. The people employed all need the employment. The programme creates considerable tourist revenue because many tourist facilities are loss leaders in their communities. Why is it so urgent to undertake a review rather than expand the scheme? Expansion could ensure more people could avail of working rather than drawing the dole. That is what they want to do. They are queueing to come on to these schemes.

Is the Minister not satisfied that the services being provided are, in the main, needed? Is he really going to tell people he will withdraw the scheme from them? How will the affected facilities survive afterwards?

Deputy Michael Ring: Those involved in some of these schemes tell me that the main difficulty they have is getting people to come on to the schemes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is Seetec.

Deputy Michael Ring: That is what they are telling me. We are near full employment. Yet, these schemes are vital to rural Ireland and to communities that need the services.

I have taken over the programme this year. I am pleased that I have taken over this programme. These are social enterprises - Deputy Ó Cuív knows that. We are giving a subsidy to these social enterprises. They are supposed to be in place, and they are. The enterprise in Connemara is doing very well. It has generated good revenue. The more of these social enterprises we have that work, the better for Deputy Ó Cuív, myself and for employment. That is what I want to see. I want us to support them. I have no wish to support the enterprises making large amounts of money or those with large amounts of money in the bank. I would prefer to support the enterprises that need the €19,000 per annum or €32,000 for the manager. Such supports assist these enterprises and enable them to operate. The supports make them good social enterprises. That is my plan and it is something I will look at in the coming year.

Dáil Éireann
Other Questions

Greenways Development

47. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development to outline his plans to co-fund the development of greenways with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1219/18]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The development of greenways is of vital importance. I imagine the Minister would agree that in developing greenways we need to buy the land and ensure the investment is secure. Does the Minister have any plans to work with the Minister of Transport, Tourism and Sport to co-fund the development of greenways? The question is especially relevant for CLÁR areas. We should expedite the agreed development of greenways where they are needed, especially along old railways. I believe there are some strategic routes where, if the Government bought the land, we could get people to agree to it. I am keen to hear the Minister's plans for greenways this year. Will the Minister take over all of this area from the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and do the job right?

Deputy Michael Ring: Policy responsibility for the development of greenways is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. However, the Department of Rural and Community Development also supports the development of greenways through the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme.

Both Departments are committed to working together to ensure that the impact of the support available for the development of greenways is maximised for citizens and visitors alike. In this context, this Department is in regular contact with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and is working to ensure closer alignment of greenway projects which may be funded by the respective Departments.

There are already a number of good examples of the two Departments funding projects that are complementary to each other. For example, I recently awarded funding to extend the Great Western Greenway to Achill under the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme 2017. I also funded an extension of the Royal Canal Greenway in County Longford under the same scheme. These greenway extensions build on funding allocated by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to support the development of the main greenways.

The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is preparing a strategy for the future development of greenways and this strategy provides an opportunity to further strengthen the co-operation between this Department and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on greenways and to maximise their economic potential.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Does the Minister believe that to protect the investment in developing a greenway, which normally has a hard surface and fences on each side, the land should be bought rather than use a permissive way whereby one landowner can hold up or stop everything?

The Minister mentioned the debate that took place here, which I did I admit keep going because I believed he was buying a pig in a poke and we were being asked to support his Department without the powers being transferred. I was very disappointed that he was given so

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little responsibility because I think he is relatively dynamic. Does he think that responsibility for greenways would sit better with his Department and has he made that case to the Taoiseach?

Deputy Michael Ring: I will give an honest reply: I do. I believe it should be. The Deputy and I, and every rural Deputy, know that this Department deals daily with farmers and landowners. It is the Department that should be dealing with them. We asked the National Roads Authority, as it was then known, to deal with the greenway from Dublin to Galway and we saw what happened. It thought it was dealing with roads. That is not possible. When dealing with landowners and farmers, we have to show them respect and be able to talk to them. This Department is very good at that and 1,900 farmers are involved with, and getting payments from, the walks scheme. I looked to get responsibility for the greenways in this Department but responsibility still lies with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. With the new plan being put in place we must have a strategic plan to ensure that this Department, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and Fáilte Ireland work together. The Deputy is quite correct that responsibility for all of this should lie with one Department, and it should be in this Department.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister did not answer the other part of the question. I do, however, admire his frankness in answering the one he did answer. I concur with him. If it was in his Department, we would not face many of the challenges we do face.

My second question relates to whether the Minister believes that the rational policy for the greenways, where two fences are put in - unlike the walkway scheme which is over open land - and a blacktop surface, is to buy the land with agreement from the farmers and the landowners, rather than basing the whole investment on permissive access?

Deputy Michael Ring: The Deputy and I know that having total control of the land makes that easier, whether it is owned by local authorities or the State. We saw that in respect of Coillte because when Government needs its land for greenways or walkways it is easier to get it. I would prefer that we could buy and control all the accesses in respect of walkways, greenways and blueways. Sometimes it is not possible and we have to put up with what we have got and that is permissive access. Perhaps as years go by and people see what an asset these greenways and walkways are to communities and counties - particularly in the context of the jobs and revenue to which they give rise all over rural Ireland - we might be in a position to deal with some of these landowners.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister should put his money on the table. He is missing the point. He did not give them the opportunity to sell.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Deputy and I know that the economy was not in a very good situation for the past ten years.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It has grown. There are more taxes.

Deputy Michael Ring: Now that the country's finances are improving, I would not mind considering that but I want to see more walkways, greenways and more people being active and more visitors enjoying our countryside. They are beginning to do that. The Deputy knows - he was part of the Government that started this - that the walkways and greenways have been a great success. It was the one thing that Government did well and it has been continued by those which succeeded it and which have made funding available. In every corner of the country to which I travel, people are looking for greenways, walkways and small walks in and around

towns and villages.

Brexit Issues

48. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development his Department's plans in respect of Brexit; the number of staff his Department has assigned to Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54712/17]

Deputy Willie Penrose: We all realise the potential impact of Brexit on rural Ireland, rural industries, agrifood and the agricultural industry. If we did not already know that we were fully informed last night by an excellent programme on RTÉ by George Lee last night. We need to ensure that all possible outcomes are being investigated and explored. We need a beefed-up team of officials in the Department of Rural and Community Development specifically devoted to Brexit to ensure we are dealing with all possible ramifications and consequences.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Seán Kyne): My colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, has the primary responsibility for leading on Brexit negotiations. My Department is contributing to discussions and providing policy advice relevant to its remit, as and when required.

The comprehensive document Ireland and the negotiations on the UK's withdrawal from the European Union: The Government's Approach, published on 2 May 2017, outlined in detail the structures put in place by the Government to ensure a strategic and whole-of-Government response to Brexit that ensures a co-ordinated approach to the identification of key priority issues for the EU-UK negotiations, and the wider domestic response.

Since the publication of the comprehensive document, the Government has sought to further increase its strategic oversight of Brexit through the addition of a dedicated responsibility for Brexit matters as part of the role of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Cabinet committee structures have also been reformed and new Cabinet committees relating respectively to the economy, and EU affairs, including Brexit and the economic response to Brexit, have been established to provide an opportunity for cross-departmental input into the issues.

The Department for Rural and Community Development has been established to deliver on the Government's commitment to bring a greater degree of co-ordination and cohesion to all of the work of Government in so far as it impacts on rural Ireland and communities. The impact of Brexit on regional and rural businesses and on communities is relevant across a number of policy areas of the Department. In this context, considerations around the impact of Brexit are shared across different policy areas rather than being assigned to a single unit or to specific staff.

In addition, my role in the Cabinet committee on the economy gives me a specific forum to raise issues for rural Ireland relating to the economy, jobs, the labour market, competitiveness, productivity, trade, the action plan on rural development and the digital economy, including managing and mitigating the risks associated with Brexit and I do so in conjunction with the Minister, Deputy Ring.

Deputy Willie Penrose: We all acknowledge the successful conclusion of phase 1 of the Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU into which we had a significant input. We also acknowledge the significant hurdles that will arise during phase 2 whereby many of those

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fundamental commitments will have to be reduced to legally enforceable trade agreements. As Professor Alan Matthews said last night, we will have to square circles to achieve particular outcomes and that will be a challenge. The only way to achieve those outcomes is for the UK to stay in the Single Market and the customs union because it doing so will help deliver the type of Border and trade arrangements which Ireland needs and to which everybody is committed.

The news that Norway is going to seek significant changes to the European Economic Area, EEA, in the event of special UK access to parts of the Single Market is a reflection of the constraints that the UK will face in the not too distant future. It is important that we remain extremely vigilant in these contexts.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I agree. The possible threat posed by and impact of Brexit across all sectors are well known and have been well documented. One could argue that at this stage the Irish Government is better prepared for Brexit than the United Kingdom Government. Even in advance of the referendum result in 2016, work was being done within government. The Joint Committee on European Affairs, of which I am a former member, produced at the time an impact report on the possible implications of Brexit. I did not see all of George Lee's documentary on RTÉ last night, but I saw the tail end of it. It was certainly an important addition to the reflections on the possible impact of Brexit. I intend to look at it again on the RTÉ Player. We have done detailed work in preparation for Brexit and all possible scenarios, including the Action Plan for Jobs 2017 and the trade and investment strategy. There are a number of dedicated measures within budget 2018 which include the €300 million Brexit loan scheme for business, increased funding for the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, a €25 million Brexit response loan scheme for the agrifood sector, additional supports for capital investment in the food industry and Bord Bia marketing and promotion activities amounting to over €50 million in total.

Deputy Willie Penrose: The Minister of State is correct. I do not think the British realise the impact of the conditions. There will be significant resistance in the pro-Brexit press when it finds out that Britain will have to comply with EU trade policy right up to 2021 and will not be able to strike its own deals during the transition period, despite losing access to agreements with 50 countries once it leaves the European Union in March 2019. That is, of course, if the European Union decides to authorise access to the trade deals for the United Kingdom. It is likely that the transition agreement will allow the United Kingdom access to the EU trade deals, but no doubt it will come at a cost. Obviously, the longer the transition period, the better for us. I still subscribe to the view I stated in the House about 15 months ago that this and another Dáil will sit before we will see the end result of this process.

Deputy Seán Kyne: There has been a lot of progress, particularly at the last Council meeting before Christmas. The negotiations advanced to stage 2, yet reflected the very important position the Irish Government had taken on the Border issue. It was hugely important to the country and our role in trying to promote and support the retention of all of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, within the Single Market and the customs union, but we do not have the final say on these things. They are part of the negotiations which have moved on to the second phase. Clearly, there is a job of work to be done and it is a huge challenge. We have received support from our European colleagues on the important issue of the Border. It also has implications for how the European Union will proceed in respect of the Single Market and the customs union. We have a very important role to play in that regard. The Dáil will continue to advocate for the best possible outcome to the Brexit negotiations for the whole island.

Western Development Commission

49. **Deputy Tony McLoughlin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he will report on the engagements he has had with the Western Development Commission; the role he envisages the commission playing in achieving more balanced regional development which is a key objective of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1292/18]

55. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development his plans for the development of the Western Development Commission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1217/18]

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: Will the Minister of State report on the engagement he has had to date with the Western Development Commission? Will he outline the role he envisages the commission playing in achieving more balanced regional development which is a key objective of his Department and make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 49 and 55 together.

The Western Development Commission, WDC, was established on a statutory basis in 1999 as part of a response to the severe population decline in the western region at the time. The remit of the commission is to promote the economic and social development of the western region, covering counties Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway and Clare. The commission has achieved a lot since its establishment and I believe has an important role to play in the Government's emphasis on achieving more effective regional development through initiatives such as the regional action plan for jobs, the action plan for rural development and the forthcoming national planning framework.

The Minister, Deputy Michael Ring, appointed a new board to the Western Development Commission in August 2017 and has delegated responsibility for oversight of the commission to me. I met the new chair and the acting CEO in November 2017. There is also ongoing engagement between my Department and the commission at executive level to deepen its involvement in the regional development agenda and benefit from its members' experience. In that context, the commission has been involved in an increasing number of initiatives. For example, it is represented on the monitoring committee for the action plan for rural development and the implementing committees that oversee the delivery of the action plans for jobs for the west and north-west regions. It is also represented on the task force that I chair to progress the development of an Atlantic economic corridor area along the western seaboard. It has been a key contributor to the sub-groups of the task force and also within the former Department on the Brexit process.

The WDC continues to implement initiatives to support the development of SMEs and emerging sectors in the western region. I recently launched a new €2 million fund for the commission to encourage the film, television, animation and games industry in the west, namely, the western regional audiovisual producers, WRAP, fund. I look forward to continuing to work with the new board as it seeks to support the regional development agenda.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I thank the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Michael Ring, for their support for the constituency of Sligo-Leitrim and south Donegal since taking up their new positions and in the time before it also. The Minister of State will be aware that the

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new Ireland 2040 national planning framework is a key policy initiative whereby, as a Government party, we can start to attempt to address the long-standing effects of a regional imbalance. It is an area in which the Western Development Commission also has a key role to play. The most disappointing element of the recently released draft version of the plan is the lack of a specific categorisation of or plan for the Sligo urban area to be developed into a regional growth centre for the north west. Historically the region has been neglected by consecutive Governments since independence. Will the Minister of State advise me of his position on such a plan? Has he spoken to the Western Development Commission about it?

Sligo and its environs form a major urban centre in the north-west region of the Republic of Ireland. It serves as many as 400,000 people in counties Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Donegal, Mayo, Cavan and Fermanagh, as the Minister of State correctly outlined. Sligo is the real driver of economic growth and job creation in the region. It has the capacity and ambition required. I am delighted to announce that 100 new jobs have today been announced by AbbVie in Sligo, with an investment of €113 million. There was another development this morning when the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport announced the allocation of €16 million for the western distributor road. As we know, €100 million has been earmarked for the N4 project in the next few years, with €20 million for being allocated for the eastern Garavogue bridge. These are the benefits that I have been highlighting for many years. They are vitally important for us in Sligo and the constituency. As the Minister of State has been very supportive, perhaps he might like to make a comment.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy for that good news.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Has the Minister of State met the executives or the board of the Western Development Commission? Did they set out for him what they believed they would need in terms of resources, both of personnel and finances, to enable the commission to reach its potential? In respect of the WDC investment fund to invest in business and community development initiatives, can the Minister of State tell me how much money it has available this year to be spread over the five counties of Connacht, as well as counties Donegal and Clare?

Deputy Seán Canney: The Western Development Commission has made various submissions on the deficiencies in infrastructure in the west. In particular, it has prepared an analysis, for example, to show where the agriculture industry is going in the west. There has been a dramatic drop of 41% in the number employed in the region in the past 20 years. That is a startling finding. The commission has prepared other reports on the merits of providing infrastructure to link areas in the west, including through the western rail corridor. Does the Minister of State support the Western Development Commission? I refer to the national planning framework, which should embed the Atlantic economic corridor and all that goes along with it, including the western rail corridor. There is a missing link between Claremorris and Athenry which should be considered. I would like to hear the thoughts of the Minister of State.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the three Deputies for their questions. I congratulate Deputy McLoughlin on all the good news for the Sligo area. As he knows, I have been a strong advocate of the prioritisation and categorisation of Sligo as a driving force for the north west in draft plans which have been published. Clearly, it is lacking and it is important that Sligo is designated as a growth centre. Other areas grow organically, whether in the Dublin area or midlands, because of their location. Sligo needs an incentive, and I am a strong supporter of that. I have written to the Taoiseach to strongly advocate that.

In response to Deputy Ó Cuív, I have not met the full board but I have met the chairman and CEO. The Minister, Deputy Ring, attended the inaugural meeting of the board. I plan to meet the board in 2018. It has made its views on funding and staffing quite clear to me - it needs more current funding. That was the message I received from the chairman and acting CEO. In 2018, €1.516 million in current funding will be allocated, which will be supplemented from its own resources.

I accept the recent census figures on population decline in the west of Ireland. It is partly due to emigration. The Government should be about improving linkages, in particular in the west of Ireland. I refer to the Atlantic economic corridor, which Deputy Canney has supported and was pushed by the chambers of commerce across the region, which I chair. The WDC is part of that task force. I have advocated that the western rail corridor should continue, and appear in the national planning framework and capital plan. It should be extended from Athenry towards Tuam and Claremorris. That is important. I know Deputy Canney is a strong advocate of that and I am also supportive of it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I asked the Minister of State about the western investment fund. How much money does it have to invest this year from its resources and those of the Government in businesses in the west? That was one of the key roles of the Western Development Commission.

The Minister of State has obviously made strong representations on behalf of the western rail corridor extension to Claremorris. Has he received any reply from the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, the Taoiseach or Minister for Finance, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, in respect of that? It appears that the Minister of State asked for a lot, but I wonder whether they are listening to him.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I have no firm commitment at this stage but, as I said, I have been in consultation with the Ministers to whom the Deputy referred and the Taoiseach. The former Minister of State, Deputy Canney, has also been in contact with the Taoiseach and Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, and will be again in the coming weeks. It is important there is support for this across the House. Deputy Ó Cuív has a role to play in terms of advocating on behalf of the capital plan. I know he has been a long-term supporter of the plan and had a role to play in his previous role as Minister.

I understand that to the end of 2014, €31.7 million of Exchequer funding was made available to the western investment fund. No Exchequer funding has been advanced since 2010 and the Western Development Commission currently uses the loan repayments on a revolving basis for new investments. I understand there is a sufficient return on capital investment to address future investment. I understand there are significant funds within the Western-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: How significant? Is it €2 million or €5 million?

Deputy Seán Kyne: I understand it is closer to €20 million.

Ministerial Responsibilities

50. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development his plans for the development of services within his portfolio in the coming years, with

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particular reference to the need to develop and modernise services affecting rural Ireland and the Border regions; the extent to which he expects to be in a position to interact with and provide funding for voluntary community groups, while at the same time enhancing the quality of services available through both the public and the private sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1788/18]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question seeks to encourage the Minister and Minister of State to outline their mission statement in respect of their respective portfolios and the extent to which they intend to interact with the community and take full advantage of the important role they have to play in the reorganisation and reinvigoration of rural Ireland.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Taoiseach's decision to establish the Department of Rural and Community Development underlines the Government's commitment to ensuring that the economic recovery can be felt by every community and that we can create a sustainable future for rural Ireland. In respect of the various areas to which the Deputy's question referred, the Leader 2020 programme provides a €250 million contribution towards promoting the social and economic development of rural areas, including the improvement of local services. Funding is provided through local action groups based on local development strategies and in line with horizontal funding schemes developed at a national level.

I am also very pleased to be able to continue and to enhance some key initiatives, many of which are delivered by the voluntary and community sector, as well as some private providers, such as SICAP, the seniors alert scheme and the volunteering programme. In particular, I am pleased to bring to the Deputy's attention that, in working with Pobal on the seniors alert scheme, my Department has for the first time spent its full allocation under this programme in 2017. I allocated a further €400,000 for the scheme in response to the high demand. The revised scheme was a resounding success, with over 10,000 installations completed in 2017.

In regard to the volunteering programme, my Department has a long-standing working relationship with Volunteering Ireland, which works closely with my Department in the oversight and work of volunteer centres throughout the country.

On key issues affecting the Border region, in particular Brexit, while my colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, has primary responsibility for leading on Brexit negotiations, my Department is contributing on an ongoing basis to discussions and is providing policy advice relevant to its remit, when required.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for the comprehensive nature of the reply. Like my colleague, Deputy McLoughlin, I wish to inquire as to the extent to which the national planning strategy will come under the Minister's microscope. For example, Professor Caulfield has referred many times to the depopulation of rural Ireland and lack of footfall and, as a result, the lack of opportunity in terms of job creation and interest in rural Ireland. I refer to the quality and extent of services required to retain the population in rural Ireland and the degree to which local authorities are prepared to co-operate in terms of accommodating, by way of planning permission, the indigenous population of rural Ireland without which footfall can never improve.

Deputy Michael Ring: As the Deputy knows, the key objective of the Action Plan for Rural Ireland, which we announced last year, was to create jobs in rural Ireland. As the Deputy knows, the CSO figures for the first quarter showed that over 70% of the approximately 135,000

jobs created in Ireland last year were created outside of Dublin.

The Deputy asked about other schemes. They include the town and village scheme, the rural recreation scheme and the Leader programme. He referred to community groups. I have provided funding for tidy towns and shows around the country to try to support groups working on behalf of their communities.

The Deputy asked about the national planning framework. I and my Cabinet colleagues will have overall Cabinet responsibility. I do not have responsibility for the area; two other Ministers have responsibility for it. I will be part of the Cabinet which will discuss the issue. Like the Minister of State, I have put proposals forward and I hope they will be looked at.

Road Projects Status

51. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when a decision is expected on the application received from Galway County Council in regard to funding for a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1791/18]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá soiléiriú á lorg agam maidir le hiarratas atá, de réir mar a thuigim, curtha chuig an Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail ag Comhairle Chontae na Gailimhe maidir le hacmhainní cuí a fháil le caoi níos fearr a chur ar Bhóthar Dhoirefhearta. Ar a laghad, ba cheart go mbeadh an tAire in ann a rá liom an bhfuil an t-iarratas sin faighte ag an Roinn. Má tá, cén uair a dhéanfar cinneadh maidir leis an obair phráinneach seo?

Deputy Michael Ring: An application for funding for the project referred to by the Deputy was submitted to my Department by Galway County Council under the local improvement scheme in September 2017. The local improvement scheme supports improvement works on private, non-public roads to improve access for people who live or work along these roads. I understand the project in question relates to a public road; it is, therefore, not eligible for support under the scheme. Responsibility for the maintenance of public roads falls within the remit of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, and Galway County Council has been advised of the position.

A Programme for a Partnership Government and the action plan for rural development commit to investment in the local improvement scheme. Very little funding has been available for the scheme in recent years owing to constraints on public expenditure. However, I was very conscious of the underlying demand for the scheme in rural areas throughout the country. I, therefore, announced in September the provision of €10 million for a local improvement scheme. Based on demand and the capacity of local authorities to complete works before the end of 2017, I announced at the end of November an additional €7.4 million for local authorities for LIS roads. My Department's funding of local improvement schemes is made in the context of my remit to improve quality of life for people living in rural areas. Overall responsibility for roads policy remains with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am at a loss to understand what is going on. B'fhéidir go mbeidh an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Seán Kyne - the Minister's colleague - in ann tuilleadh cabhrach a thabhairt. We have attended public meetings and I have followed all of the correspondence. I have a list of it in front of me. I understand we have already received the reply

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the Minister has given. I understand from more recent replies that the application is before the Department of Rural and Community Development. At this point what I want to hear is an acknowledgement that this cannot go on. This is a road i gcoílár na Gaeltachta. Tá droch-chaoi ar an mbóthar agus tá sé baolach. It is dangerous and in the heart of the Gaeltacht. I ask for the Minister's assistance in clarifying where the people of Carraroe can go with the application. They are going from Billy to Jack and back to Billy again, from the county council to the wrong Department and then another Department and all the time the condition of the road is worsening. Tá sé ag éirí i bhfad níos measa. Ag an bpointe seo, ar a laghad, I seek direction and a commitment to help the people living in the area to address their legitimate concerns.

Deputy Michael Ring: I can sense the Deputy's frustration. I know that there have been public meetings held about the condition of the road. I also know that the Deputy met the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, during the summer. I introduced the local improvement scheme because of people like the Deputy, Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív, the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Kyne, and my colleagues present, but I do not have responsibility for roads. That is a matter for the Minister, Deputy Shane Ross, to whom I will write on behalf of Deputy Catherine Connolly. The application was made to my Department, but it did not qualify under the scheme. To be fair to me and the Department - Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív and Tony McLoughlin and the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Kyne, know this - I found the money to make an allocation in respect of every application sent to me under the scheme by local authorities, but the application in question did not fit the criteria. I will refer the matter to the Minister, Deputy Shane Ross, with whom I know Deputy Catherine Connolly has been in consultation. I talked to departmental officials recently about dealing with roads, but the Minister, Deputy Shane Ross, is independent. There had not been a local improvement scheme for many years. To be fair to Deputy Catherine Connolly and people like her, they are frustrated. People are paying local property and other taxes and entitled to a road in good condition. I brought forward the local improvement scheme because I could justify its establishment. However, I am afraid the Deputy will have to talk to the Minister, Deputy Shane Ross, who has overall responsibility for roads.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will have no difficulty in doing so. We have the support of all elected representatives in the area. The difficulty is that there is constant confusion. The Minister has clarified repeatedly that the application does not come within the remit of the scheme, but, unfortunately, that is where the application went. I would have thought one Department communicated with another, as the Minister is now planning to do. Earlier there was a discussion between him and an Teachta Éamon Ó Cuív about the millions that had been refunded, yet here is a Gaeltacht community that is struggling to survive and, more importantly, be safe in using the road. At some stage there has to be communication between the two Departments. It is not happening in the absence of support from local Deputies. We have repeatedly attended public meetings and raised the matter. I take on board what the Minister has said that he will personally ensure a letter will go to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in order that someone will follow up on the matter, but at the end of the day it is a very small amount of money chun caoi a chur ar bhóthar atá mar phríomhbhóthar don cheantar agus do chosmhuintir na háite.

Deputy Michael Ring: I can again sense the Deputy's frustration. I will personally do as she asks and write a letter to the Minister, Deputy Shane Ross. I will also contact Galway County Council. We did write to it to tell it that the road did not qualify for funding under the local improvement scheme. To be fair, I introduced the scheme. I facilitated road access

to community facilities to try to accommodate people such as those about whom the Deputy is talking. It is not easy for local councillors to obtain funding and they were not able to undertake big jobs such as the ones I undertook. That is why I set up the scheme and allocated €17.4 million for it last year. If the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport got together with mine, we might be able to provide for a bigger scheme. We must begin to look at the public roads such as the one to which the Deputy referred to see what can be done to support the people she has highlighted.

Charities Regulation

52. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he is satisfied that the legislation governing the Charities Regulatory Authority is robust with regard to enforcement against certain bodies identifying as charities that may be in breach of the Charities Act 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1783/18]

Deputy Mick Wallace: I welcome the Minister on this, his first opportunity to answer questions. This question relates to the Charities Regulatory Authority which I understand is within the Minister's remit. Charities have come under some scrutiny in recent years, but much more transparency and accountability are required. Is the Minister satisfied that the regulator is capable of holding charities to account? I note that section 4 of the Charities Act 2009 which deals with enforcement was finally implemented in September 2016, two years after the Charities Regulatory Authority had been set up. Will the Minister outline the role he envisages the regulator playing and areas of concern he believes need to be addressed?

(Deputy Seán Kyne): The Charities Regulator, the Charities Regulatory Authority, was established on 16 October 2014 pursuant to the Charities Act 2009. Responsibility for the oversight of the regulator transferred to my Department on its establishment in July 2017 and to me in the delegation of functions in September.

The general function of the regulator is to regulate charitable organisations operating in Ireland in order to increase public trust and confidence in their management and administration. Under the Charities Act 2009, the Charities Regulator is fully independent in the performance of its statutory functions. As of the end December 2017, there were 9,061 charities registered with the authority.

Part 4 of the Charities Act 2009 was commenced in September 2016 and conferred investigative and enforcement powers on the Charities Regulator, complementing its regulatory powers under Part 3 of the Act. Using these powers, the regulator imposed intermediate sanctions on a charity for the first time in January 2017 and secured its first prosecution against a charity in February 2017. Also during 2017, it commenced statutory investigations into a number of charities. The inspector's report on the first of these investigations was published in July 2017, while the remaining investigations are ongoing.

My officials continue to liaise with the Charities Regulator to review the operation of the legislation to ensure it is operating effectively. In early 2017, on foot of public consultation, the regulator proposed amendments to the Charities Act 2009 in order to ensure consistency and fairness in the accounting and reporting obligations of charities. My Department will be working with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to progress these amendments.

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If anybody, including the Deputy, has concerns that a charitable organisation is in breach of the Charities Act 2009, he or she should forward details of his or her concerns to the Charities Regulator. All concerns expressed to the regulator are actively reviewed.

Deputy Mick Wallace: We have a serious problem with some organisations that identify as charities when sometimes clearly they are something quite different. Let us take the example of Pobal. It has annual expenditure of more than €450 million. It is a private wing of the Government which was set up to provide administrative services and distribute payments for various Departments. It even states on its website that “Pobal’s activities and priorities are shaped by the context and policies laid out in ... the programme for Government”. It is registered as a charity and deemed to be a not-for-profit organisation. I do not understand the reason it has been registered as a charity or, for that matter, how it even qualified for charitable status. Perhaps the Minister of State might explain the reason to me.

7 o'clock

In 2014 an internal audit report in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs expressed concerns about payments made to Pobal to monitor compliance among child care providers. The auditors could not understand the annual fee received of €2.5 million. They also stated the work had been awarded to Pobal without a tendering process which might have been in breach of EU directives, but nothing happened in that regard, which is a little worrying. We need to take a proper and in-depth look at organisations that identify as charities to check to see if they meet the criteria laid down.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Deputy for his comments. Clearly, issues regarding public confidence have arisen in some charities in recent times, as the Deputy rightly stated, but charities do a lot of very important work on behalf of this country. It is only right and proper to ensure they are all acting above board in performing their duties. This is why the legislation was introduced.

The Charities Regulator is independent in the execution of its duties. It would be irresponsible for me to comment on any particular group under investigation or on findings that may arise in that it could prejudice the investigation. Personally, I have not heard of any issues regarding Pobal. If the Deputy has information he would like to share, we would be happy to examine it within the Department.

Before Christmas, I met the Charities Regulator, including the chairman of the board and the three new members appointed to the board. Clearly, they have a roadmap for what they want to do. There has been an increase in the number of groups registered as charities, indicating an increase in compliance. As I stated, 9,061 were registered at the end of 2017. A number of others were registered automatically because they had a valid charitable tax exemption from the Revenue Commissioners. In addition to those, a number of others were registered for the first time, including a number of schools.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I do not know how Pobal operates. I am wondering whether the Government knows either. Does it offer value for money? An internal document from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, dated August 2014, states, “In particular, Pobal has not produced evidence to show how it specifically has promoted social inclusion or countered disadvantage through the implementation of programmes.”

On another issue concerning charities, I note the regulator issued guidelines last July regarding internal financial controls that it states will help to maximise value-for-money objectives on behalf of a charity. There is very little reference in the guidelines to salary scales, particularly at

CEO level. I am not saying all charities' CEOs are overpaid but, if one examines certain charities, one notes their pay rates for CEOs can be extraordinary when compared with the overall output. The CEO of the Asthma Society of Ireland, for example, was paid €95,000 in 2016 but the organisation's expenditure for that year was only €885,000. Some 33% of its funding came from the Government, yet the CEO was paid more than 10% of all the expenditure. It seems a bit odd. I am not pointing the finger at any charity but just saying this is an area that needs much tighter regulation. We have some serious issues with some of the charities.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I concur that there has been public concern over the rates of pay for some CEOs in the charity sector. It has caused disquiet over recent years. The regulator regulates in respect of a number of areas. I will confirm its responsibility in regard to rates of pay for the Deputy. The charities have boards of governors and terms and conditions, and they publish their accounts. I know from conversations I have had with the Charities Regulator that it wants to ensure there is a single website and that one can find, in respect of any charity, its number of staff, its expenditure, whether its accounts are up to date and whether everything is correct in terms of corporate governance. It wants a one-stop-shop for all charities that would make the information available to everyone quite easily to ensure we have confidence in all charities across all sectors.

The Deputy mentioned Pobal. There are bodies in the health and education sectors that are registered as charities. Clearly, there are some smaller charities that we do not want to see overly burdened. We want to ensure they can continue to do their work and that people have confidence in them. The regulator is prioritising the larger charities in the initial phases.

Regional Development

53. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the steps he will take to address County Wexford areas that were highlighted in Pobal's deprivation index; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1793/18]

Deputy James Browne: What steps is the Minister taking to address the needs of areas of County Wexford that were highlighted in Pobal's deprivation index? Could he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Michael Ring: The deprivation index to which the Deputy is referring measures the relative affluence or disadvantage of areas within the State. It is used by my Department and other Departments and State agencies as an aid to direct funding to where it is most needed.

Within the 2016 index, County Wexford was classified as marginally below average, with a score of -4.8. This is the third lowest score of the 26 counties classified. As with all counties, small areas within the region ranged from very affluent to very disadvantaged. The small areas in County Wexford that are classified as very disadvantaged are, for the most part, located around larger urban areas, such as Wexford town, Enniscorthy and New Ross.

The social inclusion and community activation programme, or SICAP, is the key national intervention for the hardest-to-reach populations in disadvantaged areas. My Department has allocated a total budget of €1.7 million to County Wexford under SICAP for 2018. Given that the total budget for the State is just over €38 million, County Wexford's allocation reflects its relative disadvantage.

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The SICAP programme is delivered by programme implementers, led locally by local community development committees, LCDCs, under the remit of local authorities, and overseen at national level by my Department.

The new SICAP for the period 2018 to 2022 was the subject of a public procurement process conducted by LCDCs. The programme has commenced in 47 of the 51 lot areas nationally. Wexford is one of four lot areas where no tender was awarded and a negotiated procedure is now under way between the LCDC and the programme implementer.

In areas where a negotiated procedure is taking place, my Department has extended the previous SICAP contract with the LCDC for a period of three months from 1 January 2018. The LCDCs are also extending their contracts with the existing programme implementers to ensure that service delivery in the relevant areas is not affected.

Deputy James Browne: I put this question to the Minister to determine what exactly he has been doing to tackle the problems in deprived areas. In the constituency of Wexford, there are seven electoral divisions that are deemed to be disadvantaged or very disadvantaged. In Wexford, people, businesses and community groups are doing their level best to make their villages and towns vibrant, welcoming and prosperous but the Government needs to do more to tackle the problems in local areas.

The 2016 programme for Government contains a clear commitment to making the renewal of towns and villages a top priority for the new Minister. Towns and villages were hit hardest during the recession and consequently suffered the worst from outward migration, reduced employment prospects and an undermining of the communities and their integrity. The danger is that, without a concerted effort to tackle poverty and its causes, these areas will continue to be left behind. I would like to know specifically what the Minister is thinking of doing for the deprived and disadvantaged areas in Wexford.

Deputy Michael Ring: I have outlined the position on the SICAP. As I stated, Wexford is getting the funding it is getting based on the deprivation index and the report we get from Pobal. I hope the SICAP will target the disadvantaged areas. As I said earlier to Deputy Ó Cuív, it is important that the funding be targeted at areas that really need it.

I acknowledge there is a difficulty regarding the programme in Wexford. As the Deputy knows, I have continued the contract from 1 January for the first three months. My Department and Pobal are negotiating. I hope the problem can be worked out. I want to see the programme up and running. In the first instance, it is a matter of putting the funding in place. The contract has been extended for three months so nobody will lose out. It is important that the areas that need the funding get it. That is why I have done what I have done.

Deputy James Browne: I raised a similar issue with other Ministers. Perhaps the Minister will consider a cross-departmental approach. People in Wexford are deeply frustrated. The county has so much potential. It is only an hour down the road from Dublin. It has Rosslare Europort, which should be one of the most thriving ports in Europe. I know this is not the Minister's area of responsibility but he should recognise that the port is seriously under-utilised.

The south east still has no university, and there is no sign of it coming. We know from all the factors that this is a key indicator as to why, according to all the indicators, Wexford and other areas in the south east continually rank in the top three where deprivation is concerned.

We hear Irish Rail talking about downgrading or closing the railway line to Rosslare Europort. We still do not have a targeted tourism product for Wexford similar to the Wild Atlantic Way. While Ireland's Ancient East is in place, it barely touches the east coast as it was designed to accommodate the midlands. Wexford has unmet potential. It needs targeted support from the Government and a cross-departmental approach to ensure that potential is unleashed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I remind Members that Standing Orders allow for brief questions, not statements.

Deputy Finian McGrath: "The Boys of Wexford".

Deputy Mick Wallace: As I pointed out to the Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, the 2014 internal document from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform pointed out Pobal had not produced evidence to show how it had specifically promoted social inclusion or countered disadvantage through the implementation of its programmes. It is not the Minister of State's fault. However, as Deputy Browne pointed out, Wexford has been left behind. While extra money was given in line with disadvantage, areas like Wexford will have to be targeted to be lifted out of poverty. Has the Minister any particular plans for Wexford?

Deputy Michael Ring: I agree with the Deputies about Wexford. I had not been in Wexford for several years but spent two weeks on holiday there this summer. I felt people could have bought more into Ireland's Ancient East, like the Wild Atlantic Way. I was impressed by my holiday in Wexford. I did many of the tours in the area and spent a few nights in some of the local restaurants along the quays. Wexford is a vibrant town. Deprivation affects many large towns and cities. However, Wexford has great potential. It is one hour from Dublin. When I was there, I came up to the All-Ireland football semi-final in which Mayo played. I could not get over the standard of the road infrastructure between Wexford and Dublin.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Minister should try the back roads.

Deputy Michael Ring: There are many social problems in Wexford like everywhere else. Wexford, however, has great potential. I have no doubt it will reach its full potential in the years ahead.

Telecommunications Services Provision

54. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he will report on the progress of the mobile phone and broadband task force, particularly in the context of the recommendations or actions for which his Department is responsible; if the task force will produce an annual report for its first full year in operation; if a work plan for 2018 has been prepared and agreed with stakeholders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1787/18]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question relates to the mobile phone and broadband task force. How has it progressed? How many meetings has it had and what conclusions has it reached? Will it produce an annual report? To what degree have the stakeholders been fully acquainted with the urgent necessity to deal with the deficiency in broadband and mobile telephony service provision in rural areas?

Deputy Seán Kyne: The mobile phone and broadband task force was established in July

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2016 to examine solutions to broadband and mobile phone coverage deficits across the country, as well as to identify tangible actions which could be taken to improve the quality of these services.

The task force published its report in December 2016. It made a series of recommendations, backed up by 40 agreed actions, to address a wide range of issues impacting on broadband and mobile phone services in areas such as planning, access to infrastructure, network improvement and consumer matters.

Along with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, I co-chair an implementation group which oversees the implementation of all actions in the task force report. Quarterly reports on progress made in implementing the actions are published on my Department's website.

Some of the key measures progressed by my Department include co-funding the employment of a broadband officer in each local authority to facilitate the roll-out of telecoms infrastructure; working closely with mobile operators and local authorities to identify specific mobile phone black spot areas and identify solutions to improve coverage in those areas.

A national stakeholder forum was convened on 6 October 2017 in Athlone, bringing together key stakeholders to highlight any barriers being experienced in the implementation of actions and to suggest new recommendations for the task force implementation group to accelerate the provision of improved services to consumers.

Officials from my Department and the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment are finalising a report of the work of the implementation group in 2017. I anticipate it will be published shortly. A 2018 work programme for the implementation group has also been agreed and an outline of this programme will be included in the 2017 annual report.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. What precisely will be done to address the deficiencies in both the quality and speed of broadband and mobile telephony services? What will the stakeholders do to address the major deficiencies relating to these services, which are hugely important to the business, education and health sectors?

Deputy Seán Kyne: This was an important part of the discussions around the programme for Government. Several areas have been identified and are being worked on by the task force, including the removal of development contributions for telecommunications infrastructure. The latter will enable increased placement of that vital infrastructure. Exempted development regulations with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government will allow industry to accelerate the roll-out of 4G services while ensuring regulations remain valid and stay abreast of network development consumer demand. Online systems for planning applications will streamline the application process. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, is working on ducting installation work to fill the gap in respect of the motorway network and to facilitate telecoms operators. TII will review the cost of access for telecoms operators to its ducts. A composite national coverage map is being prepared by ComReg to help consumers and businesses choose the network provider which best meets their needs where they work and live. ComReg will work on the level of signal which can be expected from different handsets in different areas. Much work has been done by local authority broadband officers to ascertain and provide a much greater degree of consistency and engagement with telecoms operators in assisting in clearing obstacles to the roll-out of infrastructure. This important work is being

carried out by the task force.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive reply. Will he give further details on the improvements to mobile phone coverage in the short term? In other jurisdictions across Europe, it has been possible to provide a satisfactory service which we do not seem to be able to provide in this country. There appears to be little we can do over time. Will the Minister of State give an indication as to the deadlines for improvements in broadband services?

Deputy Seán Kyne: A black spot pilot project has been undertaken by the Department in conjunction with the Department of Communications, Climate Change and Environment, mobile telephony operators and several local authorities. This is a significant step in identifying problem areas and any infrastructure which could potentially be used to improve mobile coverage. New technologies are being explored such as, for example, purpose-built lamp-posts, which could be used in many rural towns and villages. Several of these have been erected in various local authority areas. These could greatly improve signal strength. Over several years, signal strength in some areas has actually declined. This ongoing work is important in improving mobile phone coverage.

Much important work is being done by this task force, which I co-chair. It involves engagement with all stakeholders, including TII, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, ComReg, local authorities, the County and City Management Association and the telecoms and broadband sectors. The recommendations will be published and will be acted upon by the Government.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

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 John McGuinness - to discuss waiting times for mental health services in St. Luke's hospital Kilkenny and throughout County Kilkenny; (2) Deputy Gino Kenny - the need to provide kivan medication for those living with PKU, phenylketonuria here; (3) Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin - the shortage of special needs second level school places in the Newbridge area; (4) Deputy David Cullinane - the need for an investigation into sexual abuse allegations (details supplied) in various State agencies; (5) Deputy Thomas P. Broughan - the need for HSE funding to meet recommended pay restoration for section 39 staff in the Irish Wheelchair Association; (6) Deputies Brendan Smith, Charlie McConalogue, Niamh Smyth, Dara Calleary, Bobby Aylward, Jackie Cahill, Anne Rabbitte and Eamon Ó Cuív - to discuss the urgent need to provide a fodder aid scheme; (7) Deputy Martin Ferris - to discuss the ongoing delay in GLAS payments; (8) Deputy Seamus Healy - to discuss the approval of funding for construction at Gaelscoil Chluain Meala; (9) Deputy Mary Butler - the absence of psychology services for children with disabilities in Waterford; (10) Deputy Jim O'Callaghan - to discuss the underfunding of GSOC and recent commentary by the chairperson; (11) Deputy Eugene Murphy - to discuss the HSE embargo on admissions at Aras Naomh Chaolain in Castlerea; (12) Deputy Eamon Scanlon - the position with BPS payments to farmers on the Killery Mountain; (13) Deputy John Lahart - to discuss the closure of Edmondstown Road, Rathfarnham; (14) Deputy Frank O'Rourke - the need to improve mental health services, especially in psychiatry

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in County Kildare; (15) Deputy James Browne - to discuss the completion of the Loreto secondary school in Wexford; (16) Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony - the status of the flood relief scheme in Bandon; (17) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - the need for additional public transport solutions in Cork City; (18) Deputy Clare Daly - the need to review the qualifying criteria for the pyrite scheme; (19) Deputy Mick Barry - to discuss the impact here following the liquidation of Carrillion in the UK; (20) Deputy Catherine Connolly - the impact of recent floods in Galway; and (21) Deputy John Brady - the position with the completion of primary schools in Bray, County Wicklow

The matters raised by Deputies John McGuinness, Gino Kenny, Seamus Healy and Martin Ferris have been selected for discussion.

Topical Issue Debate

Mental Health Services Provision

Deputy John McGuinness: I recently attended a protest outside the department of psychiatry, St. Luke's General Hospital, Kilkenny, with members of the Psychiatric Nurses Association. They were protesting about the quality of care that they are able to give to patients in that facility. I have visited patients at this facility for a long time but it has not been updated. It requires significant capital expenditure and investment in staff. Staff are put to the pin of their collar. It is unfair to staff and to patients that the current situation would be allowed to continue. Yesterday, there were 51 patients in a 44-bed unit. Patients were being admitted to sit on chairs on which they were asked to stay and sleep while waiting for a psychiatric service, and that is not good enough. The staff attended that protest in their own time. They did not vacate the wards. They came in from their lunch breaks to highlight what they see as being an unfair system and very poor care for the patient.

Some of those there for the long term are in an inappropriate setting. They are waiting for placement elsewhere. People cannot get counselling services. Some patients are being told they will have to wait for three to six months before they are seen. If one is in a community setting outside the hospital, the same waiting list prevails. How can one tell someone who is in a crisis regarding mental health that he or she will have to wait for three to six months? There are volunteer organisations on the ground, such as Taxi Watch founded by Derek Devoy. It monitors those who may be on the verge of suicide and brings them to the attention of relevant services. What can the services do when they are underfunded, understaffed and under pressure in the department of psychiatry? I am not saying that for political purposes. Those central to delivering the care are saying it. The HSE is referring patients who are looking for counselling services to Teac Tom, a voluntary organisation in Kilkenny city. It provides immediate, on-the-spot counselling services but the HSE refuses to pay for the service because it believes it is referring the individual to a service that is run on a voluntary basis. How can that be? How can the Minister of State allow that to continue? I stood on that picket line with a friend of mine, a councillor, Joe Malone, who is associated with the care of those who need care for their mental health and well-being.

What will the Minister of State do to provide capital expenditure and the needed staffing requirements? What plans are there to extend the department of psychiatry? When will an ex-

tension or refurbishment of that centre be provided for? This has gone on for a long time and someone has to cry stop before we have another death by suicide. It is that critical. I invite the Minister of State to visit the service, to visit Teac Tom and to talk to Derek Devoy in the other service, and to see first-hand what is going on in the department of psychiatry. We also need investment in the management of that service. It is deplorable that the managers of a service cannot see the issues confronting their staff and that the management is not planning ahead for the numbers attending the service and the staffing levels required. I draw the Minister of State's attention to the fact that the same circumstances prevail with the Waterford services.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I thank Deputy McGuinness for raising this important question. I know from his work in Kilkenny that he cares passionately about mental health services. Carlow-Kilkenny mental health services focus on delivering a broad range of primary and community-based services as well as specialised services for children, adults and older people. These services are provided in a number of different settings, including the individual's own home, inpatient facilities, outpatient clinics, acute day services, day hospitals and day centres, and high, medium and low support community accommodation.

The 44-bed department of psychiatry based in St. Luke's General Hospital, Kilkenny, is the designated approved centre for acute inpatient services in the area of Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary. This enables all acute inpatient admissions to be managed at a single site. Referrals to the department of psychiatry are through a consultant psychiatrist who makes the clinical decision to admit based on the level of acute presentation or need. I am pleased to say that I am informed by the HSE that there are no waiting lists for admission to the acute inpatient service. The HSE acknowledges that at times there can be issues of over-capacity at the department of psychiatry, which I take the Deputy's point about. When this occurs, all additional controls relating to risk management are applied. This includes ensuring that staffing levels are at an appropriate level. Regarding staffing, a number of posts are with the national recruitment service to be filled and are currently being filled in a temporary capacity.

In addition to the department of psychiatry, a dedicated psychiatric liaison team operates from the emergency department in St. Luke's General Hospital. All service users presenting to the emergency department who require psychiatric assessment will receive that assessment within agreed timeframes in line with the relevant department of psychiatry or emergency department guidelines. Onward referral pathways are agreed with all service users upon completion of a psychiatric assessment in the emergency department. Pathways can include admission to an acute unit, referral to a relevant community mental health service team or referral back to a person's own general practitioner.

In line with A Vision for Change and Mental Health Commission recommendations, there have been significant developments in the area of community mental health services. The comprehensive development of community mental health teams has brought together key professionals to provide a wide range of mental health interventions on a multidisciplinary basis to service users in the community. This approach is based on assessment of a person's needs. The HSE has assured me that any waiting times for community mental health teams are in line with the national key performance indicator requirements. In addition, the development of the home-based services teams in Carlow and Kilkenny has ensured the delivery of a service that facilitates recovery in the service user's own home environment.

I am glad to have the opportunity to share with the Deputy the continuing steps being taken

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to improve mental health services in this area. The Carlow-Kilkenny mental health service is engaging in the reform programme to realign services to primary care networks in line with national policy. The aim is to facilitate integration of services and to seek to provide a seamless service to service users. In addition, there is a significant focus on the involvement of the service user in the management of his or her illness, through initiatives such as involvement centres and a recovery college. I hope this information has addressed the issues raised by the Deputy to his satisfaction. I will report back on the other issues he has raised with me to the Minister, Deputy Simon Harris.

Deputy John McGuinness: That is not good enough. The Minister of State has not addressed any of the issues. As I said to him, there are 44 beds and 51 patients. How can the Minister of State tell me that is good health care, whether for mental health or otherwise? How can he say to a family waiting for a counsellor for three to six months that is satisfactory? I respect that the note the Minister of State read was probably given to him by the HSE. It is a load of nonsense. It is not true. The Psychiatric Nurses Association of Ireland went out on a picket line - its members went out on a protest march. They did not do that for fun. The reply the Minister of State has given does not answer the questions. It is very unfair to put that ráiméis on the record of this House without addressing the real trauma that affects the families of those who are patients in the department of psychiatry in St. Luke's General Hospital in Kilkenny. I ask the Minister of State to come and see it for himself. He should visit it and see the capital expenditure that is needed. It is obvious. Will he please explain to me why the HSE can out-source its counselling service to a voluntary organisation and not pay for it? It is reprehensible that our Government would stand by and watch what is going on in the south east and in the department of psychiatry in St. Luke's General Hospital and not do something about it. It is unacceptable that the management would not acknowledge the fact that it is not delivering the services, that there are inappropriately placed people in the department of psychiatry and that young people and others are asked to come in as patients and take their place on a chair and sleep there. Mental health issues are not the same as a broken leg; they mean a broken life. We are putting people's lives at risk if we do not accept the fact that our services are falling down around us and we are not prepared to acknowledge it. It is not just that the Minister of State is not prepared to do so. The HSE and the Department are also not prepared to do so because they wrote the briefing note for him. They have, therefore, told a story that is absolutely misleading. The Minister of State should meet union representatives and talk to them about this. He should visit the hospital and at least acknowledge the fact that something has to be done. People who are suffering from mental health issues and poor well-being are in a situation where services cannot cope with what is happening. I ask for a better response and that the HSE be forced to acknowledge what is happening on the ground.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I said I would convey the issues raised by Deputy McGuinness to the Minister. The Deputy made critical points about the current situation being unfair to the staff and the patients. It is unacceptable for people to have to sit on chairs. He also mentioned the fundamental question of capital expenditure on the refurbishment of the centre. In Kilkenny, there is significant focus on meaningful involvement of the service users in the management of their illnesses with the development of recovery-focused services. Six actions are being undertaken: the development of involvement centres, which are peer-led support services located in Carlow and Kilkenny; the development of a recovery college that delivers programmes for people who have lived experience in mental health; the delivery of wellness recovery action planning, WRAP, which is a programme to help people to manage their mental health; a class programme that supports service users and their relatives; projects, which focus on recovery

from mental ill-health; and service user forums, which facilitate service users to feed back on service delivery and development of service initiatives.

I take the Deputy's point about major problems emerging. It is important that Ministers see what is happening first hand and that they engage with psychiatric nurses. I am very much open to that. It is also important to acknowledge that, in budget 2018, an additional €35 million has been allocated to develop mental health services and that the Minister has also committed an additional €55 million in funding in 2019, delivering a total of €105 million in additional funding for the implementation of A Vision for Change over the three-year period 2017 to 2019. I want to see exactly where the money is going. I take the Deputy's point that if issues are raised in Kilkenny they have to be dealt with in a comprehensive way and I will bring that message back to the Minister.

Medicinal Products Availability

Deputy Gino Kenny: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to raise this issue. Those living with phenylketonuria, PKU, have been engaged in a protracted campaign to get access to the drug, Kuvan. Over the past eight years, access to Kuvan has been assessed and rejected by the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE, on two occasions, namely, in 2009 and 2017. That process is questionable when it comes to orphan drug assessments. A review into all orphan drugs is under way and that should be welcomed by all parties in the House. Even though Kuvan is readily available in most European countries, it is not available for those living with PKU in Ireland. The drug has the potential to transform a person living with PKU. The irony, incredibly, is that the drug is made in Cork and that Ireland has the highest rate of PKU, a genetic condition, in the world. I understand a decision will be made on provision of the drug soon. Hopefully, the Minister of State will have good news and there will be a positive outcome for those living with PKU.

The issue of orphan drugs has been raised a few times since I became a Member. The people requiring them have rare diseases and they cannot access certain drugs. There is clinical evidence but there is also the issue of a price being put on these conditions and on people's lives. The Minister of State will probably agree that is completely unacceptable in society. Hopefully, he will have good news and those living with PKU will get the good news this week to the effect that they can access this drug.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue and for his work since he became a Member on alternative medicines. I also thank him for having an open mind, as there have been many times when I have strongly agreed with him. I commend him on pushing this agenda.

Securing access to new and innovative medicines in a timely manner is a key objective of the Minister and the HSE. That is why the Department of Health has put in place a robust legal framework under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013, which gives full statutory powers to the HSE to assess and make decisions on the reimbursement of medicines, taking account of expert opinion as appropriate. The Act specifies the criteria to be applied in the making of reimbursement decisions, which include the clinical and cost-effectiveness of the product, the opportunity cost and the impact on resources that are available to the HSE. In reaching its decision, the HSE will examine all the relevant evidence and will take into account such expert opinions and recommendations that are appropriate, including from the NCPE.

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This ensures that reimbursement decisions will be made on objective scientific and economic grounds. Medicines represents one of the largest areas of expenditure across the health service and is expected to increase again in the years ahead. That is why the challenge is ensuring access to new and innovative medicines in an affordable and sustainable way.

Kuvan was first assessed in 2009 under the national pricing and reimbursement process at that time. However, it was concluded that insufficient evidence was available to support the pricing and reimbursement application submitted by the then promoter, Merck Serono. In December 2015, Merck Serono advised the HSE that the market authorisation for Kuvan was to be transferred to BioMarin in 2016. The HSE met the new market authorisation holder in May 2016 and was advised that the company would be submitting a new pricing and reimbursement application relating to this medicine. The new application was assessed by the NCPE in September 2017 and, in its report to the HSE, it did not recommend Kuvan for reimbursement because it was not deemed cost-effective. However, I would like to make it clear that the HSE leadership, which is the ultimate decision-making authority on reimbursement decisions, has yet to make a decision on the new pricing and reimbursement application submitted by BioMarin. The HSE met the company recently to discuss the report from the NCPE and to explore commercial options. The Department of Health has been advised that the HSE drugs group and the HSE leadership are expected to consider all relevant information, including any commercially confidential offering during the first quarter of 2018.

Deputy Gino Kenny: All Members received an email from the PKU Association of Ireland earlier. The association does amazing work for those living with the condition. I had no knowledge of PKU until a few months ago. It has been enlightening and educational to find out about the condition and how it can be treated. All members received the email and the PKU community is hoping that there will be a positive outcome on Thursday. I know the Minister of State said the ultimate decision is for the HSE but I hope there can finally be some good news for those living with PKU in Ireland.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Deputy is right that the decision is expected very soon. According to the memo I received from the HSE, it will be in the first quarter of 2018, and while I hear that it could be in the next couple of days, that will be announced independently. It is very important that the HSE is the decision-making body on the reimbursement of medicines under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. It is the HSE, and the HSE alone, which will make the final decision on whether Kuvan will be reimbursed, taking into consideration the statutory criteria as specified under the 2013 Act. This Act does not give the Minister for Health any powers in the reimbursement process. The HSE does not require approval or consent from the Minister or the Government when it is making a reimbursement decision.

Schools Building Projects Status

Deputy Seamus Healy: Ar an gcéad dul síos ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire Stáit as ucht a bheith anseo anocht chun an rún seo a fhreagairt. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil chomh maith leis an mbord bainistíochta – na tuismitheoirí, na múinteoirí agus le foireann uilig na gaelscoile i gCluain Meala as ucht an tsár-oibre atá déanta acu le 23 mbliana anuas. Bunaíodh an Ghaelscoil i gCluain Meala in 1994 agus fuair an scoil aitheantas sealadach ansin. In 1996 fuair an Ghaelscoil aitheantas buan.

Gaelscoil Chluain Meala was founded in 1994 and received provisional approval in that

year. Two years later, in 1996, it was granted permanent recognition by the Department but today, 23 years later, there is huge frustration in the school community because of the huge delay in progressing the building of a new school for Gaelscoil Chluain Meala. Progress has been tortuously slow over those years. The school is currently accommodated in an 1830 building which was used in more recent times by South Tipperary County Council as part of its engineering and stores offices; indeed, I worked there myself when I worked with South Tipperary County Council in both the stores section and the planning section. As it is very old, the building is totally unsuitable and not fit for purpose. Classrooms are overcrowded, playground space is extremely limited and toilet facilities are inadequate. There are no parking facilities and the building is damp and difficult to heat, with poor ventilation - the list goes on.

When the school was established in that building, it was thought that in a short number of years the school would be located in a new building but, as I said, progress has been tortuously slow. The school started with 45 pupils and two teachers whereas it now has 210 pupils and 11 teachers. It has been promised on a number of occasions that construction would start. For example, in November 2015 it was indicated that it was in the programme and that construction would commence in 2017 but that has not happened. The current situation, as I said, is that there are 210 students, 11 teachers, support staff, clerical staff, cleaning staff and caretaking staff in the school, as well as a naíonra. It is long past time that this school would be given approval and that construction would commence. We are aware the capital programme will be announced in the coming weeks. The school is asking for confirmation that the new school building will be funded in that capital programme and that construction will commence in 2018, as is urgently needed.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it provides me with the opportunity to outline to the Dáil the current position in regard to the major building project for Gaelscoil Chluain Meala. The major building project for this school is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, stage 2b - that is, the detailed design stage - which includes securing the statutory approvals, such as planning permission, fire certificate and disability access certificate, and the preparation of tender documents. These have all been completed and the design team has submitted written confirmation that it is satisfied that the tender documents are complete, correct and in compliance with the Building Control (Amendment) Regulations 2014 and Department of Education and Skills tender documentation requirements. This project is included on the six-year programme announced on 17 November 2015 to go to tender and construction.

Gaelscoil Chluain Meala is a co-educational school. The project brief is for the refurbishment and renovation of the existing primary school, which is a protected structure. It is to include eight classrooms, shared spaces, library, ancillary accommodation and staff parking. The project comprises repairs to the existing building and the construction of a new eight-classroom extension, including a general purpose room and ancillary accommodation.

The Deputy will be aware of the funding pressures on the capital programme and the need to focus limited funding on the provision of additional school places to cater for demographic demands. The Department's overall capital allocation for 2017 was €693 million, of which €531 million was expended on the schools capital programme. This included completion of 46 major school building projects, along with expenditure on smaller additional accommodation projects, emergency and summer works, site acquisitions and the payment of a minor maintenance grant to all primary schools. The Department is currently reviewing its programme for capital expenditure in 2018 and into 2019. Building projects, including the project for Gael-

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scoil Chluain Meala, will be considered in that context. Officials from the Department will shortly be in contact with the school regarding a timeframe for progression of this project.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I thank the Minister of State for her response, although we were aware of most of the points made. This has been a long-delayed project. I again ask the Minister of State to ensure the project is in the capital programme to be announced shortly and that it is funded for construction to commence in this year. It has been a long and tortuous process over the last 23 years. It had been expected to be five or six, or even ten, years but to be 23 years down the road without the commencement of the project is simply unacceptable. I hope the funding will be made available and that the project will be commenced this year. In a reply to a parliamentary question that I asked last November, the Minister stated that he was awaiting documentation from the school. I wish to confirm that all that documentation is now with the Department and that nothing further is awaited from the school.

This has been a long and tortuous process. The school community at Gaelscoil Chluain Meala looks forward to the approval of funding under the capital programme in the next three to four weeks so that building can commence in 2018.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: I thank the Deputy. I have taken a note and will ensure that the Minister and the officials in the building unit hear about this tomorrow.

GLAS Payments

Deputy Martin Ferris: The delay of green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, payments because of IT payments has been a debacle. According to my numbers, 500 people are still awaiting payment in Kerry, accounting for approximately €2.5 million. Since he comes from this background, the Minister of State will be conscious of how important this money is for low-income earners within the farming community. Many of the farmers awaiting payment have large overheads. Some have been unable to meet their bank loans. Others have had to borrow because their children are attending third level education. They have outstanding bills from co-ops for fertiliser and so on.

Nationally, thousands have had their payments delayed because of the problem with the on-line application system. This has been ongoing for three years and is not getting any better. In fact, it is getting worse. There seems to be no end or solution in sight. In the west, commonage management plans had to be drawn up before 31 October. Due to a problem with the digital process, many farmers - shareholders in commonages in particular - have been unable to make their online applications.

When can the 500 people in question expect to be paid and, from a national perspective, how does the Minister of State hope to deal with this ongoing problem with online applications?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Before I begin, I wish to acknowledge Deputy Ferris's tireless work as his party's spokesperson on agriculture. In particular, the work he has done on behalf of fishermen in Kerry throughout his career in politics has been second to none.

I have followed the Minister of State's career. He is a practical, sensible and down-to-earth man. I want a simple answer from him. Last year, IT problems held up GLAS payments. We told farmers that they had done everything right but that the Department had IT problems.

There were IT problems the year before last as well. My office has been in Agriculture House for many years and I 100% respect the staff working there. They are second to none. However, I do not understand what “IT problems” means. If I am a small hill farmer or someone who is struggling and relying on my cheque to come in the post, I want to know what a bloody “IT problem” is. Will the Minister of State tell us so that we can go home to Kerry and tell the farmers that Deputy Ferris and I are referring to what the problem is and that the Department will solve it?

It is not fair. Each of us gets paid every month, week or so on, but these people rely on that payment. They want it and are relying on us to come to Dáil Éireann to fight for them. I am not blaming the Minister of State. I am only asking him to explain what these IT problems are. If the farmer has done everything right and all his or her documentation is right, what is the IT problem? These farmers need their money. They have to pay contractors from last year. They must pay for silage. A farmer cannot buy straw anymore. A round bale of silage is beating €30 and is difficult to find. Will the Minister of State please help us and give us the answer?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): I thank the Deputies for raising this matter, which gives me an opportunity to set out the current position regarding GLAS payments. I have just come from the Irish Farm Centre-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The IFA might help the Minister of State out.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: -----where I attended the IFA’s AGM for a questions and answers session with the Minister, Deputy Creed, who would normally take this Topical Issue debate. This question, among others, was raised. I had to return and deputise while the Minister and the Taoiseach joined the IFA great and good for dinner.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister of State might give more answers than he would. The Minister of State knows more about it.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I am here to answer for everyone.

I am pleased with the level of payments made in the past three months. Almost €1.7 billion has issued to farmers in that time, which is the highest amount ever paid. Indeed, Ireland leads other member states in terms of our implementation of the rural development programme and has the second highest drawdown rate of EU funds.

GLAS is the most popular scheme ever run under a rural development programme in Ireland. The original target of 50,000 participants was surpassed well ahead of the target date, such is the popularity of the scheme. Given that the first approvals under the scheme run from 1 October 2015, it is a remarkable achievement to have exceeded this target within a period of 15 months.

GLAS has a maximum annual payment of €5,000 under the general scheme with provision for a payment of up to €7,000, known as GLAS+, where the farmer is required to give exceptional environmental commitments in a limited number of cases. Last year, we paid out almost €200 million under GLAS and have continued payments each week into the new year.

Like previous agri-environment schemes, GLAS supports participants in improving their agricultural productivity and practices in a sustainable manner. The scheme delivers overarch-

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ing benefits to the rural environment and addresses the issues of the mitigation of the impacts of climate change, the enhancement of biodiversity and the improvement of water quality. It provides valuable support to participants who deliver public goods and environmental benefits that enhance the sustainability credentials of Irish agriculture.

The scheme is co-funded by the national Exchequer and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, EAFRD. As required under EU regulation, two payments issue in respect of each year, these being, the advance payment followed at a later stage by a balancing payment. In 2016 and again in 2017, the advance payment represented 85% of the annual payment with the balancing payment being 15%. In 2017, advance payments commenced on schedule in November and continue to be made on an ongoing basis as tranches of cases are cleared.

There are 49,700 active participants in GLAS. By the end of this week, more than 40,000 of these will have received their 2017 advance payments, valued at €161 million. This represents over 87% of farmers eligible for a 2017 advance payment.

In more than 3,000 of the outstanding cases, applicants remain ineligible for payment until they complete the steps that they must take before the Department can process their payments.

8 o'clock There is nothing that we can do to advance these payments until the applicants complete their obligations. In most of these cases, this relates to outstanding documentation, which they must submit. As soon as this is received and assuming everything is in order, my Department will move immediately to issue payments.

The main issues include the need for advisers to submit farm nutrient management plans to the dedicated online system, commence commonage management plans in the case of participants with a commonage action and submit the required documentation in the case of the low-emission slurry spreading and rare breed actions.

To be clear, many of these payments are not delayed, as has been suggested. It is simply the case that it is not possible for the Department to make them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies Ferris and Michael Healy-Rae have one minute each.

Deputy Martin Ferris: It is hard to know who to believe here, to be quite honest. *AgriLand.ie* reports that the Department is arguing that the agricultural consultants, ACs, are being unfair to it, as are people like myself and Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, who raise these issues in the House in the interests of the people we represent, particularly the small farmers who are trying to survive on very marginal land. The ACs make it quite clear that they are not going to be the scapegoats. They say that payments for GLAS training days are being held up-----

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I apologise, to whom is the Deputy referring?

Deputy Martin Ferris: The ACs, the agricultural consultants, who are the management plans people. They say that training days are required to be completed before the end of the year and if participating farmers missed the deadline of 31 December, then the 15% balancing payments will be withheld until the appropriate training is complete. The training is being carried out by the ACs but they are not being paid, the farmers are not being paid for attending the training days and a 15% deduction is being applied if training has not been completed by 31 December. Somebody is not telling us the truth.

Effectively, 500 farmers in our county have received nothing because of what the Department says is an error in the IT system. That has to be sorted out and it is up to the Minister and his Department to sort it. It is not up to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae and myself to sort it out. All we can do is raise the issue.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The reply is totally unacceptable but I am not blaming the Minister of State. He did not write it but whoever did does not have the first clue about agriculture. We know about the people who have not submitted their nutrient plans and about such cases but the people we are talking about are not in that category. The category of people we are talking about are those who are 100% compliant. The Department is saying they should be paid but that it cannot pay them because of an IT problem. I am not getting at the Minister of State but I ask him again to explain, on the record of the Dáil, the IT problem in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine at present because that problem is holding up payments. People at the other end of the phone in the Department are telling farmers that the Department cannot pay them because of an IT problem. We had this last year and the year before that. Where else can Deputy Ferris or I ask this question only in the House? I do not want to put the Minister of State to the pin of his collar about it but can he answer the question himself? Has anyone in his Department told him what the bloody IT problem is? He can imagine how frustrating it would be, were one in Glencar and seeking payment. They rely on us to come up here and demand answers. What is the IT problem?

Deputy Andrew Doyle: To go back to the issue concerning the ACs raised by Deputy Ferris, I do not quite understand what that is about but I will try to find out. This is the first I have heard about trainers or participants on one-day training courses not being paid. They would normally get the cheque in the afternoon when they are leaving-----

Deputy Martin Ferris: The ACs have not been paid. Farmers are supposed to get €158 and the ACs are owed €80 per participant.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: That is certainly something that needs to be looked into but I cannot answer the Deputy on it now.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Department is incompetent.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I do not think it is fair to say that about the Department. We are the most efficient of all EU member states in drawing down money. The Deputy might not like to admit that but it is actually the case.

In terms of the IT problem, I must make it clear that there are now three GLAS schemes in operation. There is a myriad of options and permutations, which overwhelmed the IT system. A lot of effort has been made to try to improve the situation.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What about the farmers?

Deputy Andrew Doyle: The Deputy can make flippant comments if he wishes but I am trying to answer the question that was put to me. This time last year, 27,300 farmers had been paid, which was only 72% of the active participants at that time. At the end of this week, 49,700 will have been paid, which is 87% of participants. Improvements have been made although I know that is cold comfort to the people who have been left behind. Deputy Healy-Rae, whose office is located in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, will acknowledge that people are working night and day to try to get all of the claims picked through and sorted out.

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Some of the applications have had to be done on an individual basis. When the pay button was hit but the applicants were not paid, the applications had to be manually re-examined, as far as I understand it. That is the nearest I can come to defining the IT issue.

Hospital Trolley Crisis: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— the health service is under huge strain following cuts made to its budgets during the austerity years and a lack of sustained investment to meet the growing and changing needs of our population;

— one of the fallouts of this is a chronic lack of capacity within our acute hospitals;

— medical and healthcare professionals are working, and have been working, tirelessly in hospitals around the country with fewer resources, supports and funding;

— the scandal of patients waiting on trolleys was officially declared an emergency by former Minister for Health, Mary Harney, in 2006 when the trolley count reached 469;

— twelve years later on 3rd January, 2018, 677 patients were left on trolleys, the highest ever recorded number of patients on trolleys in the State;

— throughout the whole of 2017, there were a record 98,981 patients left to spend one night or more on a trolley in hospitals throughout the State, representing the worst ever recorded number;

— the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data confirms that our acute public hospitals operate at 95 per cent occupancy, which is way above the acceptable OECD average of 77 per cent needed to provide a safe, consistent and effective standard of patient care;

— intensive care units in our hospitals are operating past full capacity daily;

— the Irish Association of Emergency Medicine has calculated that there could be between 300 and 350 excess patient deaths each year due to the trolley crisis and emergency unit overcrowding;

— Ireland had the second lowest number of hospital beds in the OECD leading to a lower than average hospital stay, 6.2 days, compared to the OECD average of 8.2 days;

— in the past decade acute hospital in-patient bed numbers were cut when they should have been increased in line with the country's growing and ageing population;

— last May, the Department of Health commenced a national bed capacity review, which was due to be published before the end of 2017, however, the Oireachtas has still not seen the final report; and

— unions representing workers in the health service have been highlighting the issue of a chronic lack of capacity in the health service for almost a decade;

further notes that:

— the recruitment moratorium in the public sector was introduced in the health service two years before all other areas of the public sector;

— there is a recruitment and retention crisis in our health service;

— unions representing workers in the health service have been highlighting the issue of the recruitment and retention crisis in the health service for a number of years;

— the Report of the Public Service Pay Commission identified problems in recruitment and retention, particularly in the health sector;

— in December, 2008, there were 38,108 whole-time equivalent nurses and midwives in the Health Service Executive (HSE) and at the end of September, 2017, that stood at just 36,170 whole-time equivalent nurses and midwives;

— to deal with the shortage of nurses, the health service has an over-reliance on costly agency staff, with the bill for agency nursing running at €1.1 million per week;

— hospital consultants make up less than 2.5 per cent of the overall public health service workforce, which is significantly less than peer countries' health services;

— the 2003 Hanly Report recommended that by 2012 there should be 3,600 consultants, yet at the end of September, 2017, there were only 2,951 whole-time equivalent consultants operating in the HSE;

— to cope with the shortage of consultants, hospitals have been hiring doctors without the requisite specialist skills who are now practising as consultants despite not being on the specialist register;

— the staffing crisis has created a severely challenging working environment, where nurses and doctors routinely work beyond their contracted hours in order to ensure patients are cared for in hospitals, at a significant physical, mental and financial cost to themselves and their families and friends;

— there is another crisis within the health service as Section 39 agency workers, who had their pay cut in line with the public service but have not had their pay restored, have balloted for strike action; and

— this pay disparity is causing gross staff loss, the demoralisation of current staff, which affects delivery of services, therefore placing further pressure on the HSE, and acute hospital sector, which will be further compounded by a possible strike in February;

and

calls on the Government to:

— ensure the Emergency Department Taskforce works on a permanent basis monitoring the situation nationwide and reports on problems to be proactively tackled;

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- reopen all hospital beds closed during the austerity years;
- meet with unions and representatives of nurses, doctors and allied health professionals in order to comprehensively examine the underlying difficulties in recruitment and retention in those sectors;
- establish a commission on pay in the health service for medical professionals and healthcare workers;
- genuinely invest in recruiting more staff to the health service, while simultaneously addressing the key issues for existing and prospective staff of working conditions, facilities, supports, training opportunities and pay;
- invest in co-locating general practices and acute mental health services next to emergency departments so those patients who do not need emergency department care can be treated in a more appropriate setting;
- increase investment for transitional care beds, adequate step-down facilities, home care packages, and home help hours to ensure that all patients who can be moved home, or to a more appropriate care setting, are given that opportunity;
- speed up the move towards primary and community care ensuring that all primary care centres are adequately resourced with new staff and funding;
- expand community diagnostics and shifting non-acute treatment from the acute sector to the community;
- commit to putting in place a plan for piloting salaried general practitioner (GP) posts starting with 2019 graduates;
- commit to graduated pay restoration for staff in Section 39 agencies;
- liaise with representatives of GPs to ensure that proper out of hours GP services can be established and maintained across the State;
- broaden the awareness campaign to ensure that the public are aware of what needs should be met in an emergency department and what needs should be met in general practice and primary care; and
- agree to the full implementation of all the recommendations in the Sláintecare Report.

There is a significant number of strands to the current crisis in our health service, from waiting lists for acute surgery to children waiting more than a year for speech and language therapy and everything in between. However, one of the most scandalous and recurring components of the crisis afflicting our health service is that of patients being left waiting on trolleys in emergency departments across the State. In 2017, a record 98,981 patients were left to spend one night or more on a trolley in hospitals throughout this State. This is the worst ever recorded number of such patients. The health service is under huge strain following cuts made to its budgets during the austerity years and the lack of sustained investment to meet the growing and changing needs of our population. Two of the main consequences of this are a chronic lack of capacity within our acute hospitals and a shortage of staff. For many years now medical and

health care professionals have been working tirelessly in hospitals around the country with fewer resources, supports and funding. In spite of the brave work of these medical and health care professionals, the crisis of patients on trolleys has recurred year on year, worsening all the while. The scandal of patients waiting on trolleys was officially declared an emergency by the former Minister for Health, Mary Harney, in 2006 when the trolley count reached 469. Twelve years later, on 3 January 2018, 677 patients were left on trolleys, the highest number ever recorded. These are not just statistics; they are human beings - grandparents, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters.

This crisis happens because we have neither the capacity nor the staff to deal with the volume of patients presenting at our emergency departments and acute hospitals. OECD data confirm that our acute public hospitals operate at 95% occupancy, which is far above the acceptable OECD average of 77%. An occupancy rate of 77% is what is needed to provide a safe, consistent and effective standard of patient care. The Irish Association of Emergency Medicine has calculated that there could be between 300 and 350 patient deaths each year due to the trolley crisis and emergency unit overcrowding. In the past decade, acute hospital inpatient bed numbers were cut when they should have been increased in line with the country's growing and ageing population. Last May the Department of Health commenced a national bed capacity review, which was due to be published before the end of 2017. Oireachtas Members still have not seen the final report but sections of the media clearly have seen it. That is disrespectful to people in this House and to those working in the health service.

Accompanying this crisis of capacity is a crisis of recruitment and retention. It is always worth noting that the recruitment moratorium in the public sector was introduced in the health service two years before all other areas in the public sector. Unions representing workers in the health service have been highlighting the issue of recruitment and retention for a number of years now. Indeed, the report of the Public Service Pay Commission identifies problems in recruiting and retaining staff, most especially in the health service. In December 2008 there were 38,108 whole-time equivalent nurses and midwives in the HSE but at the end of September 2017 that stood at just 36,170. The fallout from this is that to deal with the shortage of nurses, the health service is overly reliant on costly agency staff, with the bill for agency nursing running at €1.1 million per week. The Minister has agreed with me on more than one occasion that this does not represent good value for money but not only does it continue, it gets bigger every year. Similarly, hospital consultants comprise less than 2.5% of the public health service workforce, which is significantly less than the percentage of consultants in the health services of peer countries. In 2003, the Hanly report recommended that this country should have 3,600 consultants by 2012, but there were just 2,951 whole-time equivalent consultants operating in the HSE at the end of September 2017. The practice of hiring doctors who are not on the specialist register to act as consultants is another feature of the chaos in recruitment and retention. The staffing crisis has created a severely challenging working environment in which nurses and doctors routinely work beyond their contracted hours to ensure patients are cared for. This often happens at a significant physical, mental and financial cost to those involved and their family members and friends.

Solutions are required to stabilise the situation in the short term. We need to ensure the emergency department task force works on a permanent basis to monitor the situation across the country and report on problems that need to be tackled proactively. The Government needs to ensure as a matter of urgency that all beds closed during the austerity years are reopened. This has to mean setting targets and putting funds aside to ensure those targets are met. If we are to

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deal with the increasing population and the changing demographics, we need to start building additional capacity into the acute hospital sector. This should be reflected in the Ireland 2040 plan. The underlying difficulties causing this crisis, including working conditions, facilities, supports, training opportunities, promotion opportunities and pay, must be tackled so we can address the recruitment and retention crisis across all grades in the health service. Workers and their representative organisations must be consulted on how to address these issues. We must find a new way forward to resolve the recruitment and retention crisis. We cannot pretend the issue of pay is not a factor. I suggest that if this aspect of the problem is to be overcome, the Government should establish a commission on pay in the health service for medical professionals and health care workers. If these issues are not addressed, we will not be able to recruit more staff into the health service.

A broader awareness campaign is needed to ensure the public is aware of what should and should not be brought to accident and emergency departments. As part of this approach, the Government needs to hasten the move towards primary and community care and ensure all primary care centres are adequately resourced with new staff and funding. The Minister and I have discussed a primary care centre in my constituency on many occasions. It is not good enough that the HSE has said it will not allocate any additional staff to the centre. It is possible that new GPs will go into it, but I am concerned with HSE staff. Some patients are often left in acute care, which is not in their best interests, when they could and should be cared for at home. It is clear that increased investment in transitional care beds, adequate step-down facilities, home care packages and home help hours would help to ensure all patients who can be moved home, or to a more appropriate setting, are relocated in such a manner. While many of the measures called for in the motion before the House seek to stabilise the trolley crisis in the short term, we also need to address the systematic problems in the long term. This can be done if there is sufficient political will to implement in full all the recommendations in the Sláintecare report.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Health care should be a right for all citizens and not a privilege for the well-off. Need, not means, must be the philosophy underpinning our approach to health. The public health system should be free at the point of delivery, based on need and funded by progressive taxation. The Government is opposed to this. It does not support the duty of the State to provide public services. The approach of the Government and Fianna Fáil involves the privatisation of the health service, or at least those bits of it on which a profit can be made. That is why the health service is in a perpetual state of crisis. That is why the Government does not engage in the essential restructuring needed to provide a health service that is fit for purpose and is free to citizens at the point of delivery. It is no longer extraordinary to hear stories of elderly people, children and very sick people being left on trolleys. These harrowing tales are now part of the everyday narrative of life for ordinary people in this State.

In 2017, a record 98,981 patients were left to spend one night or more on trolleys in hospitals in this State. This represents the biggest number of trolley nights ever recorded. Last week, there were 126 patients on trolleys at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, which is in my own constituency of Louth. There were 31 people on trolleys on Wednesday alone. The equivalent figure for yesterday was 27 and for today it is 29. After seven years in power, Fine Gael has had plenty of time to take account of all of this by preparing a service plan that meets the needs of patients. I listened to the Taoiseach and the leader of Fianna Fáil debating these matters in the Chamber earlier today. I heard two failed health Ministers trying to score points off each other, like two bald men fighting over a comb. They made no sense at all. This country's nursing and medical staff and all the other health workers are doing a tremendous job,

but they cannot cope. They should not be blamed for the mess that has been made of the health service by the successive health policies and strategies of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

This crisis will not simply blow over. If this awful mess is to be sorted out in a socially just way, a definite and definitive change in policy is required. That does not mean a patched-up version of the current two-tier system. There needs to be a radically transformed wraparound health service that delivers care for all citizens from the cradle to the grave. As we heard when Deputy O'Reilly outlined some of the propositions she is bringing forward, this must mean ending the trolley crisis in our accident and emergency departments through proper investment and resourcing of community care. It must also involve the introduction of a new single integrated hospital waiting list management system, which allows people to move from one hospital to another to reduce waiting times. It also means recruiting doctors and nurses to reverse the cut-backs in staffing numbers that were introduced by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party in recent years. I do not envy the Minister, Deputy Harris, in doing his job. I do not doubt that he is doing his best and will continue to do so. Despite his best endeavours, however, he will not resolve the crisis in our health services because he is looking at the wrong problem. I say that with such certainty because I know the Minister is not trying to create a genuine public health service. I appeal to him to do so.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: A number of years ago, harsh winters put increased pressure on accident and emergency departments across the country. The seasonal pressures on accident and emergency departments that were evident some years ago are now a crisis that manifests itself all year round. Why do patients, some of whom are very elderly, have to wait for unreasonable and extremely long times in accident and emergency departments? Why do they have to spend so much time lying on trolleys or sitting in chairs placed around accident and emergency departments? Among the many factors that have given rise to the continuous trolley crisis and the crisis in our accident and emergency departments are capacity issues and the constant brain drain of doctors, nurses and other highly trained medical staff. The lack of consultants and the subsequent cancellation of operations has added to this chaos. It is a scandal that we are exporting our doctors to other countries where conditions and pay are better.

Poor political decisions are important factors in the creation of this crisis. The lack of political will to resolve the growing scandals in our hospitals on the part of this Government and its predecessors has allowed the trolley crisis and the crisis in our accident and emergency departments to grow to the point where they are seemingly out of control. Our health system is poorly organised. When funds and resources are not put to good use, it leads to a reliance on acute public hospitals. This places an additional burden on the shoulders of hospital staff, who are over-stretched, hard-working and dedicated. Poor decision-making has led to a lack of primary health care centres. The development and resourcing of community care would help to alleviate the crisis in our emergency departments. All of this is giving rise to a systematic failure in our health service provision. It is an indication of a health system that is not fit for purpose and is unable to cope with the health requirements of the population. The INMO recently recorded the highest-ever number of patients on trolleys. Apart from the hardship of having to lie on a trolley for hours on end, such excessive delays in accident and emergency departments give rise to additional risks to patients, especially those who are elderly or vulnerable. Political will, leadership and proper resourcing are required to end the crisis in our accident and emergency departments and on our hospital trolleys.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion. I thank the wonderful staff of our hospitals and our health service across the State. Without the

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tireless work they do, our health service would be in a much worse situation. Those who experience the stress of having their children or their parents in hospital are having to deal with the added worry that their loved ones will not get a bed and instead will be left sitting for hours on trolleys or plastic chairs in accident and emergency wards. It may be a new year but, unfortunately, some things never change. As we welcomed the new year, 2018 started with a record 677 patients on trolleys across the State. It is disgraceful and upsetting that children are also being placed on trolleys. I cannot understand how the practice of placing people on trolleys continues or that the Government fails miserably on this issue every year. This Government and that which preceded it have had seven years to get a handle on the problem but instead it continues to worsen.

Solutions have been rehearsed in the House time and again. Closed beds must be reopened, qualified staff must be recruited and retained and adequate step-down facilities must be provided. Home care hours are also needed in order that patients who are in a position to move on can do so. Members of the public have listened to these debates over and over again and they are sick to the back teeth of all the talk and no action. The phrase I use to describe the Government's approach to the health crisis is that it is tinkering around the edges. It appears to me and others that the will to make the big decisions on investment, pay and conditions for staff and the implementation of recommendations such as those in the Sláintecare report is absent. This must change.

Deputy John Brady: Maureen is 76 years old and has small cell lung cancer. On 30 December last, she started to vomit blood. Unable to have a palliative care team provided until 2 January, her daughter tried to contact the general practitioner out-of-hours service. The family was left waiting for 16 hours because of the Minister's failure to put in place a dedicated GP out-of-hours service.

On 4 January, an ambulance was called for Jay who was experiencing severe chest pains. It took two hours for the ambulance to arrive because it travelled all the way from Baltinglass to Arklow where there is no rostered ambulance on Thursdays. Jay's case is another of the Minister's failures. Jay and Maureen are two of the Minister's constituents. Jay's ambulance bypassed St. Colmcille's Hospital, where the 24-hour accident and emergency department has been closed, and brought him to a trolley lined corridor at St. Vincent's Hospital. This is another failure by the Government and the Minister's colleagues in the previous Government, including Labour Party Ministers. At the same time, the Government is railroading through the closure of St. Brigid's nursing home in Crooksling, a critical step-down facility that has provided excellent service to people in west County Wicklow and the Brittas area for many years. The closure of this facility follows the closure of other homes, including the Orchard welfare home in Bray and Wicklow District Hospital.

County Wicklow is a microcosm of what is taking place across the State. The slash and burn policies of the Government and its predecessor are the cause of the current crisis and unless they are changed, we will find ourselves in the House next year debating more cases involving people like Maureen and Jay. There must be change and investment.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Having spent time on a hospital trolley, I can relate to the experiences of many of my constituents and other people around the country.

In the 90 seconds available to me, I will focus on one issue. Last Thursday, security staff entered an area of Tallaght Hospital known as "the pod". Management then arrived and in-

formed those present that the area was being redesignated as an adult area. The staff protested but were effectively asked to go away. They had to complete their work without access to this space. Some were told this was part of a two-day trial but that they should plan for the area to be redesignated permanently as an adult area. During the redesignation, I received reports that space could not be found for extremely sick children who had been brought to the hospital. These included patients with severe neurological conditions and one patient who may have cancer. Other sick children were then shunted out to public corridors. In one case, a five year old on a drip was left sitting on a chair on the main corridor of the department. Will the Minister confirm that this incident took place? Will the redesignation be permanent or is it a temporary measure to address difficulties being experienced in the hospital?

Children should not be left on trolleys. This practice gives rise to safety and personal dignity issues. I once observed a woman dying on a hospital corridor surrounded by family members. It was an awful experience and I am sure Deputies will be able to relate similar experiences.

It does not make sense to close down step-down facilities while cases such as those described by Deputies are taking place. St. Brigid's nursing home, which serves the Dublin South-West constituency and Wicklow, is a fantastic facility that is about to be closed. At the same time, families are telling us they cannot find nursing homes that will take in their loved ones who are in hospitals such as that in Tallaght. The reason for this is the high demand for such services. Much could be done if we sought collectively to address the problem. We must do things differently.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I welcome the opportunity to address the Dáil on the important issue of hospital overcrowding and thank Deputy Louise O'Reilly for facilitating the debate through the motion. I would like to approach this debate in a spirit of finding solutions and forging cross-party consensus. I appreciate that Deputy O'Reilly put forward a number of constructive suggestions. I am also conscious of the need for all of us to work together to reach a sustainable solution for the health service, placing patients and their needs at its heart.

The Government will not oppose the motion because we all want the same thing, namely, to do better by patients and front-line staff. However, there are a number of aspects of the motion that the Government contests and I will deal with these in the course of my address.

Nobody in the House considers it acceptable that we have high numbers of patients on trolleys waiting for long times in overcrowded emergency departments in conditions that are awful for them and the staff looking after them. I do not claim, nor does anyone in Government or the Health Service Executive, that the difficulties that arise immediately after new year are not predictable. We had detailed plans and extra resources in place for this reason. However, we still hit a surge that was extremely challenging for the health system. There is a difference between predictable and avoidable and the latter requires that we break the cycle of overcrowding. This will not be achieved in one year's winter plan.

I will first focus on this year's winter plan. I assure everyone that the Government is committed to investing in health and investment is having an impact. We do not often hear this but some things are going well in the health service. This year, as part of budget 2018, an extra €30 million was made available to respond to winter pressures, with a further €40 million being provided in 2018. Let me share something that Deputies may not have heard this winter. In the face of increased demand, staff across the country continue working to improve perfor-

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mance. The overall number of patients on trolleys over the whole winter so far, that is, from 1 November 2017 to 1 January 2018, has declined by more than 2,000 year on year. While far too many patients spend time on trolleys, staff are making an impact with the extra resources provided. The decline is the result of progress made in November, when the counts undertaken by the INMO and the HSE both acknowledged a significant decrease on the previous year. In December, the HSE's TrolleyGAR also showed a significant decrease on the previous year.

Measures such as expanded access to transitional care have meant 382 patients were approved for such care between 1 and 10 January. This has come about as a result of investment. Additional access to diagnostics out of hours has been provided as a result of investment. Investment in more home care has delivered a significant reduction in the number of delayed discharges. In addition, 80 patients are receiving care in private hospitals as a result of a decision to adopt a proposal made by Deputy Kelly last year to use all available capacity across the health service. While these measures have not been sufficient, they have had an impact.

The Government also provided €25 million for social care, including more home care supports and packages. It also provided €1.4 million for rehabilitation and step-down beds in Limerick and Cork and money to deal with complex case discharges to allow people to return to the community. We have opened additional beds at the national rehabilitation hospital and a day hospital is planned at Cashel. Moreover, the HSE's winter plan included a communication strategy, as called for in the motion. The strategy incorporated a public information campaign to increase awareness of the different approaches to accessing services, including emergency services, over the winter period. I must, therefore, counteract the narrative that there was a failure to predict or plan for what has occurred.

We need more beds to reduce the unacceptable number of patients who are still ending up on trolleys. This winter, we are opening an additional 227 beds and the capacity report will inform our plans for further increasing capacity. As of today, nearly 150 additional beds have been opened in Beaumont Hospital, St. James's Hospital, Naas General Hospital, St. Luke's Hospital, Kilkenny, Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, and Limerick and Galway hospitals.

We have a growing and ageing population in this country and demand for our health and social care services is only going to go in one direction. In the region of 1.3 million people attended our emergency departments last year and more than 330,000 people were admitted to hospitals from emergency departments during the same period. This represents an increase on last year. In particular, there was an increase in the number of older people, those aged 75 years or over. The figure was up 11.3% last year on the year before.

Notwithstanding this rising demand, I wish to comment on something we do not often hear about, which is that some of our hospitals have done rather well. The figures show that Our Lady of Lourdes, Drogheda, Beaumont Hospital, Cavan General Hospital and St. Vincent's University Hospital, to name but a few, have seen a significant reduction in trolley numbers, ranging from 40% to 50%, compared to 2016. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation figures acknowledge that point. We should acknowledge where good practice is in place and demand that it happens throughout the system.

I acknowledge that some hospitals experience specific challenges. The hospitals in Galway and Limerick have capacity issues but they have embraced the national patient flow project and both hospitals have seen improvements in this regard. I wish to thank staff and management in those hospitals.

If we are really to progress this debate, we need to move on to the solutions. What are we going to do to break the cycle? We are going to pursue three key priorities. We are going to increase bed capacity using the evidence and not the cries of those who want more beds for the hospitals in their constituencies. We will use the beds evidence of the capacity review to work out where we need the beds, what type of beds we need and how we are going to get them there. We are going to implement reform through Sláintecare. We are going to increase services provided through primary care by negotiating a new general practitioner contract and having engagements with GPs about how to unwind the financial emergency measures in the public interest legislation.

The first point relates to capacity. We simply do not have enough hospital beds in Ireland to serve our population. That might sound like stating the obvious, but it was not obvious during 2007 to 2011, when policy decisions were made to reduce the number of hospital beds. That was a policy of many people - it is not a partisan point. There was a view that we could do much in primary care, a view held by many eminent people in the health service. Clearly, there is a need to do more in primary care but we still need more beds in our acute hospital setting.

I became Minister for Health at a time when our country was back in economic growth. I want to build more hospitals, provide more beds and staff these beds. I am committed to doing this using an evidence-based approach. That is why we have undertaken a health system capacity review, aligning the needs of our health service now with our demographics out to 2031. The review is now complete and will be brought to Cabinet next week.

Additional capacity cannot be the only answer. Reform must take place as well. We need fundamental reform with significant development of primary and community care. Sláintecare provides a blueprint for this process. I am committed to driving a genuine all-party approach to agreeing a vision for our health service. That is what our country and people deserve. One of the first things this Government did was work with Opposition politicians on the establishment of the Committee on the Future of Healthcare and the production of the Sláintecare report. There is considerable consensus in this regard and I am keen for Deputies to know that I am absolutely committed to delivering on those reforms.

Detailed work will be overseen by a new Sláintecare programme office. The recruitment process for an executive director has commenced and is under way. The advertisement was placed on Friday. It is about getting the right person. That is why we did an executive search through the Public Appointments Service. This will be the largest level of reform ever undertaken in the health service, if not in the public service. It is essential that we get the right person with the right skills and experience. I expect that process to be complete by April.

We have already taken several actions with which Deputies will be familiar, including the preparation of legislation to introduce governing boards to bring back accountability and greater performance oversight. We are looking at the consultation process on how to align hospital groups and community health organisations, taking on board the views of front-line staff and patients. I have set up the Donal de Buitléir group, as the Sláintecare report asked of me, to look at how we can decouple public and private health care. Unlike the assertion of Deputy Adams, I want to see a universal health care system where private practice is decoupled from the public health service.

I wish to briefly focus on primary care. We will do Sláintecare. We are putting in more beds and we will continue to do this. We know we need to work with our general practitioners to do

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more in primary care. I know they are up for that and that they want to do that as well, but they need to be resourced. That is why, within a week, I will set a date for the FEMPI talks to begin. We can talk to our health contractors, starting with our GPs, about how to unwind some of the financial emergency measures brought in during times of economic recession to make their role more sustainable in future. This will serve to enable the delivery of a new GP contract. Much work has gone on. Talks have been held with GP organisations and there have been negotiations with the IMO in the past year. I believe the FEMPI talks will be an enabler to move those GP contract talks on further.

Earlier, I heard the leader of Fianna Fáil refer to the need to develop more community intervention teams. He is correct in this regard and that is why we are doing it. Budget 2018 provides further funding in this regard. We have seen a significant increase in the number of referrals. From January to the end of November, the figure was 34,452. That figure already exceeded the expected activity for the past year by more than 5%. We need to do more in that regard as well.

Putting more diagnostics in our primary care centres is under way. This is not talk; we have done it. I went to Castlebar, where we have put X-ray and ultrasound machines in the primary care centre. This will ensure that we have more than fine buildings; we will have diagnostics as well. More than 500 people were waiting for X-ray services in Mayo in April. That figure is now down to zero. Expanding the roll-out of diagnostics and access to diagnostics in primary care is clearly an important point.

I agree with Deputy O'Reilly that there are recruitment and especially retention issues. We have a process that the unions are engaging in today under the Public Sector Pay Commission. We have a specific module whereby the INMO, the IMO and my Department have made detailed submissions. The commission will make a final report to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform this year. I will certainly make my views clear in that regard.

I wish to acknowledge the hard work done by our front-line staff and management during a very challenging period. This year can and must be the year of reform in the health service. I am committed to working with everyone in the House to make that reform a reality in order that we can build the health service that our citizens rightly demand and require, although we all know it will take several years.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I wish to share time with Deputies Murphy O'Mahony, Browne, Butler, Breathnach, Rabbitte, Murphy and Scanlon.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. It is timely in the sense that patients and staff in our emergency departments throughout the country have gone through horrific times in recent weeks. Unfortunately, while we have heard talk about planning, I believe most of the planning was around spin rather than the actual implementation of substantial issues to address overcrowding in our emergency departments in the window after Christmas and the start of the new year. Almost every year in recent years we have consistently seen bedlam and chaos in our emergency departments from the first Tuesday of the new year and flowing out through January and February. It is beyond me. I cannot understand why no system is in place other than the pretence of winter-proofing in September and October. Press releases are turned out with claims of winter-proofing and that we are going to be ready for the winter flu and the challenges that are thrown at the health services in January.

We know that if we do the same thing over and over again, we will get a consistent result. That is a failure of management at the most senior levels in the HSE. However, the Minister has to take some political responsibility for it. He is in place in the Government. It must take responsibility for the difficulties with regard to the lack of capacity not only in our emergency departments, but to the flow of patients through hospitals.

There is no point in the Minister publishing a bed capacity review in the coming weeks if he does not immediately start assessing where he can identify in the short term wards in hospitals throughout the country that would be suitable for opening. This should happen with minimal capital investment in the coming short period coupled with the increase in staff recruitment processes to man those beds. There are longer term implications with regard to capital development of new hospital builds in the State over a longer period. There is no point in us being here this time next year and saying that the bed capacity review has highlighted something that we intend to fund in the years ahead. We need immediate efforts to pinpoint the pinch areas in our hospitals that cause overcrowding on a continual basis. The crucial period is the time immediately after Christmas and in the early new year. It is the same period year in, year out. Today, I predict that if the Minister does nothing, as has been the case in recent years, we will again be here this time next year talking about bedlam and chaos in our hospitals throughout the country in 2019. We will talk of patients waiting inordinate periods with poor health outcomes because of those delays.

I urge the Minister to take on board the views expressed in the motion. We understand the constraints the State has in terms of funding. However, there can be quick wins in identifying closed wards or wards that have been converted in hospitals throughout the country. We need to identify them early and we need capital investment to open them up. Long-term bed capacity requirements will have to be addressed over a longer period.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: Despite an undertaking by the previous Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, in 2011 to bring an end to the trolley crisis, seven years later we find ourselves debating this issue in circumstances where the problem has become worse not better. Fine Gael has been in government for seven years and has failed to achieve any health target it has set. It is not rocket science to know that January will be a busy month in the hospitals. Our party spokesman on health issues, Deputy Kelleher, highlighted this to the Minister and the HSE last February when they were before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health but here we are again with no apparent plan.

An adequate management system in emergency departments is impossible to maintain given that the recommended waiting times are constantly being overrun. The latter results in emergency departments remaining at capacity levels all year round. This is heightened at this time of the year thus making the situation worse. We have reached the point now where elective surgeries are being cancelled and the problem is extending outside the emergency department.

I spoke before Christmas to the family of a constituent in her 80s who fell and broke her hip. She lay on a trolley in Cork University Hospital, CUH, for 48 hours. This was after waiting hours for an ambulance and travelling from west Cork. Surely a woman in her 80s and in severe pain deserves better than that. I have heard many more such examples in my Cork South-West constituency.

The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation annual trolley and ward watch figures prove that CUH was one of the most overcrowded hospitals in the State in 2017. As late as last Sun-

day, the hospital began to transfer patients out to regional hospitals, including Clonakilty Community Hospital, in an effort to alleviate the pressure on the emergency department in CUH.

Bed numbers need to be increased in all hospitals. On numerous occasions in this House and at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health, I have alluded to the fact that many general hospitals, such as that in Bantry, are more than willing to increase their workload and more than capable of doing so should they be given adequate resources. With reports indicating that 2,500 beds are required with immediate effect, it is imperative that the Government and the Minister for Health make this their priority.

Deputy James Browne: I wish to support this motion regarding the record numbers of people on trolleys in our health system. Hospitals across the country are struggling to cope and staff are overstretched, overworked and increasingly suffering from stress and burnout. I thank the staff working in our health system during this very difficult period.

In 2011, the previous Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, vowed to bring an end to the trolley crisis. However, seven years later and three Fine Gael Ministers of Health later, the problem is worse than ever, with record-breaking numbers of patients lying on trolleys in hospitals throughout the country. What was once an unacceptable winter crisis of people languishing on trolleys is now a year-round experience in some hospitals. Little did we realise that when Deputy Enda Kenny and Fine Gael promised to end the trolley crisis they meant they would do so by normalising it. This has been a persistent problem but year after year the Government has failed to take the necessary steps to tackle the overcrowding crisis. The Government is bereft of ideas and devoid of plans to address this crisis. Instead, it is choosing to adopt the role of the innocent bystander looking aghast and with nodding concern but little understanding or acceptance that they are responsible for averting this crisis. Almost 100,000 people spent time on trolleys in 2017. There was at least one instance of a child sleeping overnight on a chair. Last week, a couple told me that their adult daughter had to sleep on the floor of a ward without even a mattress. Overcrowding results in more delays and cancellations to scheduled hospital treatments and between 350 and 400 deaths every year result from overcrowding. The persistent problem must be tackled once and for all. It has been clear for a long time that there are insufficient beds in the system. It is not just a question of bed capacity in hospitals. We need greater availability of nursing home beds, rehabilitation spaces, convalescent supports and home care supports so that those fit for discharge can be discharged with the supports they need. The lack of availability of out-of-hour diagnostics in hospitals or the availability of diagnostics to GPs is still not being addressed. Implementation of the Sláintecare report, the all-party agreed plan for the future of our health care service, has been dragging. There is still no sign of electronic health records and mental health services are failing. An international assessment of our mental health services, as reported in *The Irish Times* today, makes for depressing reading. It is time for this Government to stop playing the innocent bystander and to start taking responsibility.

Deputy Mary Butler: As the Minister is aware, we have an ageing population. We are living longer, healthier lives which is very welcome. However, when the older generation require hospitalisation they are anxious, nervous, frightened, bewildered and mostly in pain. The health service is overstretched. The emergency department, the part of our acute system that never says no, is the place where patients come up against access block and are unable to access an acute hospital bed.

I want to refer to the son and daughter of a 75 year old man who was admitted to the accident and emergency department in University Hospital Waterford on 1 December 2017. They artic-

ulate what we all know is happening all over the country. The trolley figures confirm this and I welcome this motion from Sinn Féin to briefly address this issue. The man's children said their main concerns relate to the clear overstretching of resources within the emergency department. They witnessed not only their father but many vulnerable patients on trolleys in corridors where the lights were on 24 hours a day seven days a week. Accordingly, sleeping was not an option and neither was a call for assistance. They witnessed patients needing to assist each other at times with only one accessible toilet for many to use. Alternatively, people were obliged to leave the unit out of view of the health care professionals. This was not an environment which promoted patient safety, dignity, privacy or confidentiality. Their father was unable to sleep. Placed at the end of the corridor he was frequently asked to push a door release button through a busy area as needed or staff had to lean over him to do this. The attention given by the nursing and medical staff was impeccable despite these difficult circumstances but to have vulnerable people on trolleys at 75 years of age in an open, unsafe area for three nights is not acceptable.

The reason this family went public was that they wanted to point out that the staff were fantastic but the circumstances in which they were working were very challenging. Unfortunately, this gentleman died on 17 December and the family said that while they were more than aware that the outcome would most likely have been the same the initial period in the emergency department delayed active palliative treatment and allowed additional suffering that was not necessary.

The persistent problems in emergency departments must be tackled once and for all. It is simply unacceptable that the trolley crisis remains. The blockages will have to be removed. I was very interested to hear Mr. Tadhg Daly of Nursing Homes Ireland state during the Christmas period that there were approximately 1,400 beds available in nursing homes. This is an option to improve throughput of patients and quicker discharges of people from hospitals.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: Lip-service does not help to provide hip services or any other health service. I commenced in local politics in 1991 and became intimately involved in the old health boards. The changing of their name to HSE in 2004 has done little to recognise the demographic growth of our population. I have no doubt that services and outcomes for those who get into the health system have dramatically improved and should be acknowledged by me and all Members of this House. I compliment the various members of the staff of the health service on their great work.

In my lifetime of involvement with health boards, waiting lists have continued to grow and every service under successive governments has been trying to put a gallon into a pint cup. The health services are running to a standstill despite that huge growth in population, particularly in the past 30 years. The Taoiseach stated earlier today that if it was just a matter of funding, this issue would have been resolved by now because there has been an increase of over 20% in funding. Ireland has one of the highest levels of expenditure on health services of all OECD countries but it also has one of the poorest outcomes. The trolley figures, which Deputy Adams mentioned, were 29 today in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital and were at an all-time high of 607 for the month of November. The latter was despite the fact that, as the Minister indicated, a 60-bed unit has been opened at the hospital. We expect the bed capacity review next week to say that 2,500 extra beds are required.

The Minister should dust down the proposals on the regional hospital for the north east in that respect. There is a 12 acre site at the Louth County Hospital that is ripe for development and could take much of the load and relieve the difficulties for the eastern region.

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Finally, I refer to the good people who are not coming in to work in our health services. There is a serious need for the Minister to look into an incremental increase for those who stay for a given duration in the medical profession. That increment could be rewarded on an initial basis with an additional increment the longer one stays in the system. It is clear to me that we have a major issue. I do not want to go over all the other issues that have been raised in respect of better community services and all the rest of it. In accepting this motion on a cross-party basis tonight, we in this House should be making sure that we deliver to those who are waiting for us to stop paying lip service.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I call on the Minister to reopen hospital beds. Those waiting on the trolleys are sick people who need to be in hospital. One reason they are on trolleys is there are no hospital inpatient beds available to them. All acute hospital beds need to be reopened immediately and appropriately staffed and resourced. Health care professionals in emergency departments and acute hospitals nationwide have been telling us this for years, as has the annual crisis. I disagree with the Minister. I do not think we need a bed capacity review to tell us what is already obvious. What we need is more hospital beds.

Health care is a continuum. The overcrowding and backlog we are seeing in the emergency departments at present are the result of problems throughout the entirety of the health care system, which are made visible when the system is at crisis point. The flow of patients from emergency departments through the hospitals and safely home again needs to be facilitated. We need not only more beds but also more rehabilitation and support services for patients in hospital, in the transition period from hospital back to their homes, and into the community. We need more nursing and medical staff, undoubtedly. However, we also need more health care professionals, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, social care workers, dieticians and psychologists.

Adequate home care packages need to be provided if people are to return home from hospital and recover fully. Placing people on a waiting list for home care packages and discharging them without any support while they wait for this service is totally unacceptable. Galway is a very good example if the Minister wants to check this. We should also consider working with the non-profit organisations. The Parkinson's Association of Ireland's branch in Galway caters for over 700 members. Unfortunately, before Christmas, funding fell short and three of its members had to attend an accident and emergency department. Prior to that, in its five years of existence it has never had to use an accident and emergency department.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: As my time is limited, I will have to omit some of the material I was going to use this evening. We all accept that the Minister is a decent man and that he wants to do his best for the health service. At the moment, however, that simply is not good enough. As Deputy Rabbitte and more of my party colleagues and the Sinn Féin Deputies have said, we need to reopen those beds. In this House earlier today, the Taoiseach said 2,500 beds would be added by 2031. That is 13 years. We will have an older population. Furthermore, I see that a number of services that were being provided in various towns and counties are being closed down. The beds are not being used. These include services for people with Alzheimer's, dementia, and some mental health issues. I am aware of a service in Castlerea, which I will bring up with the Minister another day. I know he is aware of it.

I will give the Minister one or two very brief examples as I am sharing time with Deputy Scanlon. A 90 year-old woman was left on a trolley at Portiuncula Hospital in Ballinasloe for seven hours recently. She was brought in for a minor X-ray. She was moved to the accident and

emergency department and left on the trolley there for seven hours. At that stage it was decided they were going to do nothing with the lady there and they gave her an appointment for Merlin Park the next day. When she went to Merlin Park, it was something very minor and she is now home and well. During that period, however, her blood pressure rose and other problems arose. Luckily, one family member was able to come in and help settle her down. That should not be happening. Why was that lady left in the accident and emergency department for seven hours after coming in for a minor X-ray?

The staff members in all those hospitals are working hard and are trying to look after people. We all want to make that clear. The staff members are doing their best. I have another constituent who is desperately ill and cannot get a bed in Tallaght. He is in Sligo hospital at the moment. That man is very ill. His family and his doctors are very worried about him. I urge the Minister to look up that case as well and see if he can help that man.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I have very little time but I want to comment on what I feel is a serious problem at the moment. We should recognise the work that is being done by the medical staff at the coalface in dealing with all the different issues and problems. The Taoiseach spoke about the 2,500 beds by 2031. Unfortunately, those beds are needed next week. That is what it is going to take to resolve the problem, from what I can gather. There is another way. While we need the extra beds, a decent home care package should also be put into place. That needs to be considered seriously. We have people in nursing homes under the fair deal scheme and the beds are costing from €900 to €1,100 a week. If there was a decent home care package such that people could buy in the care that they require to keep people in their own homes where they want to be, it would be a massive improvement in trying to resolve some of the problems.

Because of all this overcrowding, there are many people waiting for operations at the moment. They are waiting to get into hospital. I am referring to people who might be suffering from cancer or other serious issues, or who might not even know yet whether they are. They are being deprived of their opportunity to get into hospital to have tests carried out. It is very unfortunate.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I thank Deputy Louise O'Reilly for raising this issue again. I agree with every single thing that has been said here tonight. I think we all do. There is political consensus that we have a crisis. I am not going to bother with the tit for tat political rubbish. We are in a crisis situation when it comes to health care. The problem now for us all is that it is like talking about the weather. Solutions do not arrive when there is a discourse that emanates and passes through people as a matter of form and norm. In the middle of all this, we have incredible people working in the service. We all acknowledge that. They are the best people one could ever meet. Like everyone else in this House, I have had to deal with them. All the stories we have told about people waiting and, of course, when people are in desperate straits they come to the likes of us and we try to help out. Incidentally, that should not be the way it works. I have had to do it myself on numerous occasions over the holiday period. It is at the stage now where, as politicians representing all the various views, we need to come together and pull together instead of pulling apart. We know what our strengths are: our resources and our people. We have significant decisions to make in the short, medium and long term.

I want the Minister to support the Sláintecare report. I welcome what he has done in respect of advertising the position at the head of it. I know he has commenced some of the reviews that were requested. The issue of private practice by consultants in public hospitals is something I was determined about as one of those who helped draft the report. I welcome all of that. That

is long term. However, we are behind schedule already.

What are we going to do in the short to medium term? While the bed capacity review is critically important, I agree with Deputy Kelleher that it is one thing doing a report. How are we going to ensure that the stock arrives and quickly?

I do not expect the Minister to wave a magic wand. It is impossible to wave a magic wand and have the beds appear. We need to identify where, in the short term, we can make beds available in hospitals throughout the country where there are wards and capacity. In the medium term, we obviously need a capital plan. I believe that everyone in the House will support the Minister in respect of the capital review and getting as much money as possible to deliver that.

Some 96 beds have been promised in a new unit in University Hospital Limerick. Limerick is on one side of me and south Tipperary is on the other. The two hospitals with the biggest accident and emergency department issues in the country are located in the area. It will be four or five years before the new unit is in place. What will people do in the interim? We need to be innovative and find solutions.

Everyone has spoken about demographic changes, people having greater expectations and all of that. Of course people have higher expectations because they are living longer and there are treatments now for many things which we could not treat ten or 15 years ago. Has it come to a stage in this country where in the case of a very simple issue, such as a double cataract, people are told they are lucky to get one eye done? That is the state we are in in Ireland in 2018. People are being told that they are lucky to have one eye treated, and not to be selfish and look for treatment in the other eye in case they could drive a car or go to work. It is incredible.

We need to change the way pathways are working across the hospital network and hospital groups. I wish to make one recommendation which could improve the situation in the short-term. Our ambulance service is under major pressure. I have raised this issue for years, as the Minister knows, but I will repeat myself. There is no reason that intermediate vehicles cannot operate across hospital networks and transport people from grade A to grade B hospitals in order for them to be treated in step-down facilities or avail of aftercare treatment or monitoring. There are people in University Hospital Limerick rather than Ennis or Nenagh because there is no transport to move them. Sometimes vehicles are not available or do not operate. The same happens across the country. This is a low-cost solution and all of these things would help. People can be brought to Ennis and Nenagh, where there is capacity and wards could be extended or opened.

We all know what happened with regard to the Hanly report and other reports, whereby services were closed without adequate services being available in other hospitals. Let us not go down that road with Portlaoise. We also have to ensure that the pathways between hospitals outside networks are improved.

Last week, I heard about a young 12 year old boy who has liver failure. He was brought by his parents to University Hospital Limerick, and was then referred to a hospital in Dublin. Everything was supposed to be fine and a bed was supposed to be available for him in the hospital. However, when he arrived yesterday, it was not available and the family were told to come back at lunchtime and again in the evening. The bed was still not available and last night the family slept in a hotel. They went back to the hospital today and the bed was still not available.

The family spent the day at a service station, with their sleeping child on the back seat of a car. He was sick and jaundiced. They waited for hours at the service station, hoping and praying that they did not have to drive to Limerick to get drugs for the child. They cried to me on the phone, looking for help to get into a hospital in Dublin. Luckily, after a lot of phone calls, the child got a bed in hospital tonight. The child was in the back seat of the car with his twin - they go everywhere together. That type of thing is not the practice we need in 2018 and is not an example of the pathways which work in this country. The pathways do not work. Children, of all people, should not be affected.

I have said to the Minister on numerous occasions that we have to develop more home help hours and home care packages. The simple fact of the matter is that it makes financial sense. Home care packages and home help hours keep people in their homes. It is cheaper and more cost effective than nursing homes or spending €6,000 to keep a patient in an acute bed. This is not rocket science; we just need to roll out such a policy as quickly as possible. There is an issue in terms of getting staff.

I wish to recommend long-term, medium-term and short-term solutions, because we have to come up with solutions. In the long term, we need a significant amount of investment on the capital side in IT because that will save money. In the medium term, the roll-out of home care packages needs to be enhanced and quadrupled. In the short term, I ask the Minister to examine transportation.

Deputy Gino Kenny: When the unacceptable becomes acceptable we have a major problem not only in our health service, but in society. I know the Minister said over the Christmas period that the trolley crisis is unacceptable - he said the same last year. It is somewhat Orwellian to say it is unacceptable but it is acceptable. It is similar to the housing crisis, whereby the Taoiseach said it was normal. It is abnormal to have 8,000 people in emergency accommodation.

Over the past decade, previous Ministers for Health have described the perennial health crisis as the trolley crisis. People want to know why this is happening. There is a reason that everything happens. Due to the fact that we are politicians, there is a political reason that there is a trolley crisis in our health service. That political reason is a political choice on the part of Fine Gael over the past six years and by Fianna Fáil in previous years. Politically and ideologically, thousands of beds were taken out of the health service. As a result, we now have a health crisis.

I have worked in the health system alongside some amazing and fantastic people. However, the demoralisation of health service staff is pretty bad. Front-line staff are demoralised by the ongoing crisis. It is a plague on the houses of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that the crisis is ongoing. The debate earlier today was nauseating. The Taoiseach sparred with Deputy Martin about which beds were taken out of the system in the decade during which Deputy Martin was a Minister. Nobody really wants to know that, rather people want to know that their mothers, fathers or brothers are not left on trolleys. People do not forget that. Seeing one's mother suffer stays in one's mind forever. I know the Minister does not want to see that, but this is the system that has been created as a result of ideology. There is an answer to every question.

In 2018, not one person should be on a trolley, never mind 600. We have a system that the Minister believes in and perhaps he is coming around to Sláintecare and so forth, which is fine, but we have a two-tier health system. Once there is such a system, there will be a perennial crisis such as this. It is not acceptable and normal for anybody to be on a trolley in 2018. If it becomes normal, we can all walk out of this place.

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Deputy Mick Barry: We have seen chaos in accident and emergency departments. The trolleys have been jammed together. The patients are toe-to-toe. The scandal of closed public wards has already been mentioned but no Deputy has yet mentioned that there were cases of other empty beds during this crisis too, sometimes just hundreds of metres away from the chaos in the accident and emergency departments. I am talking about the empty beds in private hospitals and in private wards. What a scandal that this is so when public patients suffer.

When Cork University Hospital, CUH, purchased ten private beds at the Mater Private Hospital in Mahon on 7 January it made national headlines. There were ten beds to buy and the same was done elsewhere. One could ask how many beds lay idle during the crisis over the past fortnight. We do not know because the private hospitals are under no obligation to release the information. However, we have anecdotal information. In an interesting article in the *Irish Examiner*, Fergus Finlay described how a majority of the beds in a private ward in which he spent time recently were empty.

We must reverse the austerity health cuts of recent times. That means thousands of new beds in public hospitals, but we also need a planned, rational use of resources to meet the challenges of public health care, including emergencies. It also means putting all of the country's health resources at the disposal of society, which in turn means nationalisation of the private hospitals and of those private beds. We must fight for every bed.

At Bandon Community Hospital, County Cork, there are currently 13 beds not in use because of a dispute over staffing levels. If the HSE were to simply hire one extra nurse and two extra health care assistants, those beds could be brought into play more or less immediately. The three extra staff should be hired immediately.

At Cobh Community Hospital, County Cork, 44 beds are currently in jeopardy because of the hospital's financial viability under a section 39 model. If the hospital is upgraded to a HSE hospital then the beds would be guaranteed, but the HSE will not do that as it would mean increasing pay rates. It is ludicrous to put 44 beds in jeopardy for that reason. The hospital should be made into a HSE hospital, the wages should be increased and those vital 44 beds should be saved.

The European Commission says there will be a global shortfall of 1 million health care workers by 2020 and that 600,000 of them will be nurses and midwives. Nurses and midwives are part of a globalised labour market and the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, recently found that 92% of student nurses and midwives were considering emigration, largely for reasons relating to pay. Last year, according to the INMO, 1,400 of 2,000 nurses and midwives who left the HSE did so because they resigned. Many went to Britain, Australia or Canada while others went to the private sector where pay is higher to the tune of thousands of extra euro per annum. It is clear that we will continue to have a crisis in terms of the retention of nursing staff until such time as they are granted very significant pay rises.

As a Solidarity Deputy, I consider myself a workers' representative in Parliament and have made a point during this crisis to talk to hospital workers and listen to their point of view. In Cork I have listened to stories of wards crammed full of potential flu victims with just three or four thermometers at hand for the entire ward. I have heard stories of Dinamap monitors so frayed and worn that attempts to take accurate blood pressure readings were hampered. I have spoken to ambulance staff who have completed 14-hour shifts without time to break for a proper meal. In general, I have heard stories of front-line workers under pressure from a crisis

but then put under even greater pressure by a shortage of resources, including human resources.

I believe this crisis has made the case more clearly than words could ever do for an Irish national health service unshackled by cuts and privatisation. For sure there is a crisis in the NHS in the UK but that must be addressed by going forward to the original principles of its founders, not by going back to the public-private model which we have here. In conclusion, I urge the Minister to reverse the bed cuts, pay the nurses and health staff a living wage, invest in primary care and establish an Irish national health service unshackled by cuts or privatisation.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I wish to share time with Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice. We will have six minutes and two minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank Deputy Louise O'Reilly for bringing this motion before the House. I have no hesitation in supporting it. I also thank the Minister for confirming that he is not opposing the motion. In addition, I congratulate the Taoiseach today for his announcement that there will be an increase in bed capacity. That is certainly a change because up to now successive Governments have confirmed that we needed fewer beds, which I never accepted.

The accident and emergency crisis and the trolley crisis are simply a symptom of a health system that is under enormous pressure. That is the case due to a sustained policy of reducing resources. I was a proud member of the health forum for ten years. Back in 2006, before the financial and banking crisis, we had closed wards and closed beds in the regional hospital in Galway. Different language was used at the time such as "cost-containment measures" and "bed refurbishment" which was a new one on me. The crisis has been deliberately created by successive Governments, which opted for private medicine. They did that in a very blunt way through various initiatives. They systematically ran down the public system, leaving beds and wards closed.

As the Minister is aware, before Christmas we discovered that a brand new ward, St. Finbar's, was closed in a centre of excellence in Galway. I hope that came as a surprise to the Minister. It came as a surprise to me. One of the initiatives in response to two theatres closing in Merlin Park due to water ingress was to open up the closed St. Finbar's ward. I did not hear the Minister or any Government politician express shock or ask the management why the ward was closed in the first place in the centre of excellence.

We have had various initiatives that actively promoted the private health system. The National Treatment Purchase Fund was introduced as a temporary measure but it has become a long-term measure. The special delivery unit was a temporary measure and as a consequence of that money is going into the private system. The then Minister, Mary Harney, declared an emergency at a time when there were just 495 patients on trolleys. While she was declaring that emergency she was simultaneously actively promoting co-location of private hospitals on public lands. The trolley crisis did not happen yesterday. It has happened over a period of years as a result of the policies of various Governments which believed that private medicine is better than public medicine and one way or another have actively supported that system.

If we come back to Galway city, there is a congested site and very bad decisions have been made that have added to that. The Minister knows the answer is to start planning for a new hospital in Merlin Park where we have 150 acres of land. In New York, Central Park has 800

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acres for a population of approximately 12 million. We have a population of 80,000 and we have one park with 150 acres yet we cannot see fit to build a hospital there. We have allowed bad decision after bad decision to add to a congested site in Galway. As a result of that the helicopter service moved and took over a public park for three to six months. Can one imagine that? Over three years later it is still in the public park.

Wards are closed and in addition there is a complete absence of primary care facilities. There is no primary care facility on the west side of the city in Galway and we have no mental health primary care facilities whatsoever. We have an ambulance service working from containers in Merlin Park. There was a recent scandal involving a child on a visit to Connemara who almost died while waiting for an ambulance that did not arrive for more than an hour. I could mention many other decisions.

The only thing that disappoints me about the Minister tonight is that he talked about giving a counter-narrative. There is no need for that. We know that nurses and doctors are doing their best on the ground. What we want are solutions and a recognition that the health service is sick. It is sick not because of the staff on the ground but because of what I have outlined, a sustained plan to undo it. As a result of that plan, mistake after mistake has been made. Unfortunately, I know this, professionally and personally, as a result of my family's experience. The cost of reviews, tribunals and independent case reviews is a matter I will raise again with the Minister in the future.

Let me return to the numbers on trolleys. Galway has the highest number today, that is, 38 out of the 541 people on trolleys. When the emergency was declared by the then Minister for Health and Children, Mary Harney, in 2006, there were, as already stated, 495 people on trolleys. On 3 January this year, 677 were on trolleys. Two years ago, the Government negotiated with the Independents in respect of a heartbeat in Waterford being more important than a heartbeat in Galway or any other part of this country rather than having them make a commitment based on what we all knew at that point, namely, that the health service is not fit for purpose.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I support the motion and commend Deputy Louise O'Reilly on introducing it.

I have been a Member of the Dáil for approximately three years and this is about the 30th debate on health during that time. This Government and its predecessor, led by Fine Gael, have had seven years in office. The Minister talks about a ten-year plan. We are three-quarters of the way through that period and circumstances are getting worse. There are people waiting for appointments, amounting to 670,000 or 680,000. Circumstances are getting worse despite the best will in the world.

I saw the Minister on the television during the Christmas period offering an apology. The Taoiseach also made statements. Apologising will not cure someone waiting on a hospital trolley for a few days, nor will it help the front-line staff who are trying to fight a fire day in, day out because the necessary infrastructure and system have not been put in place.

The GP contract has to be tidied up. This matter has gone on for so long. The Department is weaving in and out. I spoke to a doctor some days ago who explained very clearly the fact that he cannot pay staff to be going around the country and that this is why patients are sent into hospitals. One has to understand that position because the Department is trying to get away with murder.

In the programme for Government, there is a reference to an air ambulance but the Minister has not even carried out the review yet.

As the previous speaker pointed out, the infrastructure in Galway is inadequate. Two years ago, the Taoiseach admitted that Galway hospital, as a centre of excellence, is not fit for purpose. There are 150 acres of land available nearby. I attended a meeting a few months before Christmas at which the problems at Merlin Park were discussed. What is being done? Nothing. I am not blaming the Minister because there are people with responsibilities in the HSE who do not man up and take the decisions. They will not do the work that has to be done.

We also need help from unions. We need the machinery in place to ensure that primary care centres cater for more people. If one compares the hours of work of X-ray machines in private hospitals by comparison with public hospitals, one will note there is a totally different ball game.

It is worrying when one hears consultants saying that they have to decide who is the worst case in an intensive care unit, ICU. I accept that the Minister does not have a magic bullet to use. Unless a genuine effort is made, however, this matter will not be addressed. Unless the people in the Department making the decisions - and not only the Minister - step up to the mark, the problem will never be solved. People are dying because those to whom I refer are not making decisions.

Deputy Michael Harty: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion and I thank the Minister for sitting through the entire debate. The main issue in trying to solve the problem in our health service is trying to achieve political drive and buy-in. It is a huge problem and nobody underestimates the challenge to be faced in solving the problems in our health service. It is a considerable challenge but the Government must start to address it.

We have produced the Sláintecare report and have spoken about it many times at meetings of the health committee. The report contains the answers to our problems. Rather than haranguing the Minister, I wish to propose two solutions that could resolve the problem in a speedy manner. The first is to introduce elective-only hospitals. We have spoken about them at meetings of the health committee and we have spoken about how they work in Scotland. Building elective-only hospitals is a crucial solution to the health service crisis because it means people will be guaranteed planned procedures. They will have their procedures carried out and will not be competing against people from casualty and those requiring urgent care for beds. Building elective-only hospitals would streamline services. The hospitals would be attractive places to work. One would be able to attract staff, including nurses. The hospitals could be iconic features of the Irish health service.

The second point is that our model-two hospitals are being under-utilised. All the resources are being poured into our model-four hospitals. Our model-two hospitals could be diagnostic hubs. Unused theatre space in our model 2 hospitals is not being used. Outpatient departments in our model 2 hospitals are not being utilised fully. Certainly, they could be used as diagnostic centres. When the Minister is considering his reform programme, I ask him to concentrate on model 2 hospitals and maximise their capacity. He should also introduce elective-only hospitals. A hospital bed costs approximately €1 million. If we built three 100-bed elective-only hospitals, it would make a serious indent in our waiting lists. Waiting lists are the biggest problem facing the health service. The Minister should concentrate on those two issues.

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Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Minister said last week that it might be a good idea to build more hospitals. How long will that take, particularly in view of the planning process and everything else? Many of the people who need assistance and medical attention today will have passed on by the time those hospitals are built, I am sorry to say.

Kenmare Community Hospital, a new community hospital built a short few years ago, is only half open. Why? Dingle Community Hospital is only half open. The land for that hospital was given free of charge. Why is it not fully open? These are the questions the Minister needs to ask the HSE. Some of the rooms in Dingle hospital have offices where beds should be.

Why can we not pay more doctors, surgeons, nurses and staff in times of need to work through the night and over the weekends to clear the backlog? We are sending buses to Belfast in the North so patients can have cataract procedures. A second bus went up last week. Another is to go next week. Thirteen patients had procedures last Sunday. The patients, from Cork and Kerry, had to go from one end of the country to the other for a simple procedure. The staff involved are working over weekends and through the night. Why can we not pay staff to do the same here and utilise the hospitals we have?

In Tralee General Hospital, there are many wards closed for a long number of years. Why are they not being opened? What is the matter? Is it a question of staffing? We are being told today all our newly qualified nurses are going abroad. Many of them are going to England. The English health service is advertising for and taking on Irish nurses.

Almost 700 people were on trolleys in hospitals throughout the country on the same day, which is ridiculous. In the middle of last May, there were 17 people on trolleys in Tralee. That is not right. The Minister needs to get an answer to these questions.

There was a man in Tralee General Hospital last week who needed to step down to Killarney Community Hospital but his family would have had to sign a fair deal application form before he could do so. He was ready to go but it is a big step for a family to sign the fair deal application form because it may mean the patient will not be coming home anymore. I need an answer to this question to know why this happened.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The craziest statement a Minister for Health ever made was made by the current incumbent in the recent past. He said he wants to build more hospitals. He said he wants to make more beds available and that he will have to build more hospitals. I want to reinforce my argument. The Minister should come down to Kerry and we will show him the hospitals that are completely under-utilised. We have excellent people working in excellent hospitals but they are not being used to their maximum capacity. I am trying to introduce a new consultant to Kerry University Hospital in Tralee, County Kerry. It is ridiculous when we have an excellent surgeon who wants to perform procedures every week but is not allowed to do so. As my brother, Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, highlighted, Kenmare Community Hospital, one of the finest hospitals in all of Ireland, is completely underutilised. Instead of using Dingle Community Hospital for beds, which is what it was meant to be used for, offices were put into it. It is disgraceful. Elderly people from the Dingle Peninsula do not want to be in Killarney, Tralee or Kenmare. They are Dingle people and want to stay in their local community. Nobody can blame them for that.

I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this important motion before the House this evening and for highlighting this matter. We must talk about the underutilisation of our services. Yesterday,

again, I had to explain to a person in chronic pain who needed a knee operation the procedure of introducing them to a hospital in Belfast for that operation and how, when they come back, the Minister will give them the money for that treatment, meaning it will not cost them a penny. Does it make sense that the Minister will give a person the money to have a procedure done in a hospital in Belfast while, at the same time, it cannot be done in the South? It does not make sense.

The Minister has myriad managers and people below him. Will he get them to cop on and use the brains God gave them? They are supposed to be intelligent, with billions of euro at their disposal, but they are making a fine mess of it again. Does the Minister want to go down the same road as other Ministers and be dubbed as yet another person who could not make a hand of it? We expect better of the Minister. He has the opportunity and resources. Will he please use them properly?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on Deputy Catherine Murphy who is sharing time with Deputies Eamon Ryan and Healy.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: As winter arrives every year, so does the annual trolley crisis. By virtue of its definition, a crisis is something that cannot be predicted, yet nothing is more predictable than the annual wringing of hands while people at their most vulnerable face horrific conditions in our hospitals. It is not a crisis. It is as certain as a rainy day in January. We must stop describing it as a crisis. Instead, it must be seen as a symptom of the failure to properly build a functioning health system.

Today's trolley watch informed us that there are 5,041 people on hospital trolleys, lined up beside each other, positioned in corridors, doorways, cupboard spaces, kitchen facilities, etc. That is just not on. These are already stressed patients at their most vulnerable who are very often in places where they cannot get to sleep due to noise and interruptions. It must be acknowledged there are fantastic staff in the health services, doing their absolute best in unacceptable conditions. This is not a criticism of the staff.

If funding for home care packages and home help services were provided, it would certainly help people to get out of hospital quicker. Nursing Home Ireland, in a survey of its sector, identified 1,400 beds across 440 private and voluntary homes. On a temporary basis, this is the kind of initiative that could be taken to discharge people when they continue to need care in transition before they go home.

My colleague, Deputy Shortall, was the initiator of the Sláintecare report which offers a complete overhaul of our health service. It offers a vision for a functional health service in which we will not see such scenes with hospital trolleys. However, it has to be done in an ambitious way with the resources put in quickly to ensure we see some returns. The Minister could be the one where people look back and say he made the difference by being ambitious about this ten-year plan in the Sláintecare report. However, I do not see that ambition. All I see is this constant crisis of doing small pieces and gingerly moving things around the chessboard. It needs much more ambition to get this up and running.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Green Party supports the Sinn Féin motion. I also want to specifically thank Caitriona O'Neill and William Gallagher who wrote a letter to the Minister for Health on their father's tragic and sad case. I believe they did a huge public service in that regard. It is easy when one thinks of numbers to think in the abstract. When one brings it back

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down to the personal, which Caitriona O'Neill and William Gallagher did in describing what happened to their father, it makes it real, tangible and urgent. We all have seen it in our families, even if in different circumstances. The fact that Caitriona and William have real medical expertise in cancer and nursing care gives them real authority when they say it is not acceptable or right that a 75 year old man had to spend three days on a hospital trolley when he required palliative care and certain basic procedures but was unable to get them in that time. It is something by which we are all shamed and it should end.

It is about the provision of physical infrastructure and beds. However, we have to be careful and consider what kind of beds. Should they be respite, long-term or hospital care beds? We have to be strategic and smart in how we respond. We have to promote and advance investment in ehealth to ensure we get the best use of our resources. The lack of measurements and understanding is a problem. I have been told the HSE still operates in a fax-and-letter world. To ensure we use resources well, we have to embrace digital technologies, as well as the sharing and use of digital information, to be efficient in what we do. We need to do everything differently. We need multi-annual budgets, not annual budgets where there is a fight and tussle with finance. We need new commissioning groups to ensure the move towards primary and preventive care, which we all agree is the cornerstone of Sláintecare. This will mean it is not just hospitals running the entire system, but that there is oversight of how we allocate resources across the system to make it work. The trolley emergency crisis is the pinch point of an overall dysfunctional system. We need to change the entire system to get rid of that pinch point and ensure there are no further cases where the likes of Michael Gallagher are left for three days in a condition which no one can accept or allow.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I support this Private Members' motion on hospital trolleys. I also welcome the approval for the 40-bed modular unit for South Tipperary General Hospital announced last year. That unit is expected to be up and running before the end of autumn 2018. The county lost 90 beds in various cutbacks, including 50 beds when St. Vincent's hospital in Tipperary town was closed. We need another 50 beds in the county to cater for the demand for health services. We hope this will be addressed in the capital programme to be announced shortly.

Step-down and hospice facilities are vital to deal with the trolley issue. The Minister visited St. Theresa's District Hospital in Clogheen in September last year. There is a proposal for additional hospice room and step-down facilities in the hospital, for which the Minister indicated his support. That development was spearheaded by a local family whose father had passed away at the hospital. Massive fundraising activities took place with friends, neighbours, local and surrounding communities involved. Up to €400,000 was collected by the local community through Boston Scientific, the Friends of St. Theresa's Hospital and South Tipperary Hospice Movement. Plans for the development have been drawn up and approved. Planning permission has been granted and tenders have been advertised, submitted and approved. The builder has been appointed. This development is shovel-ready with €400,000 available for it. It would help deal with the overcrowding in the accident and emergency department of South Tipperary General Hospital. We need the Minister and the Department to come in behind that development and to fund its balance. Hopefully the capital programme, which I understand the Minister is about to announce in the next couple of weeks, will provide for this development at St. Theresa's Hospital, which is a very important local project, fronted by the local people, families and the local community. It is well worth supporting and we certainly hope that will be supported in the capital programme.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ba mhaith liom cúpla ráiteas a thabhairt don Aire mar gheall ar an mhéid atá ag titim amach i gContae na Mí. I have been given a couple of statements recently relating to the difficulties with the trolley count in Navan. I hear that people are stuck in the waiting room of the emergency department in Navan without getting access to the hospital itself. They are being forced to wait for long periods in that waiting room after having been triaged and treated. They are forced to wait with needles left in their arms while waiting for X-rays and for blood tests. Those people are forced to wait on their feet because there are no seats left in the waiting rooms for people trying to get into the hospitals. I heard a report about Drogheda to the effect that it was like a cattle market at the time. One man was obliged to sit in the waiting room for five hours after being triaged. The report stated that the waiting room was full to the brim, that three ambulances had just arrived and they were being forced to wait because they could not leave their patients behind unattended. Dr. Tom Ryan, president of the Irish Hospital Consultants Association, said that the HSE is rationing intensive care unit, ICU, beds. That means that staff members are forced to prioritise patients in serious need over other patients. The Irish Association for Emergency Medicine stated, on the trolley crisis and waiting list, that up to 350 people would die in Ireland in 2018 because of those two factors.

The trolley count in Navan has quadrupled in the space of one year from 500 people to 2,500. One should put those three sentences together and then consider that it is the objective of the Government and of the HSE to close the ICU and emergency department beds in Navan. I have only a couple of seconds left so I will make a point on the issue of there being no step-down facilities in County Meath whatsoever. Some years ago, I found that a person was forced to wait for 24 months after being clinically discharged from Navan. That person was left in a hospital bed for two years after the doctors said they could not help that person anymore because of blocked pathways. I found out in the last months that another person was forced to spend one year on a trolley after being clinically discharged. We had 24 people in hospital beds in our hospital this year who were clinically discharged. That is an entire wardful. We need step-down facilities in Meath to alleviate this crisis.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The figures are stark. Some 98,981 patients spent one night or more on a trolley last year. In Portlaoise alone, 3,203 people spent one night or more on a trolley. On Monday night of this week, 15 people were on trolleys in Portlaoise. There is a plan before the Minister to close Portlaoise emergency department, forcing patients to go to Tullamore, where there were 35 patients on trolleys on Monday, or to Tallaght, where there were a further ten, and that was one of the best recent days in Tallaght. Any proposal to close Portlaoise hospital and push people to other overcrowded hospitals will not work and these figures show it. The Taoiseach committed today, and I hope I heard him correctly, that no emergency department would be closed. I hope he adheres to that and I welcome that if that is the case. The people of Laois, Offaly and south Kildare who depend on Portlaoise hospital deserve better and the people of the State deserve better. Action is needed in four specific areas. We can all see what the problems are and we have to say what the solutions are. Sinn Féin is constantly putting forward costed solutions. There are 162 fewer hospital beds now than there were in 2008, yet the population of the State has increased dramatically.

We propose to immediately increase the number of beds by 500 at a cost of €153 million. That is in our alternative budget. There is a shortage of general practitioners, GPs, in the country, with a huge shortage in Laois. Sinn Féin would focus our health service more on primary care, catching people before they have to go to hospital and providing care in the community. We provide for the recruitment of 200 extra GPs in our budget. We would recruit 500 additional

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nurses each year over the next five years, and 800 consultants over a five-year period. We know it will take time and that we cannot do it in one or two years. We would also increase home care packages. I will say a quick word on this issue. We want to increase home help hours by 20% and we budgeted for that. It is in our costed proposals. We put forward those solutions in those four areas. Step-down facilities need to be utilised, such as at Abbeyleix hospital in my own constituency. The Minister is aware of this. We are meeting the committee for Abbeyleix hospital on Thursday night about this. As elderly patients in Portlaoise hospital could be discharged to that facility, Abbeyleix now needs to be expanded and upgraded.

My final words are on home help schemes. I had a case in my office this morning where a woman was granted one hour, seven mornings a week, to keep her in her home in a rural area on the side of the Slieve Bloom mountains. If that woman does not get that help, she will be in hospital. She was granted it in May and still has not received it. She has been put on a waiting list. Employ some of the unemployed people on the dole for home help and let us keep people in their local areas and local communities. It would cost approximately €100 a week. To put people in a home would cost €1,000 a week. Those are the economics.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: My constituency holds a shameful record as the location of the most overcrowded hospital in the State in 2017. University Hospital Limerick saw 8,869 people lying on trolleys last year. That is an absolute disgrace. University Hospital Limerick has been suffering from severe overcrowding for years. The situation is not just being caused by the flu outbreak. It has become a permanent feature in Limerick. The Government is doing nothing to help the patients in my constituency. The core of these problems stems from the downgrading of Ennis, Nenagh and St. John's hospitals and the establishment of the so-called centre of excellence in University Hospital Limerick, which has not worked. In May, I expressed my concern that the opening of the emergency department would see the overcrowding levels transfer to a new part of the hospital. Unfortunately, this has come to pass. I raised a topical issue at the time with the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath. I told him that the nurses on the ground were concerned that there was a plan to have 24 patients accommodated on trolleys and chairs from the get-go in the new emergency department. The Minister of State completely rebuffed this and rubbished my claims, dismissing any such suggestion, suggesting that there was no basis for the idea that 24 patients would be accommodated on trolleys in the new emergency department. This was wholly untrue. More than 24 patients are accommodated on trolleys and chairs in the new emergency department every single day. It is often double that number. It is a shocking situation. It is ongoing, shameful, and exposes a health service in crisis. I asked the Minister to intervene in the summer. Instead, he wrote an email to the manager of the hospital, outlining his unhappiness. That does not solve the problems. We do not need studies, reviews or investigations. We need extra money and extra beds to accommodate the patients. It is that simple. I hope the Minister is listening and that his Cabinet colleagues will reflect on this the next time they sit down and see how much tax they give away. They should think about the €335 million they gave away in October's budget and how that would help to address the crisis.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Today, 29 people of all ages who were in need of medical assistance were left lying in the corridors of the emergency department of Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda. Staff in the emergency department had to run the equivalent of an inpatient ward in the corridors of the emergency department, on top of all the patients presenting to the emergency department 24-7. Staff also had to endure this on top of staff shortages. Every single winter, the Government feigns shock and promises to tackle the situation, states it will

not happen again, that it will do better the next year and how this year was the worst year, as well as stating that it intends to improve next year. Why does the Government do that? I will give the history of why it happens repeatedly in County Louth. In 2010, the previous Fianna Fáil-led Government closed 97 acute beds in Louth County Hospital. It would not listen to public concern and warnings that Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda would not be able to cope and there would be overcrowding. That Government bulldozed ahead and closed the beds. Only 40 beds were opened in Drogheda to compensate for this. I acknowledge that additional beds were provided there recently. However, that only gets us back to the position we were in 2010. Despite that, in 2012, the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government again targeted public provision of beds in County Louth. They removed the long stay and respite beds in the college hospital in Drogheda and ignored massive public opposition to that move. A total of 10,000 people took to the streets of Drogheda to protest about it and the Government was told that it would compound matters. To this day, elderly who are medically fit cannot be discharged from Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital because no home help, respite care and home care packages and housing adaptation grants are available. One problem has compounded another. To add insult to injury, we were promised a 100-bed unit in St. Mary's, Drogheda, after the hospital was closed. Six years later, not one brick has been laid. The Government should not feign shock every year at the trolley numbers. They are the result of policy and until that policy changes, nothing will improve.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): I am sorry the Minister had to leave but he has asked me to make the closing contribution. I thank Members for their contributions, some of which I listened to before I arrived in the Chamber. The Minister and I have taken notes.

It is clear from the debate that the House shares our commitment and determination, and that of the Government, to do better for our patients. Despite the genuine efforts of politicians, health service managers and front-line staff, our emergency departments are under pressure this January. What we are seeing in our hospitals right across the country is a symptom of long-standing and fundamental deficits within our broader health system. I have listened carefully to the debate and I believe we need to move forward now and implement the three key priorities of Government: implement the findings of the health system capacity review; progress the reforms set out in *Sláintecare*; and make a decisive shift to primary care.

While improving hospital services is essential, we cannot underestimate the importance of moving away from a hospital-centric model of care. We need to recognise the interrelated, interdependent nature of the environment within which public hospitals operate. As the Minister pointed out, the Government is committed to delivering more non-acute care within the primary care sector. This means that better care which is close to home can be provided for communities around the country. To this end, we have invested significantly in our primary care infrastructure providing modern well-equipped primary care centres. This will allow our primary care teams and GPs to be located together and will enable the delivery of a wider range of integrated primary care services. Currently, 110 centres are operational, with a further 18 expected to become operational throughout 2018. There will be a continued focus on advancing those 60 locations which are under construction or at various planning stages. Significant investment in additional staffing and service reorientation has also been made in the primary care therapy areas. Dedicated funding since 2016 is supporting the recruitment of additional posts in speech and language therapy provision and psychology services, both with a particular focus on children. Most recently, budget 2018 provided funding for additional occupational therapists. The

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new primary care centres are equipped to facilitate the new primary care staff that are being recruited. The centres will, into the future, be capable of facilitating additional new staff that may be required as the plans for further shifts of activity to primary care are implemented.

Another measure outlined by the Minister is the importance of greater access to diagnostics in the community. Access to diagnostics for GPs in the community will alleviate some pressures on the hospital system to provide such services. That is why we have put in place enhanced community diagnostic programmes for ultrasound and X-ray. Since 2015, the HSE developed a service whereby a GP can refer medical card and GP visit card adult patients for ultrasound scans currently in ten primary care sites across the west and south. By the end of November 2017, more than 19,000 scans had been undertaken, which exceeded the expected activity in 2017 by nearly 15%, and the onward referral rate to a hospital setting for further radiological-medical investigations increased by between 15% and 20%. This low onward referral rate demonstrates the success of the initiative and highlights the effectiveness of having direct access to ultrasound available for GPs and is further relieving pressure on hospital services and decreasing waiting lists. Currently four primary care centres have on-site X-ray facilities available and the Minister has previously highlighted the success of the Castlebar centre, for example, where the services are run under the governance of the radiology department in Mayo University Hospital. There are now no waiting lists in Mayo for X-ray services which are a vast improvement on the waiting list figure of 517 for this service in the county in April 2017 before the start of the service.

I understand from the HSE that future primary care centres will have rooms that meet radiology specifications and may provide X-ray services to patients. Further phased expansion of the community diagnostic programmes in primary care sites will be undertaken in 2011. We must continue to build on these developments and we must further seek to expand our primary care provision. A key element of this will be negotiation of a new modern responsive contract for GP services. As the Minister for Health stated earlier, the provision of a €25 million primary care fund from budget 2018 reflects the commitment of the Government to ensuring that primary care sector now and in the future is equipped to deliver modern, responsive and effective health care provision for all in our society.

With the Sláintecare report, for the first time, we have political consensus on the vision and direction of travel for our health services and as such a solid platform for reform. The Government has affirmed its commitment to implementing a significant programme of reform, as outlined in the report, and this will set out our ambitions for the next decade and concrete plans for the immediate years ahead. As outlined by the Minister earlier, this detailed work will be overseen by a new Sláintecare programme office.

I am delighted that the health system capacity review is complete and will be brought to Government next week. This will provide the evidence we need to make important decisions regarding hospital capacity at individual, regional and national level. The analysis carried out as part of the review indicates that given current capacity constraints and demographic projections for the next 15 years, we will have to invest in capacity across all aspects of the health service, including beds in acute hospitals and across the community. It is important that there be full appreciation of our demographic profile. The rate of increase in the cohort aged over 65 is considerable. This increase is happening quickly and steeply and will become even more pronounced over the next 15 years. The following are key headline projections from the analysis of the period 2016-2031. There was a 12% growth in overall population, with a 59% growth in the age 65 and over population and 95% growth in the age 85 and over population.

We will, therefore, need to put the supports in place for much greater numbers of older people in the future, both home care and residential care. We will need better supports in primary care to manage chronic disease and multi-morbidity.

Without significant reform of and investment in community-based services, acute care will continue to be the default option for the majority of care needs, and our hospital services will become even more unsustainable. The Minister asked me to point out that more than 750,000 additional home care package hours will be provided this year. The findings of the review will provide a basis for determining both the extent of capacity requirements over the next 15 years and the type of capacity that is needed. It is important that this be undertaken in a planned way and the new national development plan will give us the vehicle for doing this.

Reform alone will not fix all the problems that exist. People are living longer and are healthier than ever before, as many Members have said, and this is something to be celebrated. In addressing the many challenges facing our hospitals, we must not lose sight of the fact the best way to address these challenges is to ensure that citizens have as healthy a lifestyle as possible. In 2013, the Government launched the Healthy Ireland framework. The vision of the framework is to address the threats to public health posed by issues such as obesity, smoking, alcohol abuse and physical inactivity. Significant progress has been made in implementing the framework since its launch, with the development of a suite of national policies and strategies, including A Healthy Weight For Ireland, the national obesity policy and action plan, and Get Ireland Active!, the national physical activity plan.

It is vital also to remember that health is not just the responsibility of the Department of Health and the HSE; it requires a whole-of-Government and whole-of-society approach. Since the launch of the Healthy Ireland framework, we have established a number of cross-sectoral partnerships with other Government Departments, agencies, NGOs, business and the private sector, and the voluntary sector in order to drive the Healthy Ireland agenda. We are seeing the results of this work on the ground in the success of national and local initiatives such as Operation Transformation, park runs, the Great Dublin Bike Ride and a host of other initiatives. I can assure the House this progress will continue in the months and years to come.

I know we all wish for a better health service and improved hospital services. I would like to reassure my colleagues this remains a priority for this Government and we will continue to work hard and stay focused on this issue. I have listened carefully to the concerns and issues that have been raised by Members this evening. As a public representative in my constituency and in my work as a politician, I have heard individual stories and listened to the individual problems on the ground. I think it is beholden on us all, no matter what party we are in, or for those in no party, to do our utmost to continue to work together to resolve many of the issues that have been highlighted in this debate. I thank Deputy O'Reilly for raising this very important issue. I am delighted the Government has decided not to object to the motion.

On a personal note, I ended up in accident and emergency on Christmas Day with my husband, who was taken very seriously ill. I have to say I was overwhelmed by the care given by the nurses and doctors, and even more so by the general staff who were there to give out the tea and the sandwiches, and so on. In general, we have a fantastic health service with fantastic people working in it. It is unfortunate that, in 2018, we still have people on trolleys filling our accident and emergency units and maybe not getting the service they deserve in a timely manner. It is time to put political views aside and to work together to resolve any issues we have into the future. I know Deputy Harty, who is a doctor, and the other Members present all feel

the same.

I thank Members for their participation in the debate. I again thank Deputy O'Reilly. I want to express the Minister's sincere apologies that he could not remain until the end of the debate.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I take the opportunity to express the hope that the Minister of State's husband makes a full recovery and that he is in good health. I echo her comments in regard to the hospital staff. There is no doubt about it and all Deputies have reflected on the fact the quality of staff in our health service is extraordinary right through the ranks.

The Minister of State said we need to set politics aside. I have always been opposed to that idea. People sometimes equate partisan point-scoring with politics but they are not the same thing. I and my party have a political analysis of our health service and what is wrong with it. We make no apologies for that and we will not be setting it aside for anyone. This does not mean we cannot co-operate with Government and Opposition Deputies in trying to find areas of common ground. However, I believe we have a different analysis of the manner in which a health service should function.

It is likely that the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, and the Minister, Deputy Harris, have heard many Deputies from across Ireland speaking about the situation in their localities regarding people on trolleys. The Ministers, with the Department and HSE staff, will be particularly aware of the situation in Cork given the landmark and significant decisions that were taken there in recent weeks. The scale of the trolley crisis in Cork is enormous. Some 9,150 people spent time on trolleys in Cork from January to November of last year. On stopping somebody on the street in Cork, one would be as likely to find they had been on a trolley in the last 12 months as to have been at a county final or at any number of big public events. The numbers we are talking about affected every community in the city and county, and probably nearly every family. Even today, there are 31 people on trolleys in Cork University Hospital and another ten in Mercy University Hospital, and it was quite a bit more than that on other occasions, with the number reaching 60 at times in recent weeks.

This is nothing short of a national scandal. An item that underlines this is that we learned in recent weeks that 30 patients were transferred from Cork University Hospital to a private hospital. This is a clear mark of the failure of the HSE to deal with the crisis and the failure of its policies. The problems in our health sector have risen to extraordinary levels and our public system is at or beyond breaking point. Léiríonn sé an faillí inár gcóras sláinte, an faillí i bpola-saithe an Rialtais agus an faillí i ndéileáil leis an ghéarchéim inár gcuid oispidéal. It also means that further funds will have been diverted from the public system to the private system which, in different guises, has been a reliable pressure valve for the Government in recent years. Of course, I am glad that people were treated but this is akin to the HSE declaring it can no longer cope and that the public system can no longer cope.

There is a cost to this, however, and we need to know from the Minister what this is going to cost the public system. There are budgets but these have been exceeded in recent years. Already, in January, we are spending money on private care in private hospitals. Clearly, it is essential that people get the treatment they need but it is utterly shocking that the authorities have essentially accepted that the capacity does not exist in the public system. Indeed, the fact there are private hospitals operating and thriving is further proof that the public system is in crisis. Business people have seen a gap in the market and they see the public system is beyond

creaking and is collapsing, and they know that people do not have confidence in it. That is truly an indictment of Government policy over many years.

I commend Deputy O'Reilly on what is a very detailed motion which outlines the actions that need to be taken. While I welcome that the Minister intends to support it, nonetheless, I do not believe the Government when it says it will implement Sláintecare. That is not to say I do not believe the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, or the Minister, Deputy Harris, but I simply do not believe that Fine Gael and the Government will ultimately throw their weight behind this and make the changes that are necessary. This is not a new problem. Twelve years ago to this day there were 380 people lying on hospital trolleys and that was under a Fianna Fáil Government with plenty of money. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have had almost a century to establish a proper health care system, free at the point of access, but they have not done so. For me, that is a point of ideology and due to the fact they have simply never truly believed in the kind of public system that I believe the public demands and deserves.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I remember very well former Minister for Health and Children Mary Harney declaring trolley numbers a national emergency - a crisis to be faced with all the resources and resolve possible. That was in 2006, when trolley numbers reached a record 469, and I was here, as my party's Dáil leader and spokesperson on health, shadowing Ms Harney. On 2 January of this year, two weeks ago today, the trolley figures reached a new high, of 677, across our public hospital network. That says everything about the "resolve" of a succession of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-led Governments regarding our health services over all those years. Almost 100,000 people experienced at least one overnight stay on a hospital trolley in 2017. Many of these were aged and infirm, some were children and all were in hospital for bed admissions.

I note the recent acknowledgment by the Minister, Deputy Harris, that more hospital beds were needed, hopefully with all of the staff and other resourcing that any worthwhile increase would require. I remember a series of former holders of his portfolio throwing cold water on that obvious need when I raised it on the floor of this Chamber time after time. It is bizarre to me that some voices in quarters have felt compelled to welcome the Minister's recent commentary but that is where we are - a Minister for Health has at last recognised or at least publicly acknowledged that more beds are needed and, judging from his remarks, more hospitals.

In the short time available to me, might I urge the Minister to consider re-examining the potential of some of the smaller hospital units that his party and Fianna Fáil before it stripped of key services? The potential of these hospital sites to contribute to the overall address of current inpatient numbers and the access difficulties presenting is obvious to some of us, including qualified practitioners.

I am particularly mindful of the hospital where I was born, where my wife was born and where our four daughters were born. Monaghan hospital and hospitals like it can play a greater role in the overall provision of hospital services, relieving current stress points in related hospitals and elsewhere within the system.

Our motion calls for the reopening of all hospital beds closed during the so-called austerity years. We also call on the Government, within a comprehensive list of actions, for increased investment for transitional care beds, adequate step-down facilities, home care packages and home help hours to ensure that all patients who can be are moved to more appropriate care settings or safely returned home.

16 January 2018

I commend the Sinn Féin motion, not just for the Minister's support this evening, but for his acceptance and implementation at the earliest possible time.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It falls to me to close the debate. I thank the Deputies who contributed, both those who spoke in support of our motion as well as those who, while not necessarily supporting it, did not speak in opposition to it either. In particular, I thank the members of Fianna Fáil and other parties for lending their support to the Sinn Féin call for a pay commission to deal specifically with health service workers. That monumental and fantastic decision sends a clear message to health care workers about who is on their side.

The main enemy to progress on this matter is the notion that the crisis is somehow inevitable. It is not. I urge the Minister to speak to people in his party and ask them to put their weight behind the public health service rather than the private sector in other countries, to stop producing leaflets asking people to go abroad and to fight for a decent public health service. There is an alternative and Sinn Féin has that alternative. We have worked it out and it is fully costed. We have set aside more money than has the Government because that is what is necessary. I will keep saying that for as long as the Taoiseach keeps getting it wrong. It is my pleasure to correct him.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: As the motion is agreed unanimously, comhghairdeas.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.15 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 17 January 2018.