



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 8 Feabhra 2018

Thursday, 8 February 2018

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The first question is in the name of Deputy Billy Kelleher. The Deputy has 30 seconds to introduce it.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Is the question grouped?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Questions Nos. 1 and 2 are grouped.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Do we have 30 seconds each?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): No, you do the introduction, but there is double the length of time for the answer.

HSE Funding

1. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health to outline his views on whether the HSE will be within budget in 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6586/18]

2. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health to outline the position regarding a potential financial shortfall for the HSE of up to €881 million before the end of 2018; his plans to rectify this; if more funding will be forthcoming; if hospitals will have to increase stretch income targets to meet the shortfall; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6473/18]

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Will the Minister for Health outline his views on whether the HSE will be within its budget in 2018? I am asking in view of the commentary by the director general of the HSE and the concerns consistently expressed from this side of the House on the

aspirational elements of the budget that incorporate savings identified. Clearly, these elements will not be delivered. Indeed, it is already being said that the targets will be singularly challenging to deliver and that some are in fact more strategic and long-term in nature. Already, sizable amounts of savings must be realised to deliver the services outlined in the service plan.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 and 2 together.

I thank Deputy Kelleher and Deputy O'Reilly for their questions. We had an opportunity to engage extensively on this matter yesterday. The meeting involved myself and the director general of the HSE. Anyway, I welcome an opportunity to engage again this morning.

As I said yesterday, the need for effective financial management remains crucial as the health service deals with a larger and older population, more acute health and social care requirements, increased demand for new and existing drugs and the rising costs of health technology. The costs associated with these service pressures will increasingly need to be managed not solely through increased Exchequer allocations but through improved efficiencies, productivity and value from within the funding base in 2018 and beyond as well. This is the norm in other health services. It is probably the norm in most businesses and public services. People are asked to ensure they get value for money. If anything, it is more important at a time when we are increasing budgets that we do not get back into the Celtic tiger spiral of taxpayers' money being spent without ensuring that it delivers decent outcomes for our patients.

The 2018 national service plan set out a budget of over €14.5 billion for the HSE, the highest budget ever allocated. The health budget was increased by over €600 million on 2017, a substantial additional level of funding by any objective standard. The amount allocated follows an extensive process of engagement between my Department and the HSE that considers the funding requirements as submitted by the HSE and the fiscal position available to the Government. These engagements are a normal part of the budgetary process and occur with agencies throughout Government.

As I remarked yesterday, it is simply that the process for health is more transparent since the director general and myself write to each other. I imagine someone may wish to find out whether IDA Ireland asked for money or this or that agency asked for money. Obviously, often-times agencies ask for more funding than the amount available. All public bodies put forward spending proposals but all such bodies, including the HSE, are required to operate within the amounts proposed by Government and determined by the Dáil.

While increased resources contribute to health service improvement, there are always ways in which improvements can be achieved within current resources. The HSE has my full support in achieving these improvements as part of our shared reform agenda.

Since I have come to office, the allocation to the Health Service Executive has increased by €1.4 billion or 10.6%. More resources are always welcome in contributing to the development of services but there is a responsibility on the HSE to seek greater value from the substantial existing resources at its disposal as well. Deputies heard yesterday from the director general and the deputy director general that they are up for the challenge as well. They accept that there is a need to ensure every euro counts in the delivery of health care.

The HSE 2018 service plan notes that provision of the level of services and activities will require the delivery of value improvements totalling €346 million. The HSE will lead on that

aim, including a corporate value programme. It is focused on cost reductions and savings, including procurement savings and agency conversion, something we have talked about for some time but which needs to be delivered. It also identifies savings and cost reductions across all corporate operations. This might include better control of central administrative costs, such as travel costs, and better management of supplies. I imagine our citizens think these aims are appropriate, normal and good practice.

The Department of Health will work with the HSE within a shared governance and oversight framework. As Deputy Kelleher correctly stated, this will be a multi-year strategic initiative, because we need to get it right. The funding of our health service, and every health service, is a challenge and therefore we need to drive value. The objective is to identify and implement savings from improved productivity and changes in models of care or policies.

Health services to the public will not be reduced in 2018. The services to be provided in 2018 are as set out clearly in the national service plan. All levels within the plan are either equal to the level delivered in 2017 or, in many cases, higher than the level delivered in 2017. For example, as set out in the national service plan, the budget for acute hospital income will be set at €44 million less than the planned levels for 2017 and, as such, it contains no stretch targets. That addresses Deputy O'Reilly's question about the stretch targets. The additional funding provided in budget 2018 for new developments will support new or expanded levels of services throughout priority service areas. I expect the HSE to operate within the funding provided to it in 2018. The HSE has signed up to do precisely that.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Minister used the expression "typically equal to or higher than planned or delivered" services in 2017. That does not give us much confidence in view of the fact that there is considerable pent-up demand. We have vast waiting lists. Large numbers of people are consistently on trolleys in our emergency departments day in, day out. There has been an extraordinary increase in the number of outpatients on waiting lists. Throughout the general health services there is an inability to deliver what is required of the services in terms of the changes in demographics, the changing nature of health and the provision of health care.

The Minister refers to funding being typically equal to or higher than what was planned or delivered in 2017. Last year, 2017, was not exactly a great year in terms of delivery. We are keen to see major improvements. In the budget we have provided for €346 million in savings to be identified to fund the delivery services. Many people, including me, maintain that is simply not possible.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Deputy Kelleher can add my name to that list. Of course it is not possible and the Minister knows that well. The Minister published a plan knowing he did not have the money to fulfil it.

Several questions leap out following the Minister's statement. The Minister referred to transparency. In truth, that this information is in the public domain is down to freedom of information requests from Martin Wall. The Minister need not pat himself on the back for having information dragged out of him - it was not volunteered. It is in the public domain because of freedom of information requests.

The Minister referred to value for money savings and targets. He has a target for the money. How much does the Minister believe he will save on travel costs for administrative staff? Certainly, he will not save on travel costs for staff who are providing front-line services in the

community. Those people have to travel; it is a necessity for the job. Is the Minister suggesting some people are over-claiming on travel? Is there a view in the Department of Health that over-claiming is taking place for travel?

The Minister referred to agency conversion and how it feeds directly into the recruitment strategy. The recruitment strategy is not working. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation has said it – the Minister need not take my word for it. How does the Minister intend to convert? What is the plan? What are the targets? What amount of money is set beside each of these targets? How will we know? Will we be relying on freedom of information requests this time next year?

Deputy Simon Harris: When I write a letter, I am aware of the law of the land with regard to freedom of information. If I did not want processes to be transparent, I would not write letters. Presumably, the same is the case for anyone in my Department or anyone in the health service. I know some people, rightly, will use what this House has passed. I know how the law works. It is an entirely transparent process that I set out clearly in writing, subject to freedom of information, for everybody to see what I expect. What was yesterday described as an extraordinary letter was actually a terribly unextraordinary letter. It basically told an agency that we had given a lot of money to it this year, it needs to live within its budget, that is the norm for every other agency and that is what it has signed up to do. A service plan is meant to be a list of what one is going to do in 2018, not a list of what one cannot do.

I take Deputy Kelleher's points, particularly about access. There is a need to do it much better. However, in the case of, say, home care packages, 750,000 more hours of home care will be provided by the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, and the HSE in 2018. The budget for the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, has been doubled. We have already seen in-patient day-case waiting lists fall for five of the past six months. I expect that to continue right throughout 2018.

I am glad the Deputy agrees with me on the need for more capacity in the health service. That was not Government policy between 2007 and 2010, when beds were taken out of the health service. We now plan to put them back in.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: It was also Government policy in 2011 and 2012.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is correct. It was the same in 2011 and 2012. The Taoiseach, when he was Minister for Health, reversed that policy.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am delighted the Minister and Deputy Kelleher agree with me. I have been saying it since 2005.

Deputy Simon Harris: I know Deputy O'Reilly gets upset when I agree with her. I would not want to destroy her street credibility by doing so.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I have no problem with that when I am right.

Deputy Simon Harris: However, we need more beds in the health service. We will fund that through the capital plan which will be seen in the coming weeks.

Deputy O'Reilly is correct on the issue of recruitment and retention. That is why we have asked the public sector pay commission to look at strategies for recruitment and retention. This process was welcomed by the nurses' organisations and one to which they will contribute. My

Department will also contribute to it. I hope the public sector pay commission will accept there is a challenge, particularly with the retention of medical staff.

On the issue of travel costs, there is no impact on front-line staff. I was referring to reducing corporate costs. Every agency should be able to try to find savings of 1% or 2%. Every household can do that.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I do not accept the Minister's points about the delivery of service. The fact of the matter is that there is a significant demographic change occurring and huge demands will continue to be placed on the health service. This year, the health service will find it has not got the capacity, both financially and within itself, to deliver on these demands. We have seen this already at the start of the year with trolley numbers. January 2018 was the worst month ever for numbers of people waiting on trolleys. Beyond that, in the whole area of elective surgery, as well as for outpatient and inpatient appointments, I do not believe there is sufficient funding in place, even with the NTPF, to deal with and get to a situation where people can be seen in a timely manner. These are my observations with which many of those who put together the HSE service plan also concur. The savings identified will not be achieved.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am delighted people are finally agreeing with what I have been saying for the past 13 years. I think I can go home now as my job is done.

The Minister is not going to hit value for money targets by reducing travel costs. To suggest he will is insulting to people.

Deputy Simon Harris: It is not just in that area.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I do not know of people in senior management, or at any level, in the HSE who actually drive around to claim expenses. I do not believe that happens.

Deputy Simon Harris: I did not say that.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am happy the Minister has confirmed it will not affect people on the front line delivering services.

Saying something is transparent because it can be obtained under freedom of information is an issue on which we will eternally disagree. If it was a freedom of information request, it would not be there.

The correspondence shows there is a tension of sorts between the Department and the HSE. It arises from the fact the HSE has stated clearly it cannot fulfil the delivery of services. We also see the Department having a hand in trying to change the language the HSE uses. I found that quite disturbing. If the HSE brings a problem to the attention of the Department, the Department should be trying to work with it to address it, not trying to get the HSE to reframe the problem to ensure it does not look like such a significant issue.

Deputy Simon Harris: Deputy Kelleher rightly identified the fact we had a significant number of people on hospital trolleys in January. I pointed out that one of the contributing factors was the decision to reduce hospital beds. That is why we are going to put in more hospital beds. We already have opened 170 and we will open 300 this year. I expect the capacity review will be funded through the capital plan process.

I do not believe the debate about health care can always be just about money. If it were, then

the problems in the health service would have been fixed many years ago. The idea that the answer to every challenge in the health service is to write another cheque misses the point. It has to be about value for money also. I know Deputy Kelleher accepts there are ways of getting better value for money for the taxpayer through savings in procurement, the use of supplies and corporate costs. These are used in other health services, such as the National Health Service, NHS. Members say they want to create a NHS-type system. This is the norm in many of the health services Members would like to create here.

Just to disagree with Deputy O'Reilly in case she gets too carried away, nobody suggested everything is going to be achieved in the value for money programme through saving money on travel. It is one of several elements through which one can make savings at corporate level. She knows this from her long time around the health sector. One can save money through procurement and supplies. One can save money in the same way any business or public service does without impacting on services.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I asked the Minister for the targets but there are none.

Deputy Simon Harris: The HSE made it clear yesterday that it will put in place a value improvement programme. We are asking people to find value for money in the context of not cutting but dramatically increasing their budgets. The health budget has increased by €1.4 billion since I became Minister. The health budget will continue to increase year-on-year. That has to be matched-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Yet trolley numbers are increasing too.

Deputy Simon Harris: That has to be matched by reform.

Why does Deputy O'Reilly never comment on 479,000 people missing outpatient appointments? Why does she never comment on the fact that inpatient day-case lists have gone down for five of the past six months? There are good things happening in our health service too.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I do comment on those positive developments.

Eating Disorders

3. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health if he is satisfied with the level of mental health supports in place for persons with eating disorders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6587/18]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): An individual who has concerns about eating disorders should attend his or her general practitioner, GP, in the first instance for primary care screening assessment and examination. The GP may then make recommendations, which may include referral to the secondary care mental health services for full eating disorder assessment.

Nationally, outpatient mental health services for adults presenting with eating disorders are provided by the general adult mental health teams. Similarly, children and adolescents with eating disorders are treated by the child and adolescent mental health service, CAMHS, teams. Specialist training in the treatment of eating disorders has been provided to clinicians within those teams as part of the national clinical programme in eating disorders.

Although most people with eating disorders do not require inpatient care, where an individual's needs are more acute, inpatient admission may be required following the recommendation of the consultant psychiatrist or physician. When the risk is primarily physical and the person is in need of physical safety monitoring while re-feeding, admission will be to a HSE acute hospital under the care of a physician or paediatrician. Currently, there are specialist eating disorder services for adults, including inpatient bed provision, at St. Vincent's University Hospital in Dublin, and for children and young people at Linn Dara services also in Dublin.

The HSE is currently developing a clinical programme in eating disorders. The HSE recognises that, although eating disorders are managed and treated by existing mental health services, these services may need support, particularly with high risk, severe and complex presentations. The clinical programme will help to develop greater capacity to manage people with eating disorders in the community to reduce the likelihood of acute hospital treatment.

As part of this programme, a collaborative model of care was formally launched in January 2018. This includes a stepped model of care delivery, a specialist training programme for existing outpatient mental health services, a new dedicated national eating disorder network, specialised inpatient eating disorder programmes within key existing psychiatric units nationally, and additional levels of care provided by the dedicated eating disorder network teams.

When this new collaborative model of care is implemented, there will be a national network of specialist eating disorder community team-based services and access to an enhanced level of special treatment beds. New clinical posts are being developed as part of this clinical programme. Recruitment for these posts will be advanced in 2018.

Deputy James Browne: The Minister of State set out a wonderful theory of what is meant to happen in mental health services where one can go to a GP and be referred on to CAMHS. However, the waiting lists to see a psychiatrist, psychologist or dietician in CAMHS in some areas are so bad, the service may as well not exist. The Minister of State referred to Linn Dara. It was shut down for several months last year because of staffing problems. I read the new recommendations for the stepped model of care delivery. While it reads fantastically, where will the Government get the staff for it? The Minister of State spoke about providing more mental health teams when the majority are underpopulated, some significantly so. Under the current model, there are 500 mental health nursing vacancies. From where will we fill those? Right now, 867 staff are eligible to retire and a further 885 will be eligible to retire within the next five years.

Plans and theories are great but, in practice, people are not getting the help they need with eating disorders. The rate of eating disorders is exploding. Practical solutions are needed.

Deputy Jim Daly: I accept what the Deputy is saying. Of our population, 5% will suffer from eating disorders. That is a large cohort. Anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any mental health issue, with a figure of 10% attributed to it.

The Deputy referred to staffing challenges. I am acutely aware of them. More than 2,000 posts in mental health services have been approved since 2012, but we have only been able to fill 1,300 of those. It is not a question of resources or money. The Government can only control so many factors. We must examine a new way of working. For that reason, I have asked the HSE to explore the avenue of teletechnology and telepsych, through which we can deliver mental health services online and in new ways. A consultant psychiatrist does not need to go to

every crossroads and spend half the day travelling. Mental health is one of those areas in which we can be imaginative and more creative. We can examine ways of doing that. Among others, this is one of the initiatives that I am pursuing with the HSE to try to deal with the recruitment issue. I am confident that we will make progress.

I understand that there is pressure regarding the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, waiting teams, but 114 assistant psychologists have been recruited. We must introduce a lower level of intervention. Not everyone who attends a GP with a mental health issue needs to be referred to a consultant psychiatrist. That has been the practice for years, but it is not necessary. We are in the process of building a lower level of intervention that will deal with many of these issues.

Deputy James Browne: Some 34% of mental health nurses are either eligible to retire now or within five years. By last August, 93 additional mental health nursing posts were filled. The issue is not being tackled. There are consistent criticisms from judges, in particular High Court judges. Anyone with a serious eating disorder is being made to travel to the UK, which has a further impact on people's mental health issues. Families must travel over just to see them. The President of the High Court, Mr. Justice Peter Kelly, has highlighted an oncoming issue arising from Brexit. All of the enforcement of children getting treatment in the UK - there must be two enforcement orders, one from the Irish High Court and a complementary one in the UK - is implemented under EU regulations and legislation, which could fall away. It will be a major crisis. As Mr. Justice Kelly pointed out, this issue is growing so quickly that it must now be financially, if not morally, viable - it was always moral - to provide these services in this country. We cannot keep exporting the treatment of vulnerable people to the UK. They need their treatments to be available in this country.

Deputy Jim Daly: If we enhance community supports and services as well as increase and make more widely available lower level supports, we can prevent many of these cases escalating to the acute level. For too long, too much of the debate and focus has been on the extreme end of mental health. We need to build a community base, give assistant psychologists and therapists an increased role and deal with these issues as they emerge rather than after they have moved to being acute. Putting all of the focus on the acute end and building with that in mind is not the solution. We must reorient our direction and planning towards community supports and community teams, which is the policy that we are pursuing.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Before we move to Question No. 4, there are six and a half minutes for each question - 30 seconds for a Deputy to introduce, two minutes for a Minister to reply and then four minutes overall for a supplementary discussion between the Minister and the Deputy. While I was in the Chair yesterday, I allowed a run-over on a number of questions, which meant that, although we should have been taking at least 13 or 14 questions, we took two fewer. In fairness to Deputies' colleagues, who often sit in the Chamber for quite a while only to not be able to have their questions answered, I appeal to everyone to obey these rules as best as possible. I never like to inhibit debate because doing that would not be a good thing, but if Members remember the time slots, I will be fair to everyone.

Hospital Services

4. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Health the specific services that will be provided under the new schedule with particular reference to the day hospital, diagnostics,

community care and minor injuries units further to his commitment to fully reopen Our Lady's hospital, Cashel; and the timeframe involved in bringing the accommodation and facilities at the hospital back into full use. [6472/18]

Deputy Michael Lowry: I appreciated the Minister's commitment on a visit to Cashel to reopen Our Lady's County and Surgical Hospital.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for asking this important question and for consistently raising the issue of how we can better use Our Lady's hospital in Cashel to support the care needs of people in Tipperary while also working hand in glove with what is being done in Clonmel. I am pleased that we are making progress on the modular build in Clonmel. The next phase must determine what more can be done in Cashel. If we can get the investment in Clonmel with its extra 40-bed modular unit right, consider how to build a permanent extension to that hospital and then complement that by providing more services in Cashel that would alleviate pressure on Clonmel, we can make a meaningful difference to health services for the people of Tipperary. This is something for which Deputy Lowry has been advocating for some time.

With the Deputy and other Oireachtas colleagues, I visited Our Lady's hospital in Cashel on 13 September last year. It was clear that there was considerable potential to provide additional services that could benefit not only that community, but also Clonmel by alleviating pressure in its hospital. The campus in Cashel provides a wide range of services, from those operating on a 24-7 basis to those that use the campus as a base to provide care in peoples' homes. Community services play a significant role in supporting older adults living at home and those who have been discharged from hospital with ongoing non-acute care needs, and also in preventing admissions to hospital in the first place.

HSE social care works closely with its colleagues in South Tipperary General Hospital to facilitate hospital discharges as appropriate. In terms of getting people home, many of these services are based in Cashel.

As a result of my visit with Deputy Lowry to Cashel, I allocated €450,000 for this year to develop community services for older people in south Tipperary further. That money is in addition to funding that I have provided for a 40-bed modular extension to South Tipperary General Hospital. With this additional funding, the HSE at local level is working on a plan to deliver a further range of services in Cashel to support older people in the south Tipperary area. I will provide the Deputy with more details in a moment.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank the Minister. He will have that opportunity.

Deputy Michael Lowry: A task force is working within the HSE against the background of three empty wards in the hospital. That unit is capable of holding 35 beds. It has been refurbished at a cost to the HSE of approximately €13 million, but it is unoccupied. This is happening in Cashel when, down the road in Clonmel, there are trolleys in a corridor. It does not make sense that we are not maximising the potential of this vacant unit.

I appreciate that the Minister had been helpful and has taken practical steps with funding to alleviate the problems with our health services in Clonmel and Cashel, but what types and levels of service will be provided by the community hospital at Our Lady's hospital? Will the Minister be specific as regards what he intends to do with the hospital?

Deputy Simon Harris: Absolutely. A number of services are being provided there in the form of the minor injuries unit, community intervention teams, primary care teams, community mental health services, disability services, outreach services provided by the Irish Wheelchair Association, a substance misuse team, home care services, acquired brain injury services, catering for the St. Patrick's Hospital campus, which is across the road, and a 24-7 ambulance station.

Now that I have supplied the funding, I have asked the HSE to identify what further services can be provided locally utilising the empty space in Cashel to alleviate pressure in Clonmel and provide greater services in Tipperary. The HSE is specifically considering services for older people as well as rehabilitative services. It tells me that it is drawing up a plan to develop a further range of services to support older people and that the overall model will be discussed in collaboration with relevant stakeholders locally, in which respect I will ask the HSE to liaise with the Deputy. In particular, it is considering the expansion of rehabilitation programmes. If more such programmes can be run in Cashel, people can be discharged from Clonmel earlier. With the 40 beds that we are putting into Clonmel plus those services in Cashel, we can make a real difference.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I agree with the Minister's approach. I understand that whatever services we provide in Cashel will help to alleviate the pressure on Clonmel hospital. It is important there would be a high level of liaison and co-operation between South Tipperary General Hospital and Our Lady's Hospital in Cashel. We are all anxious to know in what way and to what extent will the newly established services at Our Lady's Hospital relieve pressure on South Tipperary General Hospital.

What is the current position regarding the modular unit? I know it is in the tendering process and significant progress has been made. What is the up to date position on the provision of that unit?

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is right. When I went to Cashel I was annoyed to see the potential that there is in that facility is not being fully utilised when there is clear pressure on South Tipperary General Hospital. Therefore, we need joined-up thinking. As a result of working with the Deputy and others, I have asked the HSE to look at Cashel and Clonmel hospitals together to see what services can most appropriately be provided there. The key area it is examining is rehabilitation and services for our older people. We do not want older people in particular to be in a busy acute hospital if we can provide services for them in a more comfortable and appropriate environment.

I will get the Deputy a specific update as to exactly where the modular unit is at. I am very clear on this. We have provided significant funding for the delivery of this unit. I know people, including the consultants and management in the hospital, have been working very hard. I want and need this unit delivered for the people of south Tipperary to ensure those 40 beds are in place well in advance of next winter, which would alleviate the pressure on the hospital. I will keep in touch with the Deputy on that.

National Maternity Hospital

5. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the details of the draft framework agreement on the future ownership of the new national maternity hospital; if the new hospital

will remain in public ownership; if he will bring before Dáil Éireann details of the proposal prior to the final legal agreement being signed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6588/18]

Deputy Róisín Shortall: At the end of August the Minister stated that his Department was finalising an agreement with St. Vincent's Hospital and Holles Street hospital under which the new national maternity hospital would remain in full public ownership. However, as of last month discussions on the legal framework were still ongoing. Will the Minister recommit today to ensuring that the hospital will remain in full public ownership? Will he update the House on the progress of the talks?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which I know she has consistently raised. I will recommit to those two issues. I want to assure the Deputy that we are making progress on the draft legal framework. We have involved the Chief State Solicitor's office on that to make sure it is as robust as we would all want it to be from the State's point of view. That will ensure the State's significant investment in a new maternity hospital, which is so badly needed, will be protected. While completion of the detailed legal agreement will require some further engagement between both hospitals, the HSE and my Department, I can confirm there is a broad understanding and agreement on the way forward. That will protect the State's resources in investing in this important project and it will also further underpin the operational independence of the maternity hospital; it is envisaged that the new hospital building will remain in State ownership. I know that is something people have been seeking.

My Department undertook to develop the initial draft legal framework and this work, which has proved highly complex, is nearing completion. The Deputy will, I hope, appreciate that pending its finalisation it is premature for me to give too much further information. However, I intend to brief Government once the agreement has been finalised and I will happily share the agreement with the Deputy, the House and the appropriate Oireachtas committee having regard to whatever the Oireachtas considers is appropriate in due course.

In terms of the project, I would like to reiterate my commitment and the Government's commitment to the development of a new maternity hospital on the St. Vincent's campus. This is vital for women and babies in Ireland in terms of the co-location of a maternity hospital with an acute adult hospital. It will represent the flagship project of the national maternity strategy and constitute the largest single investment ever made in maternity services, which makes the case for the Deputy's point in terms of how important it is that we get the legal framework right. The new development will cater for up to 10,000 births per annum and include state-of-the-art obstetrics, neonatal and gynaecology care facilities. Following the granting of planning permission, which thankfully has now happened, the design team is continuing to work on the detailed design of the hospital and the preparation of tender documents. As I have made clear, the agreement needs to be finalised and brought to Government before any of that progresses.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: We are all conscious of the fact that when it emerged last year that the new hospital building would be in effect gifted to a private interest, there was an understandable public outcry. The Minister's commitment last August to State ownership went some way to alleviating public concerns about that. However, the language he used in his statement was and still is to some extent concerning. He referred to the building on a number of occasions but never to the site. He replied to a parliamentary question in recent times and he has been quite vague about this. We need to know what legal arrangements will be put in place in regard to the site. Does the Minister expect it to be a lien, a licence a lease or some other arrangement?

Will financial commitments be made to secure the use of this site and what will they be? Will the Minister commit to return to the Dáil with details of the proposal prior to any legal agreement being signed?

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is correct in that there was significant public concern regarding this situation, which I heard loudly and clearly. That told us that while we have invested significant resources in the past in facilities that we have not necessarily owned, the public want that to change now. That is why I have set up a group chaired by Dr. Catherine Day and including Professor Jane Grimson and Professor Deirdre Madden to examine the relationship between the voluntary and the public health service. I am very pleased they are doing that good body of work.

I am not endeavouring to be vague, I am just endeavouring to be careful because of the fact that the legal agreement is pending finalisation. The Deputy will be well aware that often we could see a lease or a licence of a site granted at a nominal or peppercorn rent. We could see a lien put in place, which is the normal course of action, to protect the State's investment. The issue that was very clear, which I believe the Deputy raised, among many others, was on whose balance sheet would the asset sit. I am being very clear in saying the asset will sit on the State's balance sheet. That is what I want the agreement to be.

In terms of sequencing, I am more than happy to have this issue debated in the Dáil. The approval process is one for myself and specifically for the HSE, but I will brief Government also before there is any further progress.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I thank the Minister for that information. He mentioned a lien and certainly Nicholas Kearns said last year that a ministerial lien would be the approach that would be taken and an undertaking was given on that. If it is to be a lien, will the Minister require the approval of the Bank of Ireland to agree such a lien, given that the land and much of the property is mortgaged to Bank of Ireland? Is that an issue currently and is it holding up matters? Will the Minister assure us that no final decision on this agreement will be taken without bringing the proposal back to the Dáil, as substantial public money is involved? While other means have been talked about in terms of a licence or a lease, these would not give the type of protection that the public would demand. It is a lien that is expected. Can the Minister clarify exactly what the position is about the role of the bank in all of this?

Deputy Simon Harris: I have no knowledge, nor has any issue been brought to my attention, that an issue relating to any bank is causing any delay. I have been told that there has been very constructive and intensive engagement, which has moved this situation significantly in terms of an agreement, in principle, that the building and ownership of the new national maternity hospital would remain in State ownership. That is quite significant. I will happily brief the Dáil but every capital project, and there are many significant ones, does not come to the Dáil for approval, but I am very aware of the sensitivities of this and I am more than happy to have the Oireachtas health committee or the appropriate committee briefed on this issue at the appropriate time. Very good progress is being made. We have planning permission for this flag-ship project. I will make sure that the asset, the hospital, remains in State ownership, in public ownership. The legalities in terms of how we utilise the site at St. Vincent's will be spelt out in the agreement. It would be premature of me to say anything further but I have given indications of how this has been done in other areas by way of leases or licences with nominal rents and I will certainly keep the House-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It will be a lien - is the Minister confirming that?

Deputy Simon Harris: No, I am not confirming that. I am saying that it is being finalised. I will brief the Deputy. I have used examples of how it is used. I do not wish to say anything on the floor of the Dáil to jeopardise this project and I am trying to provide the Deputy with as much information as possible.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister's own statement was that it would be a lien.

Deputy Simon Harris: I expect it will be.

Other Questions

Industrial Disputes

6. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Health if funds will be made available by his Department to help resolve the dispute involving section 39 workers in the health care sector whose historic link to their public service comparator in terms of pay and conditions other than pension conditions has been broken due to them not obtaining equivalent pay restorations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6088/18]

9. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health when additional funding will be provided to the HSE and section 39 organisations to enable them meet pay restoration commitments as per the Labour Court recommendation of 20 November 2017; the amount of funding to be provided; the timeframe for the provision of these additional funds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2124/18]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Question No. 6 in the name of Deputy Mick Barry is grouped with Question No. 9 in the name of Deputy Broughan. The procedure is that double time is allocated when two questions are taken together. Deputy Barry will introduce the question, the Minister will reply and then the two Deputies can make their contributions, and if time permits Deputy O'Reilly would also like to make a short contribution.

Deputy Mick Barry: We are less than a week away from strike action by 7,500 members of SIPTU working effectively in the health service. I ask the Minister whether funds will be made available by his Department to help resolve the dispute involving these section 39 workers, whose historic link to their public service comparators in terms of pay and conditions other than pension conditions has been broken due to them not obtaining equivalent pay restoration. Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 and 9 together.

I thank Deputies Barry and Broughan for raising this important matter. Under section 39 of the Health Act 2004, the HSE provides financial assistance to organisations by means of a grant. Many of those organisations provide very useful and valuable services that our citizens appreciate. Section 39 legally underpins the provision of services similar or supplementary to a service that the HSE may provide. In 2017, the HSE provided funding of approximately €800 million to over 2,200 of these agencies. The funding provided can range from high value, in

the millions, to relatively modest amounts of just a few hundred euro. The point I am making is that many section 39 organisations have different scales and sizes

Staff in these organisations were not subject to the provisions of the FEMPI legislation. They were not a party to the public service agreements and are not covered by the pay restoration provided for in these agreements. These are not value judgements or views; they are just facts. While it is understood that pay savings were made by the organisations, the precise mix of pay cuts or other savings measures will have varied. I have seen that some did apply pay cuts and others may not have while some have restored them and some may not have. Also, where there were pay cuts, it is not at all clear that they were applied in a universally consistent manner, as was the case in the public sector and consequently, there is a complexity to this issue.

Therefore, the Government believes that we need a much deeper understanding of the funding position in these grant-aided organisations and the true extent of the pay reductions applied. In establishing the position, I am obliged to have regard to the legitimate taxpayer and value-for-money issues that arise. That is why I have requested that the HSE engages with the section 39 organisations to establish the facts around what cuts were applied and how and when they were implemented. I have asked that the executive complete this exercise as soon as practicable having regard to the large number of organisations concerned. Officials from my Department and the executive are continuing to engage with the relevant trade unions to ensure that this work is carried out on a consensus basis. We want to reach agreement in terms of how we do this. I note that one union has already agreed to how this should proceed while another has not.

I am mindful of the threatened industrial action in a number of these organisations, which is scheduled to commence with a one-day work stoppage next week. I believe that the process which I have outlined should address the concerns raised by the trade unions in a fair and transparent way. I am very conscious that the trade union movement has called for a process. I believe we need a process and I genuinely hope that agreement can be reached. I understand that the Irish Congress of Trade Unions is engaged in conversations with management in this regard. It is at a very sensitive stage so while wishing to be as forthcoming as I always like to be with the Dáil, I must be careful not to say anything that would in any way jeopardise something that is at a very sensitive stage. I hope a resolution can be reached because there should be no disruption to the delivery of these services. I know the unions do not want that, I do not want that and certainly the people depending on the services do not need that either.

Deputy Mick Barry: We are six days away from a national strike and I do not sense any degree of real urgency in the Minister's reply. The case of these workers is basically unanswerable. How can the Minister stand over a situation where a nurse in the HSE is getting paid one rate with her pay restored while a nurse in Rehab doing very similar - essentially the same - work has not had her pay restored? I noticed that the Minister is wearing a little badge. My eyesight is not good enough to see exactly what it is. I suspect it marks the 100 years since votes for women were granted. The Minister will wear a badge about 100 years of votes for women. What about these workers, many of whom are women workers and low-paid women workers, who are being forced to wait for pay justice and to have their pay restored? Can we have some urgency and justice for these workers?

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: The Labour Court recommendation of 20 November is very clear. It states "The Court has given careful consideration to the submissions of both parties and is clear that the worker's pay is clearly aligned with the HSE pay scales." The Irish Wheelchair Association was the key mover in the case. It could not be clearer but yet, as Deputy Barry

noted, we are just a few days away from a work stoppage involving 7,500 workers in nine section 39 organisations. As the Minister knows, they provide services to some of the most vulnerable citizens in our community. It is outrageous that we have reached this stage. The Not for Profit Association has been negotiating with the Minister for almost a year. When I visited the Irish Wheelchair Association last year, I raised the matter with the current Taoiseach, who admonished me that in no way were services to be cut. It was up to him, however, to bring the funding up to the required level for those organisations. The Government had an opportunity in budget 2018. We had a discussion yesterday and other debates about the deficit in the health budget for 2018. I welcome that the Minister has said he is prepared to reach but he needs to move very fast, as my colleague has said.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister stated that talks are at a sensitive stage. I do not believe they are and I have had that confirmed to me in the past couple of seconds. In fact, very little talking is taking place. The Minister also talks about a process. It is important that the record of this House reflects that there was no process when these workers were having their pay cut, there was no recourse and no analysis was done. No money was identified. A cut was simply imposed on them. I know this because many of the Labour Court recommendations that found against the cases initially had my name on them. There was no process. It is really unfair to these workers to say that we cut their pay when we felt we needed to do so - they did not feel there was a need to do so and neither did I - and now the Minister is going to hide behind process. That is deeply unfair to those workers. We are six days away from a dispute. We need a sense of urgency about this.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am not sure what Deputy Barry's comment about the badge relates to. I am very proud that women have had the vote for 100 years and I hope we will do an awful lot more to advance women's rights in this country in the coming months. There is an urgency in terms of resolving this but, and I mean this respectfully, with the position I hold I do not have the luxury of being able to say some of the things Deputies can say on the other side of the House. In response to Deputy O'Reilly, I am informed that talks are at a sensitive stage. I checked that before I came into this House. I am informed that unions and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions are involved. I am also aware, as is the Deputy, that one union has already accepted the proposal and has issued a statement welcoming it. Where people get it somewhat wrong is the idea that this was applied universally in each and every section 39 organisation. That is not the case. There are 2,200 organisations with their own boards, governance structures and CEOs and they applied them in different ways.

Let me be clear in case there is any misunderstanding: I accept there are a number of legitimate issues. I accept that a number of people experienced pay cuts, that we need to establish the facts and that this will come with a bill that ultimately will need to be met. I accept that but the unions are calling for a process and I want a process. I accept that Deputy Broughan raised this issue a number of times. I believe there is a legitimate issue here but I am making the point that there is a complexity to this issue that is not there with public servants. This Oireachtas did not pass a law to cut the salaries of people in section 39 organisations. This Oireachtas did cut public servants' pay. This Oireachtas passed a law to restore public servants' pay. It did not pass a law regarding section 39 organisations. It is a process and we must work our way through it. I am determined to work our way through it. There is no need for industrial action because we will put a process in place and I hope we can reach agreement on that very quickly.

Deputy Mick Barry: The significance of the badge is that the Minister is prepared to advertise his support for women who fought for their rights 100 years ago. He has a practical op-

portunity here to demonstrate his support for workers, largely women workers, who are fighting for their rights today yet these workers are left to face the prospect of picket lines next week because of inaction on his part. Their case is unanswerable. So unanswerable is it that their own employers in the sector have accepted that pay parity is warranted. Solidarity stands foursquare behind the thousands of section 39 workers who are fighting for pay justice and preparing for industrial action next Wednesday. The Government, the HSE and the Minister must see sense before the deadline for action. If they do not, the responsibility for any ensuing disruption and stress will be entirely on their shoulders, including the Minister's shoulders.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: As the Minister is well aware, a number of organisations, including the Irish Wheelchair Association and Rehab, have been under intense pressure in terms of recruiting, retaining and looking after staff because of the ongoing issue arising from pay restoration in the public service. It is clear, from the Labour Court, the conciliation conference and every aspect of the human resources process, that the Minister forced the Irish Wheelchair Association to engage in that the workers in question are entitled to pay restoration. It is outrageous that we have reached a point where services are set to cease next Wednesday.

The Minister referred to a mapping process in a number of responses. When will we receive the report on this process and when will the HSE receive it? It is intolerable that workers in section 39 organisations who do exactly the same jobs as workers in section 38 organisations and the HSE have not been paid the same rate since we embarked on pay restoration. As my colleague stated, we need to do justice to these workers urgently.

Deputy Simon Harris: There is an alternative to industrial action, namely, talking and engaging, which is generally the way we settle industrial disputes. We have dealt with a number of such disputes in the health sector since my appointment as Minister. I do not need to wear a badge to prove my record of willingness to engage and work through issues.

Deputy Broughan is entirely correct that a number of organisations are experiencing a recruitment and retention challenge. I accept that a person working in a section 39 organisation could receive a higher salary in a section 38 organisation and I see how this will play out and cause difficulty for organisations. I also hope the Deputy will also accept the legitimacy of the point that there are 2,300 section 39 organisations, ranging from groups that receive grants of a few hundred euro to organisations that receive grants of many millions and provide vital services nationwide.

In terms of the timeline for concluding the mapping process, this is one of the issues on which I want to reach agreement with the trade unions and other stakeholders. I could announce the process but I want to try to agree it with the stakeholders. There is time to achieve this and the process should be agreed as quickly as possible in order that we can provide reassurance to service users regarding their services next week. It is only by getting into a process that we will be able to successfully resolve this issue.

Hospital Waiting Lists Action Plans

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Office of the Ceann Comhairle has received written correspondence from Deputy Niall Collins, who tabled Question No. 7, requesting that the House agree to allow Deputy Billy Kelleher to take his question. Is that agreed? Agreed.

7. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health the extra support that will be provided to University Hospital Limerick in 2018 to reduce waiting times for a first-time appointment to see a neurologist in view of the fact that 418 persons had been waiting more than 18 months for appointments at the end of 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6421/18]

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I ask the Minister for Health what extra support will be provided to University Hospital Limerick in 2018 to reduce waiting times for a first-time appointment to see a neurologist in view of the fact that 418 persons had been waiting more than 18 months for appointments at the end of 2017.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputies Billy Kelleher and Niall Collins for raising the important issue of the need to reduce waiting times for appointments to see neurologists at University Hospital Limerick. Reducing waiting times is one of the Government's key priorities.

I am advised by the HSE that outpatient waiting lists, including neurology lists, are managed centrally at University Limerick hospitals group. All patients who are waiting are prioritised according to clinical need. University Limerick hospitals group will continue, as is right and proper, to focus on seeing and treating those who have been waiting longest.

The number of outpatients waiting for a neurology appointment at University Limerick hospitals group increased in 2017. At the end of January 2018, 408 patients were waiting. Among the reasons for the increase are growth in demand, an increase in the number of urgent referrals and a shortage of consultants.

This year, particular focus will be placed on the validation of outpatient waiting lists by University Limerick hospitals group to ensure all those who are waiting require appointments and resources can be targeted at those who need them. The scheduling of patients waiting longest will also be a focus. This will be subject to weekly review at hospital level and as part of this process, neurologists at University Hospital Limerick have commenced reviewing referrals of patients waiting longer than 36 months. Following consultation with patients' general practitioners, University Limerick hospitals group will schedule appointments as required. Hence, there is a weekly procedure in place at the hospital to try to get on top of this issue.

Recent experience with waiting list initiatives, including outsourcing, suggests there are opportunities for further improvements and a number of steps are being taken to ensure that lists are accurate. These efforts will intensify in the coming months. My Department has also requested the HSE to develop an outpatient waiting list action plan for 2018. I will ask that neurology waiting lists in University Hospital Limerick forms part of this action plan.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: This issue is indicative of the serious problems in neurological services nationwide. They are overwhelmed as a result of changing demographics, the ageing profile, the increased incidence of dementia, stroke and other neurological illnesses such as Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis. People cannot access the treatments they are entitled to and need. Early diagnosis is another issue that must be addressed. There are not enough beds, neurological consultants or capacity in the system to deal with the problem. Large numbers of vulnerable people are waiting for diagnosis, not to speak of treatment, and cannot access neurological services.

According to the Association of British Neurologists, there should be one consultant neurologist per 70,000 of population. In some areas of this country, the ratio is one consultant neurologist per 200,000 of population. We are, therefore, well off the mark even in terms of the

basics, and this must be addressed urgently in view of the demographic changes that lie ahead.

Deputy Simon Harris: I largely agree with the Deputy on this matter. The HSE launched a model of care for neurology in 2016 and is moving towards the implementation of this model. The national clinical programme for neurology model of care document recommends an increase in the number of consultant neurologists and nurse specialists, including clinical nurse specialists, and other health care professionals. This would have a positive impact on addressing waiting time issues. The programme also proposed implementation of its recommendations over a five-year period. This would significantly improve access for all neurology patients. I welcome that the clinical community has come together to draw up this roadmap.

The national clinical programme for neurology reviewed demand and capacity for access to neurology consultants for adult services. Arising from this work, the number of consultant neurologists nationally is planned to increase by ten, which would be an increase in numbers of almost 50% and the single largest increase in the history of neurology services in Ireland. Seven of the ten additional consultants are already in place.

The point identified by Deputies Kelleher and Niall Collins is correct. The HSE will increase the number of neurologists and, in the meantime, weekly efforts will be made in University Hospital Limerick to drive the process forward.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Multi-annual budgets are required for key areas such as neurology services to ensure the plan that has been drafted can also be implemented with sustained funding to allow the service to catch up with demand. Government, Parliament and citizens must debate the issue of demographics which will clearly present serious challenges in many areas, including dementia and other neurological diseases and conditions in the years ahead. We will not have the capacity or ability to address these challenges unless we commit ourselves to funding the necessary services. This will require the provision of additional resources from tax revenues. We must have this conversation because people will otherwise get lost in the system and we will have delayed diagnoses and poor outcomes and treatments.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy raises a valid point. Capital projects will increase capacity in terms of the number of beds and dementia facilities. An issue also arises regarding the number of people on the outpatients list, particularly those with dementia, who could be treated in the community. This issue applies to the outpatients list in general. When so many people on such a large list miss appointments, it suggests there may be a mismatch between the number of people on the list and their requirement for a service. Many of those on the list may wish to have a service in the community and may want to be referred back to primary care.

Deputy Kelleher noted that 418 persons had been waiting more than 18 months for an appointment at the end of 2017. This figure has since fallen to 408 and I would like it to continue to reduce. The University Limerick hospitals group is prioritising this matter.

Suicide Prevention

8. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Health his plans to increase resources for suicide prevention services in County Wexford in view of the number of recent suicides in the county and the county's high suicide rate compared with national averages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6379/18]

Deputy Mick Wallace: According to the Central Statistics Office and National Office for Suicide Prevention, Wexford consistently has one of the highest suicide rates *per capita* in the country. At times in the past ten years, the suicide rate in the county has been almost double the national average. Will the Minister provide an update on his plans to increase resources for suicide prevention services in Wexford given the number of recent suicides in the county, its high suicide rate when compared with the national average and the abysmal services currently in place in Wexford?

Deputy Jim Daly: I thank Deputy Kelleher for the opportunity to address this serious issue. Suicide prevention is a priority for the Government. Since 2012, we have increased the funding for the National Office for Suicide Prevention from less than €4 million to more than €12 million.

While there has been a very welcome reduction in national suicide rates, I acknowledge that the rate in County Wexford is higher than we would hope. In order to reduce the rate, we have put in place a number of support services in the county. Support is available in the Wexford region for people who are feeling suicidal and for families or friends who are concerned. There is a range of services available in the area of suicide prevention, as well as support in the aftermath of a suicide.

Each community health organisation, CHO, has at least one resource officer for suicide prevention based within its area. This includes CHO area 5, of which Wexford is a part. The HSE's suicide crisis assessment nurse service, SCAN, is also available in Wexford. This is an expert mental health nursing service which is available within primary care and which offers an accessible and speedy response to GP requests for assessment of those who are self-harming or in suicide distress. Wexford also has the HSE's self-harm intervention programme, SHIP. This is a free service offering short-term counselling to individuals aged 16 and over who are experiencing suicidal ideation or the impulse to self-harm. Referral is through a person's GP or other medical professional.

The HSE continues to work not only through its professional staff in mental health services but also through GPs, within counselling services and in the community and voluntary sector, in developing various responses to the incidence of suicide in Wexford. Training programmes are offered to HSE and other relevant front-line staff in Wexford in partnership with voluntary organisations and the National Office for Suicide Prevention. These training programmes include e-suicide TALK, safeTALK, applied suicide intervention skills training, or ASIST, and understanding self-harm.

Connecting for Life is Ireland's national suicide prevention strategy for the period 2015 to 2020 and the National Office for Suicide Prevention is tasked with its implementation. This strategy sets out a vision of an Ireland where fewer lives are lost through suicide and where communities and individuals are empowered to improve their mental health and well-being. Connecting for Life local plans are developed by communities for communities. The local plans align with the national strategy in terms of vision, with a core component being local implementation and empowerment of communities. The Wexford Connecting for Life local plan was updated and relaunched in 2017.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I do not know how much the Minister of State knows about what it is like on the ground but it is abysmal. The HSE web page for Wexford mental health services lists two mental health hospitals and five day services. There are no links to provide more in-

formation but there are phone numbers. If one Googles the names of the five day services, only one has a website, and it - like two of the other five day services - is clearly not a mental health service. At the bottom of the page there is a note on a regional suicide resource office, with a phone number for St. Patrick's Hospital in Waterford, which was highly criticised in a report by the Mental Health Commission in 2016. If I were in crisis and I needed some help after 6 p.m., there are three numbers I could call and one is in another county. I would have no idea what would happen, the kind of care I would get, if somebody would talk to me, who I would speak with and if the relevant person could prescribe medication or if I would be kept overnight. It would be money well spent to simply provide some information on web pages relating to these services on the HSE website. I am sorry but the people in Wexford would say this to the Minister of State. Several people have been affected by this lately and it can be devastating. They will say the services are not there.

Deputy Jim Daly: I appreciate that this is a sensitive matter and one about which the Deputy is very passionate. One of the challenges I have seen since coming to the Ministry is the myriad services which exist but which are not joined up. There is no up-to-date or real directory of services available. If I wake up with a mental health issue in west Cork or the Deputy wakes up with one in Wexford, the question is who to call. Does a person call Aware, ALONE, the Samaritans, Childline, Pieta House or Jigsaw? There is a variety of different services. Nobody in a perfect state of health, let alone with a mental health challenge, could figure out the myriad of services and what is most appropriate.

One of the first actions I asked of the HSE since starting in this job is to have one national helpline that would be as identifiable as the 999 number that we know. This should refer everybody who calls it to the most appropriate local service in the area suitable to their needs. Work is ongoing and I hope we can make significant progress on it before the year is out. It will be a very positive step towards remedying what the Deputy is highlighting.

Deputy Mick Wallace: In 2010, when the acute beds were closed at St. Senan's hospital in Wexford and the service moved to Waterford, we had the same suicide rate as Waterford. Now, however, the rate in Wexford is double the rate in Waterford. This is an issue and St. Patrick's Hospital in Waterford is not even fit for purpose. I understand that not everybody presents with suicidal ideation. It is not always easy for the State to know somebody will kill himself or herself; that cannot be known unless a person presents. In Wexford there is a lack of emergency response to those who present. I spoke in this Chamber last year about a 14 year old girl, a ten year old boy and a seven year old boy who presented with suicidal ideation but all of them had to wait almost two years to see a child psychiatrist. Surely there should be some kind of "break-glass-in-case-of-emergency" service for such children. The problem is compounded by a lack of a joined-up mental health and disability service. The mother of one of these kids has said her son repeatedly tells her he wants to be dead but she is still awaiting an autism assessment for him, with no clear date as to when that will take place. She has been told her son is sixth on the list but the psychologist left before Christmas and no replacement has been found. I am not saying this is the Minister of State's fault but there is a serious crisis in Wexford. Not enough is being done.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am sorry to curtail the Deputy on such a sensitive matter and I appreciate how he is speaking on it but I must move on.

Deputy Jim Daly: We are aware of those challenges. We are trying to give GPs access to consultants so they can immediately advise them. GPs will be the front line in many of

these cases. To be fair, they cannot know everything that is right to do so if we can get them immediate access to a consultant in the mental health area, it would be a positive step. The Connecting for Life strategies are very important as they devolve responsibility and authority locally to joined-up thinking. The Deputy argues there is a lacking in that regard. In fairness, Wexford's plan has been revised and relaunched. Some counties are better than others at keeping everybody in the loop, including gardaí, local authorities, health services, schools and the agencies working together. There is a challenge in tidying up the directory of services and making a more accessible single list. Access is one of the biggest challenges and people must be signposted to the most appropriate service. There are many services not being utilised that people are not aware of.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): If Members stick to the allocated times, we might get to deal with four more questions.

Question No. 9 answered with Question No. 6.

Freedom of Information

10. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the work being carried out at Beaumont Hospital in respect of publishing a freedom of information disclosure log, as per the Freedom of Information Act 2014, on the hospital's website; if this process will be expedited; the timeframe for completion; if he will direct the hospital to publish as much information as possible in an open and accessible manner on a routine basis outside of freedom of information; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6097/18]

Deputy Alan Kelly: This is a very specific question. It asks the Minister the status of the work being carried out at Beaumont Hospital in respect of publishing a freedom of information disclosure log, as per the Freedom of Information Act 2014, on the hospital's website; if this process will be expedited; the timeframe for completion; if he will direct the hospital to publish as much information as possible in an open and accessible manner on a routine basis outside of freedom of information; and if he will make a statement on the matter and why this has not happened to date.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for this question, which has caught my attention because we are very clear on what people should do in this regard. Beaumont Hospital is a prescribed body, as the Deputy knows, in its own right for the purposes of freedom of information. Statutory responsibility for the hospital's compliance with the provisions and requirements of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 rests with the hospital authorities. Inquiries have been made with the hospital on the publication, under section 8 of the legislation, of its publication scheme. The hospital has advised that work is under way collating and compiling information for publication on the Beaumont Hospital website. This will include up-to-date details of the services provided by the hospital, high-level policies and procedures, financial information, procurement data and other relevant information.

I am advised that, in parallel with this, the hospital has recently commenced a major overhaul of its website, which it anticipates will be completed by quarter 2 of this year, including the publication of the publication scheme and the disclosure log. On foot of the question received from the Deputy, I will write to the chair and chief executive of Beaumont Hospital requesting that the work under way is expedited and that as much public information as possible is provid-

ed outside of the freedom of information process. I welcome any further thoughts or insights that the Deputy might have on the matter.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I clearly asked the question for a reason. The hospital is running afoul of the Act. It is not meeting the requirements of the 2014 Act, which allowed six months for implementation, and it is now 2018. What is it hiding? There is no disclosures log on the website and there is a link to nothing. I know a number of freedom of information requests and other requests for information have been made of the hospital but these are not public. The information given out is contradictory. Why is it not publishing the information in order that we all might see it? The hospital is not like other hospitals that are maintaining the log and adhering to Freedom of Information Act requirements. I want to know why it is behaving in this manner. I appreciate what the Minister is saying and that he will expedite it. I am asking this as an oral question because I already asked it as a written question in November 2017. The answer was the exact same as the one the Minister has read out here. There is something going on. I ask that the Department looks at Beaumont Hospital and what is happening in all the other hospitals. Why are all the other hospitals adhering to this and providing the information as required but Beaumont Hospital is not?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Kelly. There is nothing the Deputy has said that I disagree with in terms of the law of the land, which is very clear and there for everyone to see. I am informed that the deadline for the publication of this scheme was 14 April 2016 so clearly anybody who does not publish is not in compliance with the Act. The Office of the Information Commissioner is the body this can be examined by but I do not think that is the point. The point is why it is not being done. In light of the Deputy bringing it directly to my attention by way of oral parliamentary question, I have now written to the chief executive officer and the chair of the board. I will also ask my Department to probe it further. The law is very clear and everybody should publish their logs. I expect Beaumont Hospital to do the same.

Deputy Alan Kelly: That is why I asked it as an oral question. Beaumont Hospital stands out. I know people who have asked numerous questions. I have put in freedom of information requests and the information has not been published or sent out and there are contradictions. The hospital, as other hospitals, is supposed to routinely publish its key performance indicators, KPIs. It does not do so. Its annual report from 2017, which refers to the year 2016, refers to its KPIs without providing detail. It seems the information provided when requested by numerous people about bed capacity at the hospital changes quite a bit. This hospital is way behind for some reason that needs to become public in providing freedom of information requests and other information through the website, which is their statutory role. It should be available for everyone. Why is this the case? What is being hidden? If something is being hidden, we need to find out why the hospital is an outlier compared with all other hospitals. The idea that the hospital would write to me late last year or tell the Minister today that it is putting in place a plan to do it is not acceptable. I want all this information available by this day next week because it has had four years to do it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy is preventing his colleagues from having a chance to ask a question.

Deputy Simon Harris: I have outlined the action I will take. In terms of compliance with the law, Beaumont Hospital is a prescribed body in its own right. The Office of the Information Commissioner oversees the implementation of the Act. It is disappointing to hear this because Beaumont is a hospital I very often reference in terms of its very positive progress on the num-

ber of patients on trolleys and waiting lists-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: So do I.

Deputy Simon Harris: -----as does Deputy Kelly. I do not know the reason for this but now the Deputy has brought it to my attention, I will correspond with the hospital and try to establish the facts and revert to the Deputy.

Home Care Packages Provision

11. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health his views on the difficulties in accessing home care packages in Dublin city and county in which the HSE is only providing palliative care in view of the fact it does not have the funding for extra staff to provide a full range of home care services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6369/18]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The question is fairly specific. It is to ask for the views on the difficulties accessing home care packages. I will be very clear with the Minister of State. It is not an opportunity to tell us a lovely story about how there are no difficulties. There are difficulties. I am aware of them and so are my constituency colleagues. The Minister of State must be aware of them as well. Will he spare us a description of what a waiting list is and comment on the fact that there are difficulties?

Deputy Jim Daly: I assure the Deputy story-telling was never my forte and I do not intend to start now.

Since being appointed as Minister of State with responsibility for older people, I have made improved access to home support services a key priority. Progress in this area is reflected in the additional funding made available for winter 2017, the increased funding and level of activity planned for 2018 and in the work being progressed on the development of a statutory home care scheme.

Home support services are a particular area of focus in budget 2018, with an additional €18.25 million allocated. The additional resources bring the budget for the direct provision of home support services to €408 million delivering over 17 million home support hours to about 50,500 people. This compares with the estimated 16.34 million hours delivered to 50,000 people last year. In addition, 235 intensive home care packages will provide 360,000 home support hours for people with complex needs.

There is a high level of demand for home support services in community healthcare organisation 9, which includes Dublin north city and county area and over €55 million was spent on home support in the community healthcare organisation, CHO, last year. Waiting lists for services are managed based on the assessed need and within available resources. Applications are assessed by the HSE and clients are provided with a service having regard to their assessed needs. Cases of individuals with palliative care needs and people discharged from acute hospital settings, who are in a position to return home with home support, are prioritised. The provision of services for the area is delivered primarily by private providers who were selected through the HSE tender process and who demonstrate the capacity to meet HSE requirements. I understand that from time to time, providers are unable to meet the service levels required by the HSE due to staff recruitment difficulties. Therefore, while there is a waiting list for home

supports in the area, additional resources have been made available this year.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I was looking for a comment on the difficulties. The Minister of State has accurately described the recruitment difficulties and I am sure they exist. I am not convinced, and the Minister of State has probably heard me say this on more than one occasion, that outsourcing this function to the private sector is the best way to do it. In many cases, notwithstanding the good work done by the individuals providing the care, it does not represent good value for money. The prioritisation of people who are being discharged from hospital and people who need palliative care does absolutely nothing to help keep people out of hospital. The Minister of State will be aware of that.

I want to bring two cases to the Minister of State's attention. A father and son met me last Monday. Their wife and mother has a very severe form of dementia. She is in Beaumont Hospital now and cannot get out to the community. They want to look after her at home. They were offered six hours. After they kicked up, they got another seven hours. They have 13 hours but they need a minimum of 30 hours a week. They cannot access them. Another case is that of an 82-year-old woman with diabetes who is effectively confined to her home. Her daughter is working 16 hours a day to look after her. There are very real cases and they cannot access home care. If the Minister of State is serious about home care the resources have to be put into it and we need to target recruitment. The best way to do that is not by outsourcing.

Deputy Jim Daly: I do not need to go to Dublin to understand the challenges in the provision of home care. I am a practising politician. It is one of the beauties of our democracy that Ministers and Ministers of State also have constituencies to run. I meet people every week in my village who cannot access home care and who need it. I am well aware of the challenges. That is why we have decided the current scheme is not fit for purpose because it will never meet the expectation. If we are spending €408 million on home help hours, we all agree in the House that it does not go far enough and does not meet the demand. We need to radically change how we do what we do. That is why we launched the consultation in July. It was completed in October. The 2,600 responses are now being reviewed and a breakdown of them will be on my desk in the next two to three weeks. We need to build a scheme that mirrors the fair deal scheme where everybody is entitled to home help in their own home by law. We need to do that to ensure there is proper funding for the staff and resourcing of it. We intend to do it but it will take time.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Does the Deputy want to make a final comment?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: No.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Does Deputy Breathnach wish to make a quick comment on this?

Deputy Declan Breathnach: It will save me asking a question on promised legislation. It has come to my attention-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I think the Deputy is in the wrong arena.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: My question is about health services.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Does the Deputy wish to comment on Dep-

uty O'Reilly's question?

Deputy Declan Breathnach: Yes, my question is on home care packages. It has come to my attention in respect of home care packages that different sectors are refusing home care packages that were in existence for people with a disability. They are taking those home care packages from them, telling them the services must be provided by the disability service, and withdrawing the package before the disability service is put in place. That is wrong and I am asking the Minister of State to take it in hand immediately. People are moving budgets from one place to another section in the service and leaving people with a disability with no home care package.

Deputy Jim Daly: I will look into it for the Deputy. I am not aware of it but I will look into it.

General Practitioner Services Provision

12. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be allocated for the delivery of a general practitioner out-of-hours service for north County Wicklow in the HSE service plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6109/18]

Deputy John Brady: In October 2016, the Minister announced he had secured the funding to roll out a GP out-of-hours service in his constituency of Wicklow and specifically in the north Wicklow area, which is one of the last major urban areas in the State to have a dedicated HSE-funded out-of-hours service. It was due to come into operation in early 2017 and mysteriously the funding was pulled. Will the Minister update the House about that service which was due to be rolled out in 2017 and if the funding is now secure?

Deputy Simon Harris: I am delighted to be delivering this service which is badly needed for people in north Wicklow. He is right that I would have liked to have seen it delivered earlier, as I know he would have also. We are one of the last parts of the country without an out of hours general practitioner, GP, service, which is very important for looking after citizens in north Wicklow and to ease pressure on the acute hospital setting. I am committed to the development of an out-of-hours GP service for north Wicklow which can provide the appropriate level of cover for the population in our area. The development of such a service will allow GPs to participate fully in the provision of an integrated health care system, providing medical services that are appropriate, timely and effective, easily accessible and responsive to the needs of patients.

There is funding provision for the introduction of a structured out of hours GP service for the south Dublin and north Wicklow area in the HSE 2018 national service plan. I previously directed the Deputy to page 28 of the plan. This service is intended to cover the night time hours from Monday to Friday and to provide cover at weekends and public holidays, providing urgent general practitioner services to patients outside normal surgery hours. The service will include initial triage and GP consultation at treatment centres or home visits as appropriate, in accordance with HIQA standards for safer better health care. The procurement process to identify a service provider is expected to commence shortly and, subject to successful selection of a suitable service provider, the service is scheduled to be operational in the second half of this year. As I have said, that means this summer. Most importantly, the HSE will be arranging to meet with local GPs to consult them on the development of this service and to brief them on

these developments. I expect that to happen in the next few days.

Deputy John Brady: We have had promises from the Minister before that the funding was secured for this in 2016. He took to social media and the airwaves to announce that it would be rolled out in the early part of 2017. No explanation was ever given to his constituents, the people who desperately need this and lie waiting for 72 hours for a GP who never shows up. An explanation is due to those people and to the GPs who had signed up to the new north-east Wicklow doctor on call service which was due to be rolled out in February 2017. No explanation or apology was ever given to those people. While the Minister's words here today are welcome, they are taken with a pinch of salt because we have not seen the tender documents or no negotiations have taken place with the GPs who had formed the co-operative last year to roll it out. Will the Minister give categorical assurances that discussions have taken place with those GPs that have formed the co-operative? Will he give an explanation of why funding was pulled from that service in Wicklow?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): The Deputy will prevent his colleague from asking her question if he continues.

Deputy John Brady: His constituents and my constituents, the people who depend on that, deserve an explanation.

Deputy Simon Harris: I know very well how to communicate with the people of my constituency.

Deputy John Brady: Maybe not on this issue.

Deputy Simon Harris: This issue is one that I will deliver on. The Government will deliver on it and make a better health service in north Wicklow. Those are facts. If the Deputy wants to know where the money is, some €25 million is ring-fenced in a development fund for primary care in 2018. The funding for the delivery of a north Wicklow and south Dublin out of hours GP service will come from that primary care fund. This is already spelled out in the HSE service plan; I think it is on page 28. As I have said, it is in black and white in the HSE service plan. The funds are being held in my Department to ensure the delivery of the service. I would have liked to see the service delivered last year, and so would the GPs. The HSE hoped to put it in place but was not possible. It will be delivered this year. There will be consultation with the GPs which will happen in the coming days but then there will have to be a procurement process which I expect to happen this month.

Deputy John Brady: The Minister says that the procurement process will be initiated this month for a service to commence in June. No discussions have taken place with any GPs so he does not know if the GPs, who were essentially burned this year although they had signed up and formed a co-operative, are available and willing to offer this service to people. There is bad taste there from the Minister's office with GPs who are ready, willing and able to roll this service out. No discussions have taken place. Is the Minister giving categorical assurances that this service will be rolled out in June one way or another?

Deputy Simon Harris: No discussions have taken place because the HSE does not go into a room with a bunch of people and decide to award a public contract. Public procurement will have to be advertised on the eTenders website for anybody who wishes to provide the service to be able to apply. I think the Deputy and I would agree that it is appropriate to ask the HSE to brief the local GPs about that service. That will happen in the next number of days. I expect

the procurement process to commence this month. Obviously, in a procurement process, one needs people to apply but subject to people successfully navigating that procurement process, I expect the service to be provided in June. This is a fully funded service. There is a dedicated resource for this. We just have to go through the formal process of procurement.

Hospital Waiting Lists

13. Deputy Louise O'Reilly asked the Minister for Health the reason the HSE has discontinued waiting list targets set in 2017; the number of persons who will be affected; the number of complex cases still waiting for surgery; if new more ambitious targets will be now set; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6365/18]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This question specifically relates to scoliosis but arises from contact that we have had from campaign groups to advise us that they are being told that the waiting lists have been discontinued. The targets which were set were not met so we do need to talk about that and it appears that the waiting lists have now been suspended, which is very worrying for people who had loved ones on those lists.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for the clarity about scoliosis. I presumed that was what the question was about and I thank her for raising this issue. The inpatient and day case waiting list action plan 2017, developed by the HSE in conjunction with the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, focused on reducing the number of patients who will be waiting the longest by the end of October 2017. As a result of this plan, 27,981 patients came off the waiting list. We are now developing a plan for 2018. Considering I know we are tight on time and that the question specifically refers to scoliosis, I will say that in May 2017 the HSE published the scoliosis waiting list update and service development plan which aimed to deliver on its commitment that no patient who required surgery for scoliosis would be waiting more than four months by the end of the year. As a result of the action plan, 321 surgeries took place in 2017, compared to 220 in 2016, which represents a 46% increase in activity, a very large increase. The HSE has confirmed that it will maintain the four month target in 2018 and beyond, which is international best practice, for all patients who are clinically deemed to require surgery now. I make the point, as I think the Deputy is familiar with, that there is a co-design group of clinicians who carry out the surgeries and advocacy groups that have been doing much good work with an independent chair. They are due to publish their proposals about how the scoliosis model of care should work in the next couple of weeks. Once a person is clinically deemed appropriate for surgery, four months is still the target.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister knows that the operating theatre only opens three days a week. Five days a week would be preferable or seven days a week if there was any sense of urgency about this issue. I have specifically raised the 68 medically complex cases with the Minister on a number of occasions, not for sport but because it is being raised with me. It would appear that the reality of people on waiting lists is not matched by reports that we get in this House. The 68 children who have complex medical needs should be treated here. They may not necessarily be suitable for travel abroad but, to do that, that theatre would have to be open five days a week, if not seven days a week. The three days a week opening is not good enough.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Children's Hospital Group will shortly publish, with the scoliosis co-design team, how the extra resources provided to it for 2018 will be expended. It will be used with a view to opening the theatre five days a week. They need to recruit for that. I do

not want to mislead the Dáil and need to check whether that recruitment has started but I know the intention is to open that theatre five days a week. I will provide the Deputy with a detailed note on the plan for 2018.

Home Care Packages Administration

14. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his plans to change the criteria for the home support scheme in view of the fact that those persons that have been approved for home help often remain on a waiting list for some time until hours become available (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6362/18]

42. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the measures he plans to implement to ensure that persons who have been approved for home support do not have to wait a considerable length of time for the commencement of such a service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6375/18]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): If Deputy Smith will forgo his 30 seconds, I will let the Minister reply and give the Deputy one minute for a supplementary. Is that all right?

Deputy Brendan Smith: Yes.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Smith for raising this matter. The Government is committed to promoting care in the community so that people can continue to live with confidence, security and dignity in their own homes for as long as possible. To support this, we plan to establish a new statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home care services. I know the Deputy supports that move and the Department is currently engaged in a detailed process to progress this issue. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, recently outlined how we have received over 2,600 submissions as part of that consultation. They are currently being collated and a report will go to the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, in the coming weeks.

12 o'clock

In the meantime, the Department and HSE are continuing efforts to incrementally improve our existing services. As detailed in its national service plan, the HSE is streamlining home care services by moving towards a single funded service. This combines the funding for home help and standard home care packages which will operate as a single home support service from this year onwards.

Home support services are a particular area of focus in budget 2018, with an additional €18.25 million allocated.

The additional resources bring the budget for the direct provision of home support services to €408 million, delivering over 17 million home support hours to 50,500 people. This compares with an estimated 16.34 million hours delivered to 50,000 people last year. In addition, 235 intensive home care packages will provide 360,000 home support hours for people with complex needs. Despite this significant level of service provision, the demand for home care continues to grow. It is important to note that the allocation of funding for home care across the system is finite and services and the HSE must distribute it across the CHOs.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his reply and welcome his commitment to the introduction of a statutory scheme. I hope the Minister can indicate that it will be imple-

mented within a short time. The Minister pointed out, quite rightly, the importance of home support. In too many instances when we make representations on behalf of people who need home support, we are told that while the patient has been approved for support, the service will not be provided until hours become available. We are all well aware that patients are being kept unnecessarily in hospital beds because the supports have not been put in place to allow them to be discharged. Likewise, there are people in nursing homes who would much prefer to be in their home environment with adequate home care support. This is an extremely important scheme and the people delivering it do an exceptionally good job. All of us know there is a desire on the part of people to remain in their homes as long as possible. Additional funding will save the Exchequer and the HSE money in other parts of the health service. As such, I appeal to the Minister to try to provide additional resources so that the time lag between a patient being approved and the service being put in place can be reduced dramatically.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I raise with the Tánaiste the issue of the national planning framework and the finalisation of the current draft as a completed document. It is an exceptionally important framework which will take us forward to 2040 and inform the way investment is made over that period. It is crucial that the document is ambitious, comprehensive and sustainable, but it is also crucial that it is balanced. Unfortunately, the draft framework document cannot be described that way. It neglects many parts of the country and leaves out rural Ireland. It is even the case that many of the Government's own backbenchers, who have stood by and overseen the development of a two-speed economy, are complaining about the national framework plan and the draft document. The two matters on which I wish to touch today are, first, the impact of the draft plan on provincial Ireland and, second, the importance of ensuring the Border regions feature as a key aspect of the final document.

To start with provincial Ireland, I note that we have seen a real lack of regional balance. Areas like the midlands, the north west, Sligo and the Border regions have not been catered for in the draft plan. That is particularly important because all planning from here on will have to drop down from the framework. Areas which are excluded may be starved of investment as a result. Housing in rural areas and the ability of people living there to develop enterprises and to work in their communities are also key. The draft plan gives rise to concerns on these issues also and must be addressed in that regard. We must recognise in the plan that people should be allowed to build houses for social reasons, including to maintain the vibrancy of their communities and to avoid people having to leave their local areas. Likewise, they must be able to create jobs locally.

We must ensure that the final framework document makes the development of our Border regions a strategic priority. These regions have been particularly affected because of the Troubles historically and a lack of political integration since they ended. Of our island's population, 72% are in the Republic while 28% are in Northern Ireland. It is crucial to do this on a cross-Border basis to ensure that our Border regions develop properly. This is not least the case in my own area in Donegal. Donegal County Council and Derry and Strabane Council have worked very closely over the past couple of years to develop the north-west growth partnership and the north-west city region encompassing Letterkenny and Derry. It is crucial that the city region is

included in the plan as Derry is the fourth largest population centre on the island of Ireland. We must recognise that in our own planning framework so that it informs our investment decisions in such a way as to ensure that growth is spread out.

I ask the Tánaiste for assurances on housing, enterprise and a proper regional spread in rural Ireland and to indicate that Border regional development will become a strategic priority in the final document.

The Tánaiste: This plan has been at least three years in the making. The job began when Deputy Alan Kelly was the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, continued when I was there for a year and is being finalised by the current Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. In that period, there have been over 40 regional engagements with stakeholders. I personally chaired meetings in Sligo, Athlone, Cork, Waterford, Galway, Dundalk and two in Dublin to ensure the process was about a national plan which was not dominated by any one coast or city. The whole point of this is to plan for a very different type of Ireland from the one we have seen develop over the past 20 or 30 years in terms of where people live, how they move around and where industry and enterprise can grow and expand. This is about rebalancing the country over the next 20 years when we know an extra 1 million people will be added to our population. If the Deputy wants numbers on that, it is no secret that 75% of the increase must and will be catered for in the plan outside Dublin. Of the population growth, 50% will be outside cities. We are talking about a plan that is big news for rural Ireland as well as one which is very strategic for cities and big towns. Of course, the Border must be part of our thinking.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: It is not even mentioned.

The Tánaiste: The input that has gone into the plan will ensure that is the case. The north west must also be strategically incorporated into a population growth story. Currently, there is no city on the Southern side of the Border. Of course, the interaction with Derry is a huge part of Donegal's economy and that of the north west generally.

I assure the Deputy that what people are looking at is a draft plan which was published for consultation in September. Since then, there have been significant conversations and interactions with other political parties and the Oireachtas committee and it is up to the Government to get the balance right in terms of a plan to influence how local authorities and, indeed, many Departments behave and make decisions over the next two decades. It is a plan that will be backed up with a ten-year capital expenditure programme of over €100 billion for the next decade. That will be consistent with the thinking in the plan which will be good for rural Ireland and the cities also. That is what we are trying to achieve.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Minister described the plan as "big news" but as currently constituted, it is big bad news for certain regions unless it is amended.

The Tánaiste: By the Deputy.

Deputy Martin Heydon: By the Opposition.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: That is why the issues I have raised with the Tánaiste and sought assurances on must be dealt with and the document must be modified in advance of finalisation and publication. Can the Tánaiste give me specific assurances on the concerns I have raised to ensure there is actually a regional spread, that there is a key strategic priority to develop Border regions and that people living in rural parts of Ireland, who comprise 40% of

our population, can continue to live and earn a living in those areas? We need those assurances. Given the importance of the plan and the need to get it right, will it actually come to the Dáil and will the Government seek the approval and endorsement of the House for it? That is crucial and the Tánaiste must give us an assurance on it.

The Tánaiste: What we are going to have, for the first time, is a planning framework and a new national plan which will be based in law through a new planning Bill, which, hopefully, will be concluded by Easter. That will require any future Government to ensure that, in the review mechanisms that are built into this plan, whereby it can be upgraded, changed and improved every six years, there is a requirement to consult with the Oireachtas through the Oireachtas committee system. That is what has happened this time, of course, but, ultimately, a Government needs to finalise decisions in terms of public expenditure and planning, and so on. In this regard, it needs to be guided by the wisdom of the House and, indeed, the committee system and the broader consultation process, which we were obliged to go through and which we have followed, and which will be consistent with the legislation when that is finalised. That is how the legislative obligation we are taking on is going to work.

In regard to what the Deputy has asked for, which is clarity around balance, regional growth and population spread, all of those things will be part of this plan. When it is launched, I think people will be quite excited by what they see.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: In 2015, the Central Bank began its formal tracker mortgage examination. Problems had been identified as far back as 2010 by the bank and for years, the Central Bank and the Financial Services Ombudsman failed to grasp the importance of the issue. This left it up to individuals and families to fight for their rights. The State arrived very late to this issue and the Government even later. Permanent TSB for years dragged these cases all the way to the Supreme Court before dropping its challenge. Now, more than two years later, there are still thousands waiting to get their own money back. The banks and, I am sure, the Government will want this issue gone, but it is far from finished. The banks are still at it. We know it is going to cost the banks up to €1 billion. Up to 100 family homes have been stolen from working families by these very same banks, including State-owned banks. More than 33,000 accounts, individuals and families, have been affected by this, with more to come as the banks play silly buggers with the numbers every week.

We are asked to believe three things. First, as tracker mortgages became cheaper for consumers, 11 lenders in the State all suffered a systems error or a lack of communication. Second, the banks just happened to be benefitted by hundreds of millions of euro while their customers lost out. Third, these errors just happened to occur at a time when it was beneficial for the banks. There was no design, no intent, just a set of three handy coincidences, which all happened to benefit the banks. I do not buy it, yet nobody has been held responsible. They come before the committee and they write letter after letter to their customers, apologising, while at the same time taking no responsibility.

Where is the accountability? Why does the State refuse to hold white-collar criminals to account? Lives have been destroyed. Families have been broken up. People have suffered very seriously, including mental health issues and suicidal tendencies. Again, the banks continue to behave in a thuggish manner.

Last night, as I was leaving here, I got a call from an individual who was livid at what he heard the bankers tell the finance committee. He told me he was one of the individuals who

lost their homes as a result of the tracker mortgage scandal perpetrated by a State-owned bank. He told me that despite what the bankers were telling the committee, the bank is fighting him tooth and nail in order that he does not get his proper compensation and redress. He told me he is left with no option but to take this issue to the court and he feels let down and betrayed again and again by the agencies that should be there to protect him. This is the equivalent of the State hounding its own victims.

What is the Government going to do to hold individual bankers to account for the crimes they have committed? What will the Government do to ensure this will never happen to an Irish citizen again? What legislation will the Government introduce to make sure these individuals will shake if they think of again taking money off Irish citizens in the way they have done? More than €1 billion has been stolen and not one individual has been held to account.

The Tánaiste: It has been made perfectly clear in the last number of months that the Government is taking this very seriously. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, has spoken about it over and over again and, indeed, has answered questions from Deputy Doherty on these issues. The Central Bank published its latest update on the tracker mortgage examination in late December. This indicated that in or around 33,700 customers were affected by tracker mortgage failings, which was a total scandal. This includes 7,100 cases involving tracker mortgage issues, which were remediated outside the industry-wide examination. So far, just over €316 million has been paid in redress and compensation to borrowers identified as impacted from the industry-wide examination. The Central Bank also confirmed that the five main mortgage lenders were on course to meet their October 2017 commitments and that known issues around disputed groups in respect of lenders have been resolved to the satisfaction of the Central Bank.

The Central Bank has advised that it is currently pursuing four enforcement investigations and it has stated that it expects all of the main mortgage lenders will face enforcement investigations, which I think is what the Deputy is looking for. Permanent TSB and KBC recently appeared before the Oireachtas finance committee. Permanent TSB indicated that a total of 1,979 customers had been affected and it was also indicated that nearly 2,500 KBC customers remain on the wrong rate. The Government continues to support the Central Bank in its efforts to complete the tracker examination as quickly as possible and it looks forward to receiving a further update from the Central Bank in due course, towards the end of March. The Minister for Finance has made it clear that if we have to introduce new legislation in this area then we will do that, but that will be based on the Central Bank's report and recommendations on how we should take this forward from a legislative point of view.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste said, "if we have to introduce new legislation". The bankers stole up to €1 billion from 33,000 families in the State, they took their homes off them, they crippled them financially and emotionally, they broke up families, they sent people to the edge, and the Tánaiste tells me, "if we have to introduce new legislation". Not a single banker will be held to account. The enforcement procedures of the Central Bank will slap them with a fine and the bankers will place that fine onto the pockets of their customers in increased charges and increased rates. Today, as we speak, KBC and Ulster Bank are still telling us brazenly that they have thousands of customers on the wrong rate. Permanent TSB tells us everything is fixed, yet its customers tell us they are on the wrong rate. Bank of Ireland is fighting its own employees because it put them on the wrong rate. Victims have been failed by the Central Bank, the Financial Services Ombudsman and the Government and they have to go and take the risk to fight these banks in the High Court.

We brought forward class action legislation in this House and, thankfully, we will have the support of other Opposition parties. The Government opposed it, however - it opposed giving a chance to the victims to stand together. I will bring forward legislation next week, which will make it a crime for bankers to lie to the Central Bank, which they have done. This means they will face a term of imprisonment. Will the Government oppose that also?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Time, please. I call the Tánaiste.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Let us get real with this. Let us get a grip on this. Let us bring in legislation to make sure that bankers will never, ever be able to do this again.

The Tánaiste: We are in a process here. The focus is to try to get people their money back, first and foremost. The Government strongly supports the Central Bank in the work that it needs to do to make sure that this does not happen again and to make sure that people who have suffered financially, not only get their money back, but get appropriately compensated also. The Minister for Finance has introduced changes to make sure this can happen. However, that does not mean this is the end of the process. What the Deputy is calling for is in advance of the next update, which we need to get from the Central Bank to know where we are in regard to ensuring the banks follow through on the commitments they have been forced to make by the Central Bank and, indeed, the Minister for Finance in the context of the meetings he has had with the banks. This process is not over. The first thing we must do is to focus on ensuring that people get their money back and are adequately compensated. That is the primary focus of both the Central Bank and Government.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The efforts to provide a legal basis for the December agreement reached between the UK and the EU are clearly running into the sand. That fudge has been subject to back-peddalling by many elements within the British Government since it was announced. At the time, the Taoiseach described the commitment as politically bulletproof, rock solid and cast iron. However, efforts by the EU to put a legally binding framework in place are, as an Irish official has put it, irreconcilable with the stated British position. In the past week, the UK has clearly said that it will be leaving the customs union but that it wants a new customs arrangement. Yesterday, the full details of economic impact assessment by the UK Government became public. Northern Ireland will be hit by at least 2.5% of GDP or up to 12% if there is a no-deal Brexit. Most accept this to be an underestimate. Britain's Brexit cabinet committee also met yesterday and we are told that Northern Ireland and the Border led to sharp division. It is reported that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Home Secretary want the closest possible alignment between the UK and the EU after Brexit to avoid a hard Border. However, according to the *Financial Times*, a pro-Brexit Minister described this approach as absolute rubbish. No agreement was capable of being reached.

If in coming weeks, the UK does not set out details of its preferred deep and special partnership that it has spoken of, I understand that the EU will proceed to a Canada-style trade deal. In such a scenario, we are looking at a hard Border on the island of Ireland. It has been difficult to find out exactly what Ireland is looking to achieve in phase 2. This week I tabled parliamentary questions to the Taoiseach for oral answer asking what economic impact assessments each Department has commissioned on Brexit. I have tabled written questions to every Department on the same basis. The Department of An Taoiseach, whose second most senior official is our representative on the Barnier team, refused to answer the question and transferred it to the Department of Finance. When I asked the Taoiseach to tell us what contributions, positions or changes his Department had sought to be made in the EU proposals, he transferred that question

to the Tánaiste's Department. It is unacceptable that the Department which is the principal lead in this area is so reticent in the context of putting forward Ireland's position on phase 2 and the preparations that are under way in the very challenging event of a hard Brexit.

Has every Department of State commissioned an economic impact assessment on the sectors under its remit under the various scenarios and will the Government make these public? Can the Tánaiste say what Ireland is seeking in phase 2 of the Brexit negotiations? Specifically, is the Tánaiste still confident that the December agreement which was announced is committed to by both the EU and the UK and will be fully implemented?

Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy for asking this question as it gives me the opportunity to clarify a number of matters. First, I certainly do not speak for the British Government so I cannot give the Deputy an answer in terms of the British Government's position, that is something it must decide for itself. I and many others have called for clarity from the British Government as soon as possible as that would make it far easier for the EU negotiating team to plan for the structured negotiations that need to take place in the future.

The Taoiseach reminded us yesterday of the commitments given before Christmas. They were clear. People talk about fudges, but we are not talking about a fudge, we are very clear about the commitment that was given before Christmas in the context of no political agreement, on a broader trade and new relationship deal that can solve the Border issue on the island of Ireland and in the context of not being able to agree mechanisms to deal with the Border on a bilateral basis. The UK has committed to maintaining full alignment with the customs union and single market to ensure that now and in the future the all-island economy and North-South co-operation can continue. We intend to ensure that commitment is maintained and have very strong solidarity within the EU and within the EU task force on what that means. To use the European term, we will not be back-sliding on that commitment.

It is very important. Yesterday, I spoke at a conference in Louth on cross-Border business and Brexit, which was jointly hosted by the Newry and Dundalk chambers of commerce. There were over 300 people there. They need certainty on a fall-back position or a floor below which we will not fall in terms of Border questions and the future in the context of Brexit. We have that floor and that fall-back position; it was negotiated before Christmas. I hope we will not have to use it because I hope that we can resolve these issues with a broad trade agreement but it is difficult to see how we can avoid using it if the British Government is determined to pursue a strategy that results in the UK leaving the Single Market and the customs union in an absolute way. That is why there will be ongoing discussions with the British Government. I will have a meeting with a member of the British Government, as I had last week in London. We need to understand their thinking. We will continue to contribute, as we do almost daily, to the Barnier task force in terms of mapping out Irish issues in these negotiations which are complex and challenging.

To be very clear, the negotiations which were concluded before Christmas are very clear on the issue of the Border and many other areas. We want to ensure that there is no pull-back from those commitments in the broader negotiations as they move ahead.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am sure that the Tánaiste will agree that now is the time for specifics and clarity. What does the Tánaiste mean when he says the Government hopes it does not have to use the fallback position? If the stated position of the United Kingdom is to withdraw from the customs union, and that includes Northern Ireland doing so, and the Republic

of Ireland is in a different customs union, what British Brexiteer Ministers are saying is that if the Irish Government imposes a border, so be it, or if the EU imposes a border, so be it. The Tánaiste knows that it cannot be acceptable to the EU to have no checks if there is not what he describes as full alignment. Does the Tánaiste expect that, in the case of Northern Ireland, there will be full alignment on everything from animal welfare to duties to standards? Will everything that applies in the EU also apply to Northern Ireland? Is that the Tánaiste's understanding of full alignment? Does he believe at all that this will be implemented by the British, particularly as it would mean - unless the entire United Kingdom applied it - that there would be a border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK?

Simon Coveney: It is important to understand the process. We are moving from a political commitment that was made before Christmas to a legal document that will be a draft withdrawal agreement. The EU is looking to draft this before the end of the month. It has been made clear, and the discussions are focusing on ensuring that the political commitments made by Britain in the context of citizens' rights, financial contributions and the Irish issues, will be part of a draft legal document on which both sides can agree. That process is ongoing. I do not think we can draw any conclusions about how this will look until we have clarity on what the British Government is seeking.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: There is no hope of that.

Simon Coveney: The Deputy is making judgments based on what he is reading and on what individual Ministers are saying. That is not the British Government position which has been finalised yet.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach has said that he does not know.

Simon Coveney: The European Union has made it clear that it will be finalising its negotiating guidelines by the end of March but that these can be altered, amended and changed up to that point. That, essentially, is the window that is available to the British Government to decide and clarify exactly what it is looking for beyond the kind of language that we have heard to date which is general in nature.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Boyd Barrett from Solidarity–People Before Profit.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Plans are well under way for a national demonstration on 7 April on the housing and homelessness crisis and the shambles of this and the previous Government's policies that created the crisis. Groups such as the Peter McVerry Trust, Focus Ireland, Simon Community, housing and community groups, trade unions and many of the Opposition political parties are mobilising for that protest and demanding a radical change from the failed policies that have been pursued for the past seven years and which have created the housing emergency that now faces the country.

There are many aspects to the failure of the Government's policies, mostly turning on the Government's refusal to return to a local authority-led direct programme of council housing construction to deal with the housing crisis and its continued reliance on the private market instead, which cannot deliver and bodies external to the State and the local authorities. The latest evidence of the shambles of the Government's policy is the decision of the CSO, after consultation with EUROSTAT, to reclassify approved housing bodies as being on-balance sheet, meaning that it will have an impact on the general Government balance and Government debt.

The fantasy of having off-balance sheet vehicles to deliver social housing rather than the local authorities doing it directly has now been exposed. The consequence of this, as the Irish Council for Social Housing has said, is that the 15,000 new social houses supposed to be delivered by approved housing bodies are now in jeopardy. The tier three approved housing bodies are now in jeopardy and we do not know what impact it may have on Government debt and the general Government balance because of the madness of the fiscal rules that prevent the State investing directly in building the council and public housing we desperately need.

What does the Tánaiste have to say about this? Is this not further evidence of the bankruptcy and folly of refusing to return to old-style local authority-led council housing provision and to develop an emergency programme in that area? Everything the Government does that is not about that is failing to deliver or, in this case, running into deep trouble which is jeopardising, yet again, the fantastic plans of the Rebuilding Ireland programme.

The Tánaiste: I am afraid the Deputy's approach on this issue is coloured by ideology, and that is the problem. Some of what the Deputy is saying is true. We need to gear up local authorities to build many more social houses. That is happening, but it cannot happen overnight. There is no silver bullet that will solve the social housing in the immediate term.

Deputy Gino Kenny: They have had six years to do it.

The Tánaiste: What we are doing is dramatically increasing the number of social housing projects that local authorities are delivering and we are funding them. We have seen a dramatic increase in public funding for social housing through local authorities.

We are also funding projects that approved housing bodies are delivering and we are putting substantial funds into acquisition programmes. We are working to purchase properties that are derelict. However, there will not be one silver bullet that solves this problem, and certainly not one that is driven by an ideology that the State has to own everything. It will be a combination of all of those matters.

In the meantime, while we are delivering many more new housing units and bringing housing units that are vacant back into use, there is a reliance on the supported rental accommodation in the private sector to deal with the thousands of families that need State intervention. Over 25,000 social housing solutions were financially supported by the State last year. We want to change the emphasis in terms of that support to increasing the number of social houses that people can access, and we are doing so. When I became Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government a number of years ago, good foundations had been laid by the previous Minister and I built literally on the back of those. In 2016, fewer than 100 social houses were built by local authorities. Last year, over 2,000 were built. Next year, the number will probably double, and the year after, it will increase again significantly until we are up to figures for social housing delivery, between approved housing bodies and local authorities, of somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000. That is where we need to be.

To come in here and pretend that we can throw all this away and say, "Let us just build social housing", without the capacity to do that or the sites ready to go, or the processes in place that can deliver that immediately, is misleading and pretending that we have some kind of ideological objection to building social housing through local authorities which we do not have.

Deputy Gino Kenny: The Tánaiste is always ideologically driven. That is why there is a homeless crisis.

The Tánaiste: Money has not been an obstacle for the past 18 months in terms of social housing projects.

Deputy Gino Kenny: Rubbish.

The Tánaiste: We are working directly, with management and with local authorities, to ensure we are providing the financial resources to deliver an extra 50,000 social houses over the lifetime of the Rebuilding Ireland plan. This is a dramatic increase of almost one third in the social housing stock in Ireland. That is what we are doing. We will deliver that across multiple different plans which is what the complexity of the Rebuilding Ireland plan is all about.

What the Deputy does not like is that it is actually starting to work. We are seeing a 50% increase in planning applications-----

Deputy Gino Kenny: Eight thousand people are homeless. It is the Tánaiste's plan. He is the ideologically driven one.

The Tánaiste: -----a 50% increase in commencements and a dramatic increase in the delivery of social housing on sites right across the country.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am afraid the Tánaiste is the one who is driven by blind ideology.

In the past couple of weeks, I had to deal with somebody who has been on the housing list for 19 years and who has just been evicted from a HAP tenancy, which is supposed to be one of the Tánaiste's housing solutions. She will now be driven back into another HAP, which is insecure. The Tánaiste is claiming that is a housing solution; it is not. The problem is the vast majority of the Government's plans to deal with the housing crisis are an accident waiting to happen because they are reliant on a private sector that cannot deliver.

The Tánaiste did not respond to something that is being discussed as we speak where the Secretary General of the Department of Finance is answering questions at the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government about the fact that another pillar of the Government's housing plan is now in serious trouble. The magic formula of using off-balance sheet rather than local authority funding has run into big problems because the CSO and EUROSTAT are classifying it as on-balance sheet. This affects the level of Government debt and the general Government balance and, as I said, puts in jeopardy 15,000 of the approved housing body units that are supposed to be delivered under the Government's plan.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time has expired.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: HAP does not work. The approved housing bodies, AHB, and off-balance sheet plan is now in serious trouble. When will the Tánaiste get it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste to respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need to return to something the State did for decades, building council houses.

The Tánaiste: That is what we are doing. I have this conversation with the Deputy regularly across this floor. We are doing what the Deputy is calling for and we are gearing up the local authorities. We are not limiting the funding that is available to them.

Deputy Gino Kenny: They are catching the Tánaiste up here.

The Tánaiste: The local authorities are at capacity in terms of delivering. In fact, we are putting pressure on management in virtually every local authority, certainly, in urban Ireland, to deliver more than they are currently able to deliver.

Finance is not the obstacle in terms of delivery in most of those projects, rather it is capacity. We are using all our capacity, whether it is through approved housing bodies, AHBs-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Answer the question about the AHBs.

The Tánaiste: -----acquisitions, vacant property initiatives etc.

In terms of what is on and off-balance sheet, we are not relying on off-balance sheet investment. It is true that there are elements of the plan that look to try to deliver housing off-balance sheet.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Fifteen thousand.

The Tánaiste: If that comes under question, we must deal with the consequences of that, but the main thrust of our social housing delivery plan is very much on balance, which is why the Department has seen such a dramatic increase in funding. No Department has seen funding increases like those of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government over the past two or three years.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste has exhausted his time.

Questions on Promised Legislation

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I remind Members that 15 minutes are allocated for questions on promised legislation.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As a former Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I am sure the Tánaiste will understand very well the fodder crisis scheme the current Minister has announced. There is a shortage of grass and grass-based fodder in the country but the Minister, instead of introducing a meal voucher scheme, which would be grain-based, would operate at a world price and be easily transported, has instead decided to give a transport subsidy for grass-based fodder, an already scarce resource. This move will only increase the price of fodder. On the one hand, it is a very skimpy and counterproductive policy proposal and on the other, it is an expensive public relations move on the part of the Minister because it will not be effective. What is the Tánaiste's view? Will he engage with the Minister? Will the Government change tack and introduce a meal voucher scheme? This would address the problem, which is particularly acute in a small number of areas but acute nonetheless.

The Tánaiste: I will talk to the Minister about that if that would be helpful and ask him to contact the Deputy directly about the matter. However, the concept here is to recognise that we have enough silage and other grass-based fodder in the country to deal with shortages but that there is a cost to transport it to those parts of the country that need it. This is why we have focused on trying to address that cost through a transport subsidy scheme to ensure we can get the fodder that is needed to farms in parts of the country that, for weather-related reasons primarily,

have fodder shortages and that we subsidise the cost of getting the fodder to where it is needed most. That has been the focus of the Minister, Deputy Creed, and it makes sense, but I will ask him to come back to the Deputy on the meal voucher issue he has raised.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The programme for Government commits the Government to protect mortgage holders, tenants and small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs, that had taken out loans that may have transferred to vulture funds. The Minister may be aware of this matter. At least he should be because I told the Taoiseach this is the next scandal that will hit the Government. It has already hit but the Government needs to get to grips with it. I refer to the global restructuring group of Ulster Bank. A total of 2,141 Irish companies employing tens of thousands of people went into the global restructuring group, GRG, and fewer than 100 emerged alive. The select Treasury Committee in Britain heard evidence recently of the actions and *modus operandi* of the GRG, which operated under RBS in Britain. I will read to the Tánaiste a memo written at the height of the financial crisis.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is the question. The memo to staff on the operational manual stated, “Rope: sometimes you just have to let customers hang themselves ... If they sign, they can’t complain.” It goes on to state, “Avoid round number fees - £5,300 sounds as if you have thought about it, £5k sounds like you haven’t.”

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A question to the Tánaiste, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The GRG existed in this State as it did in Britain. West Register existed in this State as it did in Britain. The *modus operandi* was the exact same. The Financial Conduct Authority, FCA, in Britain has done a report into it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It has been leaked. We need to see similar action taken here. I have asked the Minister whether the Central Bank has a copy of that report. It will not say “yes” or “no”.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Tánaiste, as a Government Minister, ensure a full investigation into the operation in this State of GRG, which put more than 2,000 Irish companies and their employees to the wall?

The Tánaiste: It sounds as if the Deputy has asked the Minister for Finance this question recently. I will raise it with him again but I would be surprised if he was not informed of the detail the Deputy has been raising. It is the first time I have heard of the matter on the floor but I will raise it with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, and ask him to get back to the Deputy.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The programme for Government includes a commitment to review the school transport scheme, but 90% of services in the scheme are operated by private companies contracted by Bus Éireann. That is well over 1,000 companies carrying 100,000 children. Thankfully and mercifully, no one was killed in the school bus accident yesterday in Limerick. Buses undergo annual roadworthiness tests, and seat belts, as the Tánaiste knows, are mandatory. However, as reported by Paul Melia in today’s edition of the *Irish Independent*, half of the 1,207 buses subject to roadside inspections in 2016 were found to have defects.

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There is no suggestion, and I am making none, that there was anything at all wrong with the bus involved in the accident but in light of that article, will the Government conduct a safety review of the school bus fleet to give reassurance to all parents that everything is well?

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): This service is provided by the Department of Education and Skills in conjunction with Bus Éireann. In respect of the very sad accident yesterday, I express my sympathy to those who were hurt. I thank the emergency services and the school for the instant plan and the supports that were put in place. The service is delivered with Bus Éireann. I have no reason to believe Bus Éireann is not keeping equipment up to the highest standards. However, in light of what the Deputy has asked, I will ask for a report on the issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Mattie McGrath, is this a question on promised legislation?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Yes. The programme for Government is supposed to support farm families and businesses. As Deputy Pearse Doherty did with the Tánaiste, I raise the issue of the banks, especially AIB. I have been in contact with a family, Tim and Nora. They have written to the Tánaiste, but ten years later they are going around in circles with the bank. They were overcharged by €90,000 and are being treated like pariahs. They cannot get answers from AIB. They are just sent further around the merry-go-round. It is State terrorism-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: -----what is being done by the banks to these people, including many families. They got no response from the Tánaiste when they wrote to him.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: When will the Government take proactive action with these pillar banks that the people bailed out? They are running amok and literally destroying people's lives, which are ending up in suicide, ill health, family separation-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have the question.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: -----and businesses destroyed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The question concerns proactive action in respect of the banks.

The Tánaiste: We cannot discuss individual cases here, obviously-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: No, but the Tánaiste knows about the case.

The Tánaiste: -----but if they are a symptom of a broader problem-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There are thousands of similar cases.

The Tánaiste: -----then of course the Government needs to deal with them. This is why we need a strong Central Bank and a strong regulator, and that is what the Government needs to focus on delivering.

Deputy Michael Collins: The programme for Government commits to make older years

the better years for the elderly. After the Labour Court hearing yesterday, it looks like long-running problems in Bandon Community Hospital might be at an end. Will we see respite care made available to the people of the Bandon hospital catchment area? Most of them, if not all, have been refused over the past year.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank Deputy Collins for raising this issue. I am sure the Labour Court ruling will come as a great relief to the people of Bandon and I expect it will see respite services recommence in Bandon Community Hospital, a hospital I have had the pleasure of visiting and a very special place.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Regarding the programme for Government and water investment, more than 1,000 homes in my constituency yesterday were put on a “no wash, no drink” notice by Irish Water due to extremely elevated levels of chlorine contamination. Quite a number of questions remain as Irish Water fixes the problem. The constituents on the ground do not know the type of chlorine that was in the water or the extent of it. We know there were elevated levels right down at the end of the line in this case, but they do not know how long it has been a problem. What we do know is that this is very important.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I know it is, but let us have a question.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: This concerns children’s health. Children have suffered what their parents describe as chemical burns. There have been many illnesses in the area in recent weeks and people are beginning to wonder what the position is. When people make a call to what is, I understand, the poisons hotline of the HSE, the HSE cannot give them any information because they need the information I have just asked the Tánaiste for regarding the duration of the contamination, the type of product that is in the supply and the extent of it in people’s water. By the way, pets who depend on water have died in this case-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am watching the clock. Can any Minister respond to the question?

The Tánaiste: I will give the House some information on this. As the Deputy knows, about 500 households are affected, which is just over 1,000 people. The incident was caused by a mechanical failure at a chlorine dosing pump that resulted in excessive chlorine levels in the water supply. Chlorine is added to drinking water for disinfection purposes to ensure that water is safe to drink from a microbiological point of view. Irish Water customers have been told not to drink the water, not to use it for food preparation and not to wash with it until further notice. Manned water tankers are in place in appropriate locations in the area. The mechanical failure has now been addressed and Irish Water is flushing the network to return chlorine levels to what they should be. The advice is clear, and it is that people should not use the water until Irish Water gives an instruction that it is okay to do so and the problem has been being fixed.

Deputy John Brassil: On page 41 of the programme for Government, with regard to jobs and rural development, one of the sections deal with the appointment of a new Cabinet Minister whose brief is to advance economic and social progress in rural Ireland and to work to implement best proposals in partnership with the rest of the Government. One of these proposals was to ensure the viability of our post office network and avoid closures in our post office network. Unfortunately, the postmistress in Glengar, County Kerry, passed away on 16 January. Since then the service has been run by her sister in law, who was contacted this week and informed that Glengar post office is to close. If a semi-State body is not implementing Government

policy, how do we hope to make progress in advancing the needs of rural Ireland?

The Tánaiste: The record of this Government and the previous Government on trying to ensure post offices did not close is an awful lot stronger than that of the Government that preceded them. Post offices are a part of rural infrastructure but we also have to work with An Post on different pressures on the overall post office network system. It is difficult for me to comment on a single case unless I have the actual details of it. Two Ministers are very engaged on this issue. These are the Minister, Deputy Naughten, because he has policy responsibility for An Post and the Minister, Deputy Ring, who has responsibility for rural development. I suggest the Deputy tables a question to both of them.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I will direct my question to the Minister for Health. We have a serious health issue in this country at present with Lyme disease. It is a very debilitating disease for anyone unfortunate enough to have it. Early detection can make a big difference to these people. I understand that at present GPs are not trained to deal with it, but it is crucial that they are brought up to speed on it. The earlier it is detected the faster it can be dealt with. It will be cured but it definitely can be made easier on the patients who have it. At present, samples must be sent to Germany for testing. We have good hospitals and good laboratories in this country. I cannot understand for the life of me why we cannot have a laboratory in this country that can test these people's blood. The quicker it is detected the quicker it can be dealt with.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Scanlon for raising the important matter of Lyme disease. I have asked the Department to carry out work on looking at how Ireland deals with it compared with other countries. I expect to receive it any day now and I am happy to revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The programme for Government makes reference to the fair deal scheme. It is my understanding that long overdue changes will be implemented, and one of these changes is the three year cap on the time charge on farm assets. In light of the fact farming families have waited so long for these changes and are under great pressure, including in my constituency of Laois-Offaly where many farming families have approached me and lobbied me on this issue, it is only right that we introduce these changes as quickly as possible. How long will it take for the changes to take effect? I call on the Government to take urgent action on this issue.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Nolan for raising this issue. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, has been working very closely with the IFA on it. We agree there needs to be greater equity and fairness for farming families and small business owners in the fair deal scheme. I expect the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, to have definitive proposals on this very shortly which he will bring to Cabinet. We will then need the co-operation of the Oireachtas to pass legislation and I hope all parties will support us in passing it as quickly as possible. We will have news on it very shortly.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Government has announced ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Last week, officials at the Department of Justice and Equality informed the joint committee on justice that the capacity legislation will not be commenced this year, but for the Irish State's compliance with the convention to be true that capacity legislation needs to be progressed. Is Ireland ratifying something with which it cannot comply? When will we see full compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities? Is this just an announcement of ratification?

The Tánaiste: We will ratify it; we are not just announcing it. It will create a focus on finalising the final piece of legislation required. Much of what Ireland has done in recent years with regard to disability is consistent with the convention. There is more to do and there is no question about it. Many countries ratify conventions while they are in the process of finalising the obligations that come with it. This is the position from an Irish perspective on this convention.

Deputy Martin Heydon: My question is for the Minister for Health, regarding an update on the human tissue Bill. Following publication of the report on the public consultation process in December, which showed a large majority of respondents support the planned opt-out system for organ donation, and a milestone 300 organ transplants carried out in 2017, progressing the Bill will help continue this growth. It is something I would like to see happening as soon as possible.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Heydon for raising this very important issue. We had a very important and informed public consultation, and I published its results just after Christmas. I expect to be in a position to go to pre-legislative scrutiny this year. We will make a lot of progress on it in 2018.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not believe any other Member has a card.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Peace reigns.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputies for their co-operation.

National Broadband Plan: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Timmy Dooley on Tuesday, 6 February 2018:

That Dáil Éireann recognises that:

— 542,000 homes, schools and businesses, representing 40 per cent of our population and 96 per cent of our geographic cover, have no access to broadband, with no possibility of connection on the horizon;

— the ability of rural enterprises and farms to remain competitive and to carry out their administrative and commercial functions is being seriously harmed by the unavailability of broadband to them;

— the National Competitiveness Council of Ireland has stated that regional job growth is being stymied by the lack of connectivity in rural areas;

— children and young people in rural Ireland are being denied the same educational opportunities as their urban peers, owing to the lack of broadband in their homes and schools; and

— there is now effectively a two-tier internet landscape in Ireland, where rural areas rank among the worst-served areas in all of Europe;

notes that:

— in 2011, the previous Fine Gael-led Government first committed to the roll-out of

high-speed broadband to every home and premises in Ireland by 2016;

- the ongoing tendering process for the National Broadband Plan (NBP) first commenced in 2015;

- the decision by SIRO to withdraw from the NBP in September 2017, owing to the overly onerous and complex bidding structure, highlighted wider deficits within the implementation of the NBP; and

- the recent decision by eir to withdraw from the NBP bidding process, leaving only one bidder remaining, has seriously compromised the tendering process and raises doubts over whether the NBP, as currently designed, can ever be implemented; and

calls on the Government to:

- guarantee that high-speed broadband is delivered to every Irish home and business in a prompt manner, even if this requires greater or full State intervention; and

- conduct a full independent expert review of the tendering process, to be concluded within two months, that will provide a full examination of the following aspects of the NBP:

- the design and implementation of the tendering process, and the degree to which the tendering process is inhibiting participation by suitable bidders;

- whether the existent NBP is future-proofed to meet Ireland's future societal and economic needs;

- the impacts of key decisions made during the tendering process on the overall viability and delivery of the NBP, including, the decision by the Government to sign a commitment agreement with eir to serve 300,000 homes that had previously been within the State intervention area, the decision by SIRO to withdraw from the bidding process, and the subsequent decision by eir to also withdraw; and

- the case for State ownership of the infrastructure.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 2:

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

“recognises:

- the importance of the Government's National Broadband Plan (NBP), which will bring high-speed broadband to every home and business in Ireland;

- the NBP will economically transform rural Ireland in the same way that rural electrification did in the last century;

- that the NBP is designed to ensure that the high-speed broadband network is future-proofed for advances in technology and increases in demand over the next 25 years;

and

— that the NBP is underpinned by:

- the Programme for a Partnership Government;
- the European Commission's Europe 2020 Strategy - Digital Agenda for Europe;
- the National Digital Strategy;
- the Action Plan for Jobs;
- the Action Plan for Rural Development; and
- the Digital Strategy for Schools;

notes:

— the appointment, through a public procurement process, of a team of circa 80 national and international experts in procurement, finance, funding, network design, project management, technical specialists and commercial and financial analysts, as well as legal specialists and support staff to support the development of the NBP contract;

— the governance arrangements in place for the procurement process, including a separate Steering Group and Procurement Board which also include national and international experts;

— that ComReg, the statutory body responsible for the regulation of the electronic communication sector, sits as an observer on the Steering Group;

— that the final proposed subsidy is reviewed from a value for money perspective by the National Development Finance Agency against the project budget;

— that the NBP programme is subject to the Public Spending Code;

— that Government agreement will be required before a contract can be awarded and a final subsidy agreed; and

— that expenditure incurred under the NBP is subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General;

considers:

— that stalling the NBP procurement process to undertake a review would delay the award of the NBP contract and of the deployment of broadband infrastructure by a minimum of six months, to allow time for procurement of experts and to carry out a meaningful review;

— the strong governance framework in place for the NBP procurement process;

— that the NBP procurement process is about to enter the final stages and the remaining bidding consortium in the procurement process has reaffirmed its commitment to the successful conclusion of that process; and

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— the significant uncertainty that would be created by embarking on an unnecessary review at this late stage of the procurement process could undermine and collapse that procurement process; and

calls on the Government to continue apace with the public procurement process to select a company to build a future-proofed high-speed broadband network in those areas which will not be served by commercial operators, to ensure that every place name, in every county in Ireland is put on the digital map.”

- (Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to amendment No. 2 on the motion re national broadband plan. On Tuesday, 6 February 2018, on the question that the amendment to the motion be agreed to, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 70(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 47; Níl, 77; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	
<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Brassil, John.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	
<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	
<i>D’Arcy, Michael.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	
<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Curran, John.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Daly, Clare.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>	
<i>Halligan, John.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	

<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	
<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Michael.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	
<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>	
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>	
<i>Stanton, David.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
	<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	
	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>	
	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	
	<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>	
	<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>	
	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
	<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>	
	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
	<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	
	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
	<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>	
	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	
	<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	

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	<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>	
	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	
	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	
	<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Joe McHugh and Tony McLoughlin; Níl, Deputies Michael Moynihan and John Lahart.

Amendment declared lost.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after “the subsequent decision by eir to also withdraw; and” and substitute the following:

“ - the possibility of now progressing the NBP through State ownership, recognising that the effects of the decision to privatise the State company Telecom Éireann in the past has had a negative impact on citizens and telecommunications services, and that State ownership would have facilitated a less complex and possibly less expensive roll out of broadband; and

- the feasibility of using existing State infrastructure held by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) for the future roll out of broadband; and

- place an obligation on existing and future broadband service providers to provide a guaranteed minimum connection speed.”

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 76; Níl, 48; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	
<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	

<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	
<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	
<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Daly, Clare.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>	<i>Halligan, John.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	
<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>Noonan, Michael.</i>	
<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>	<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>	<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>		

<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>		
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>		
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>		
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>		
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>		
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>		
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>		
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>		
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>		
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>		
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>		
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Joe McHugh and Tony McLoughlin.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 77; Níl, 48; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	
<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	

<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	
<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	
<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Daly, Clare.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>	<i>Halligan, John.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	
<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>Noonan, Michael.</i>	
<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>	<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>	<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>		

<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>		
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>		
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>		
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>		
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>		
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>		
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>		
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>		
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>		
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>		
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Michael Moynihan and John Lahart; Níl, Deputies Joe McHugh and Tony McLoughlin.

Question declared carried.

Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Amendment) (Climate Emergency Measures) Bill 2018: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Amendment) (Climate Emergency Measures) Bill 2018 which was taken on Wednesday, 7 February. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time," a division was claimed. In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), that division must be taken now.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 78; Níl, 48; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	

<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	
<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	
<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Daly, Clare.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Halligan, John.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Noonan, Michael.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	

8 February 2018

<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>	<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>	<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>		
<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>		
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>		
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>		
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>		
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>		
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>		
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>		
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>		
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>		
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>		
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Bríd Smith and Richard Boyd Barrett; Níl, Deputies Joe McHugh and Tony McLoughlin.

Question declared carried.

Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Amendment) (Climate Emergency Measures) Bill 2018: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]

Deputy Bríd Smith: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment pursuant to Standing Orders 84A(3)(a) and 141.

Question put and agreed to.

Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Pat Deering - difficulties with the Garda vetting process; (2) Deputy Peadar Tóibín - the inclusion of a rail line to Navan in the infrastructure plan; (3) Deputy James Browne - the need to discuss the shortage of respite places in County Wexford; (4) Deputy Michael McGrath - to discuss the concerns of commuters regarding Bus Éireann services in Cork city and county; (5) Deputy Róisín Shortall - to discuss school intakes in certain multidenominational schools; (6) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the restrictions on HSE funding for home care packages; (7) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - delays with driving tests at Sarsfield Road in Cork; (8) Deputy John McGuinness - to discuss infrastructural issues at Tinnahinch, Graigue-namanagh, County Kilkenny; (9) Deputies John Lahart, Darragh O'Brien, Jim O'Callaghan and John Curran - to discuss the decline of Garda resources in Dublin; (10) Deputy Gino Kenny - to discuss the withdrawal of lidocaine patches from the drug payment scheme; (11) Deputy John Brassil - to discuss the closure of a post office in Glencar County Kerry; (12) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss the availability of tonsillectomy services in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda; (13) Deputy Mick Barry - the expansion of waste facilities in Cork; (14) Deputy Clare Daly - to discuss Fingal County Council's role in applying the EU Regulation 598/14 on noise reduction; (15) Deputy Brian Stanley - the future of Abbeyleigh District Hospital, County Laois; (16) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the rent pressure zones and high rent levels in Cork east; (17) Deputy Mick Wallace - to discuss the procurement of information technology, IT, services to An Garda Síochána which has not been tendered for since 2006; (18) Deputy Eamon Scanlon - contamination of Lough Talt water supply in Sligo; and (19) Deputy Anne Rabbitte - to discuss maternity services at Portiuncula Hospital.

The matters raised by Deputies John Lahart, Darragh O'Brien, Jim O'Callaghan and John Curran, Pat Deering and Clare Daly have been selected for discussion.

Sitting suspended at 1.35 p.m. and resumed at 2.15 p.m.

Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015 [Seanad]: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Noel Rock: I have been thinking about this Bill for quite some time. Its slow passage to this point has not gone unnoticed. It has been so well documented that I have had ample time to consider the matter. The truth is that I remain unconvinced. I agree that we must tackle the issue of alcoholism and that we must tackle excess drinking. Who in this Chamber, were

it fully attended, would not agree with those sentiments? However, I am unconvinced by the measures set out in this legislation. I am unconvinced by the provisions in the Bill in respect of advertising, labelling and, most of all, minimum unit pricing. I support the aims of the Bill, but I disagree with the detail. In short, I want to see action against alcoholism, but I feel these measures squeeze the people on the lowest incomes and the smallest producers.

I do not think there is anyone in this House who underestimates the turmoil, the toll and the cost that alcoholism visits individuals, their loved ones and on society at large. There is no one in this House who does not believe that we need to battle the causes and effects of alcoholism. However, we appear to differ on the interpretation of the data at our disposal and on the effectiveness of the measures that are proposed in this Bill. On the data, we can see that alcohol consumption in Ireland has plummeted since 2001. We can also see that it is somewhat of a generational thing, with European teenagers 37% more likely than Irish teenagers to have consumed alcohol in the past 30 days and European teenagers on average 25% more likely to binge drink than Irish teenagers. In fact, Irish teenagers are the second most sober in the EU, a statistic we should be proud of.

My generation has a very different view from those who came before us when it comes to alcohol. Sitting in the Chamber yesterday and listening to the contributions, I was treated to some tremendously outdated views of youth, young adults and drinking. This view is not borne out by the data in the slightest. Nevertheless, it seems to stick and is commonly wheeled out.

In terms of the industry, the smallest producers are set to suffer most. When it comes to labelling, and when it comes to the impacts on producers, we need only look at the craft beer industry, which we often laud and celebrate in this House as a source of exports, jobs, regional development and tourism. We heard on “Prime Time” on Tuesday night from a Wicklow-based brewery, Wicklow Wolf, who testified that this makes their economies of scale more difficult, and that it may cause them to rethink their plans. This is the same for many craft breweries and is a direct consequence of the labelling issues. Each product will now need a domestic label and a foreign label, a domestic canning press and an export one. These are expensive pieces of equipment that affect the economies of scale. For craft brewers, canning procedures are a significant burden and expense. This has not been considered in the drafting of the Bill. Similarly, it strikes me as incongruous that we as a House supported craft breweries developing visitor centres in Deputy Alan Kelly’s Breweries and Distilleries Bill, yet do not make it clear if these same visitor centres will be included in an advertising ban. Fianna Fáil had an amendment in the Seanad in this regard, but withdrew it; I do not know why.

On minimum unit pricing, and this is perhaps my biggest issue with the Bill, I find it difficult to conclude that minimum unit pricing is born of anything but middle class guilt. It strikes me as being middle class guilt with working class consequences. Alcoholism and abuse of alcohol can happen just as easily to someone on a salary of €80,000, €90,000 or €100,000 as it can to someone on the average wage or below it. The aforementioned middle class guilt, combined with the desire to be seen to do something - anything - comes at the expense of those who work hard, already pay taxes in abundance and drink modestly.

It all strikes me as similar to “Upstairs, Downstairs”. People can just as easily succumb to alcoholism on a high income as they can on a low one, and as we move upward through the income brackets, minimum unit pricing will clearly have a rapidly diminishing effect as a deterrent. Indeed, across my constituency among people I know, I can see how these measures will be welcomed in principle in a broad sense. Everybody agrees alcoholism is a bad thing, after

all. When it comes to the actual implementation, among people I know in my constituency this will be keenly felt and coldly welcomed. For the woman who spends €35 a week on groceries and €5.50 on a bottle of wine, or for the man who buys four cans of beer on a Saturday night, this makes a big difference to their budget, to their week and to their lives. They suspect and expect that minimum unit pricing is something that will apply to other people. However, as the Minister of State and I know, that is not the case. That €5.50 bottle of wine will become €8 under minimum unit pricing. A difference of €2.50 might not mean much to me or the Minister of State, but it could mean an awful lot to an individual for whom it is a once-off treat as part of their groceries. It is a 63% price increase. The four cans of beer will go up by 50%, but to what end? My constituents will lose out, retailers will win, and normal people will lose.

To hone in on what I mean when I say that retailers win, one issue with the Bill that was not highlighted at all yesterday is that the introduction of minimum unit pricing of alcohol will actually put more money into the pockets of the likes of Tesco, a point outlined in the Oireachtas Library and Research digest of the Bill. Our local pubs will not benefit from the minimum unit pricing payment to the same extent as Tesco. Off-trade retailers are expected to benefit by €69 million while on-trade will benefit by €9.3 million. This gets to the nub of my issue with the Bill. This money does not go towards the health service or education in this field. In fact, incredibly, the research indicates that revenue to the Exchequer will reduce by €34 million per year as a consequence of the Bill.

Deputy Boyd Barrett railed yesterday against the retail and alcohol industry, saying he does not care about its profits, which is perhaps a good thing as this Bill looks certain to increase them. A better way for the Government to proceed would be to reintroduce the ban on below-cost selling, which was removed by the Fianna Fáil Government in 2006 when the then Minister for Enterprise, Deputy Micheál Martin, ended the old groceries order. Not only did this mean that retailers could sell alcohol below cost price, but it also led to a situation where supermarkets could recover the VAT on the difference between the sale and cost price, which is yet another cost to the Exchequer and the taxpayer. Alcohol NGOs were rightly critical of this move. The State lost out on revenue and low-cost alcohol became far more widely available as a result of this short-sighted policy by Fianna Fáil.

To my mind, there is an open question about the mechanism of minimum unit pricing. When people see these price rises, and presumably they will very much see them because otherwise what is the point of the disincentive, they will assume this is a tax. They will assume the Government benefits and that it is going towards a health, education or alcohol deterrence policy. That would be a better outcome but, incredibly, it is not the case. I am not sure my constituents, who enjoy an occasional weekend drink, will enjoy being lectured to and patronised, and having the privilege of paying for it, by politicians and anti-alcohol advocates who have never seen the inside of an Aldi or a Lidl.

There is also still a large open question about its effectiveness. It is said that this can only be brought in when Northern Ireland does the same, but while we might then both have minimum unit pricing, it is fair to say that alcohol in Northern Ireland will remain substantially cheaper, as the prices in both jurisdictions will increase in lock-step with each other, effectively preserving the *status quo*. Scandinavia has been mentioned quite often in this debate as an example to look towards and, surprisingly, it provides an example for my point also via Tony Connolly's book on Brexit. It involves a shopping area called Nordby, where Norwegians have spent about €100 million euro every year of the last decade on cross-border shopping. Norway has a punitive sugar tax, so shopping centres in Nordby, which is just over the border in Sweden,

have brilliantly lit outlets brimming with chocolate and sweets dotting the way across the border. Unsurprisingly, it is home to Scandinavia's biggest shopping centre, yet the municipality in which it exists has a population of only 6,300. It strikes me that this Bill could push Newry towards being the new Nordby as people will go up North in search of alcohol at a reasonable price. That would not be a good outcome for us.

Many of my constituents work in Dublin Airport, as do those of the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath. Normally, the airport is exempt from alcohol legislation. Those who have been through either of the terminals will be aware they have a fairly elaborate global whiskey shop. I am led to believe it has the largest selection in Europe. Some of these are extremely rare, with maybe only one bottle making it to Ireland, and perhaps as few as ten in existence globally. Incredibly, no exemption is given for these when it comes to labelling requirements. It would be expected that a custom label would have to be created. This simply will not happen, as anybody with common sense will realise. A small amendment could allow for even a minor exemption for airports whereby the labelling warning would be required to accompany the purchase. This would seem to be a fairly common sense solution.

Broadly speaking, and with those criticisms in mind, I agree with the thrust of this Bill and with the need to curb problem drinking, alcohol addiction and problems in our society caused by alcohol. This Bill will not achieve that, however. The most substantive thing it does is require one third of a label to be devoted to a warning, therefore tying one hand of our craft beer industry behind its back. It requires normal people to pay a minimum unit price, which arguably will not change consumption patterns in any respect but will simply mean people pay more. It will not fund the Exchequer or indeed fund any sort of health or education programme which could make a difference. Instead, it is a straight cash transfer from the citizen to the retailer while the Exchequer actually loses out. There are improvements and amendments to be made and I would appreciate it were the Minister to convey to his colleagues in Cabinet that this Bill can be improved. We all agree that alcoholism is not a good thing for society and that we should all be doing our level best to prevent it.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Fianna Fáil broadly supports the provisions of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill. Any legislative measures to curb alcohol abuse and excessive consumption are to be welcomed.

There is most certainly an issue with harmful drinking in Ireland. Evidence shows that this measure will reduce the burden of harm from alcohol. Its effects will be felt most keenly by high-risk drinkers. It is estimated that three people die every day in Ireland as a result of alcohol. That amounts to 88 deaths a month or more than 1,000 people who lose their lives every year. This Bill will prohibit the advertising or sale of alcohol products below a set minimum price. It is a targeted measure, designed to prevent the sale of alcohol at very cheap prices and is aimed at those who drink in a harmful and hazardous manner. Almost six out of ten people support a minimum price for alcohol products.

The price of alcohol is directly linked to consumption levels and the level of alcohol related harms. Increased costs, including price increases, lead to a decrease in consumption rates and harm. The University of Sheffield has estimated that this measure alone could save €1.7 billion over 20 years by reducing health care costs, in crime and policing, reduced absenteeism and improvements to quality of life. Minimum unit pricing will target cheaper alcohol relative to its strength, because the minimum price is determined by and is directly proportional to the amount of pure alcohol in drink. The University of Sheffield study supported the finding that

the alcohol products most affected by this policy are those that are currently sold very cheaply, often at below-cost prices in off trades such as supermarkets and off licences.

Health labelling of alcohol products is a key element of this Bill. It provides for information on the label of an alcohol product such as a warning to inform the public of the danger of alcohol consumption, information on the danger of alcohol consumption when one is pregnant, the direct link between alcohol and fatal cancers, the quantity of grams of alcohol contained in the product and the number of calories it has. The details on the HSE website provide information on alcohol and related harms. Products sold in kegs or casks will have an accompanying document containing the above information. Licensed premises will have a notice on the warnings, and website information will confirm that a document noting the alcohol content and energy value of every product for sale in the premises is available on request. The above information will also be required on any websites that sell alcohol online. The aim is to provide consumers with information on alcohol products regardless of the manner of purchase; whether it is bought in a pub, shop or online.

The Health Research Board noted strong support from the public for more labelling on alcohol products with information on the alcohol strength, calories and alcohol-related harms. Mixed traders and retailers can store alcohol products in a storage unit behind the counter and can display and advertise alcohol products only. They will have to have an area in the shop which is separated by a physical barrier or enclosed storage units on the shop floor where the products are not visible. A maximum of three units of 1 m wide each and 2.2 m high will be permitted. The separation of alcohol products is intended to achieve several objectives. The access to alcohol products will be more controlled in these premises. Alcohol products will be less likely to be on display near grocery products, thereby discouraging their purchase as everyday household grocery shopping. Alcohol products also will be less visible to children.

The Bill provides for the drafting of regulations the Minister for Health to prohibit or restrict certain types of promotions, for example, buying one alcohol product and getting another one free or for student nights. The intention of the provision is to prohibit promotions that encourage risky drinking, that encourage individuals to purchase or drink more than they might intend or to drink faster than they might intend. The Bill provides for the restriction of the content, placement and volume of alcohol advertising. There is an aim in the provision to protect children from exposure to alcohol advertising and to address advertising that links alcohol with positive healthy lifestyles and social successes.

The Bill contains a requirement to include health warnings and details of HSE alcohol information websites on all advertisements of alcohol products. It will also restrict the content of alcohol advertising to facts about alcohol products. The advertising of such products will be prohibited within 200 m of the perimeters of schools, early years services such as crèches, and local authority playgrounds. Advertising on public transport vehicles and public transport stops and stations will also be prohibited.

I see all of these measures as very positive. They will enable Irish society to discourage alcohol abuse and harmful drinking, and will redirect our attention to a more positive attitude to our health and perhaps change our drinking culture for generations to come.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I absolutely support the objectives of the Bill to tackle alcohol misuse and underage drinking. However, I have some concerns about the labelling and advertising provisions in the Bill, which I believe will not achieve their public policy objective but

which will seriously hamstring a thriving indigenous rural-based sector and affect rural investment and jobs. Balance is a word lost in this case. These amendments include the introduction of mandatory cancer warnings on all alcohol products sold in the Republic of Ireland and a requirement that health warning labels must make up at least one third of dedicated labelling space of all alcohol products sold in the Republic of Ireland. I believe we need to balance the objective of the Bill with the need to protect the growing Irish craft beer, whiskey and gin industries, including associated tourism.

The drinks sector supports the employment of 204,000 people in this country. This includes brewers, distillery workers, suppliers, farmers, distributors and those working in the hospitality sector. The sector generates a national wage bill of €2.9 billion, purchases over €1.1 billion of Irish products annually, exports goods worth more than €1.25 billion and provides the State over €2.3 billion through excise and VAT income, as well as hundreds of millions in income tax, PRSI receipts and tax on profits every year. Ireland exports drinks products to 130 markets worldwide, reinforcing our reputation as a premium food and drinks producer. Four years ago there were four whiskey distilleries in Ireland. There are now 18, with an additional 16 in planning. There are also approximately 100 microbreweries operating in Ireland today.

The advertising and labelling measures are not supported by evidence in regard to decreasing misuse and will severely constrain the ability of small craft breweries and distillers entering the market. Before going into greater detail about the labelling and advertising provisions, I would like to refer to one distillery in particular. The Shed, owned by Mr. P.J. Rigney, is a handcraft distillery in the rural village of Drumshanbo, County Leitrim. Mr. Rigney's business was launched, as I understand it, by the Taoiseach, and he has sent me an email, which he has given me permission to read here today. It states:

I am deeply unhappy with [the Government's] approach to this bill, the lack of consultation & the propagation of outdated stereotypes & suspect research on alcohol consumption & its health affects provided by lobbyists in the health sector some of whom appear to have an extreme & narrow agenda. I am particularly concerned with the changes to advertising & labelling, some of which is pure nonsense & will affect our investment & jobs in Leitrim. We hope to achieve planning for the enhanced new visitors experience next week [for] Drumshanbo. I am considering cancelling the project & will have no choice but to put the cause of the cancellation at the foot of this bill unless [common] sense prevails and [the Bill] is balanced.

The Shed Distillery employs 18 people and will add 20 more if their visitors' experience centre goes ahead in Drumshanbo, where there is a need for jobs. The risk is a €2 million investment and 20 jobs at the very least in a rural area which needs these jobs badly.

The distillery will link with local hotels, the Shannon Blueway and Arigna to bring tourism to the area. All of that will be put at risk. Of the company's 18 employees, 16 were previously on the live register. Some of them were unemployed for up to eight years. They are wonderful staff and are keen to learn. In conjunction with its US distiller, the Shed has trained wonderful local staff with zero previous experience to become world-class distillers from a point of zero. All of this has happened in Drumshanbo. Why should the company invest if it is being undermined by the Government in the form of this extreme and unbalanced Bill?

In my home town of Ballymote, there is a micro-brewery which has been operating for approximately four years and employs 20 people in an area where people have no real opportu-

nity to gain employment. Another small micro-brewery in Sligo, Lissadell brewery, employs 18 people. Those are brave individuals who are trying to do something for their local areas by creating employment where previously there was none. In the plan for the period 2020 to 2040, there is no mention of the north west. Sligo, Donegal, Letterkenny, Cavan, Monaghan and Roscommon are totally ignored in that plan.

Section 12 of the Bill provides for the introduction of new labelling requirements in respect of alcohol products. Labels will include a warning on the danger of alcohol consumption, a warning on the danger of alcohol consumption when pregnant, a warning on the link between alcohol and fatal cancers and information on calorific content and the quantity of alcohol in grams. The Minister has complete discretion on the content, form, size, colour and prominence of these warnings, which he can unilaterally introduce without any consultation with the drinks industry or other relevant stakeholders. We are all human and we would all agree that people should be made aware of the dangers of alcohol. In addition, we all want people to drink less. Section 12(10) also states that at least one third of the printed materials will be given over to the health warnings and outer packaging as well.

The Minister accepted two Opposition amendments in the Seanad, one of which was to include cancer warnings on all alcohol products. We cannot disagree with that either but it is about achieving a balance. No other country in the world has mandatory cancer warnings on alcohol products. Such a measure applies a stigma to products produced in Ireland and gives a clear advantage to competitors abroad who are not required to carry such labels.

According to DKM Economic Consultants, who published a report, Socio-Economic Impacts of Proposed Regulations under the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill, specific Irish-only labelling will impose additional costs on producers and will result in significant additional costs and logistical difficulties for businesses operating in and importing to Ireland, which represent a barrier to trade in the European Union. Industry sources indicate that the cost of redesigning a single label for large-scale manufacturers is approximately €14,000 while the entire suite of labelling for a single product line, including front and back labels and outer packaging, is approximately €50,000. This is a cost that small brewers, micro-brewers and small distilleries trying to get off the ground cannot afford. Imposing Irish-only labels puts Ireland at regulatory divergence from everywhere else in the EU and constitutes a barrier to trade.

The Bill will make Ireland one of the most restrictive countries in the world for marketing alcohol products. The advertising restrictions will make it difficult for new distilleries and breweries to market their products and compete against established brands. The advertising restrictions will give an unfair advantage to products or brands that are well established within the Irish market. Small and new alcohol producers will be placed at a major disadvantage in terms of brands. The Bill will stop product innovation in Ireland, which will reduce consumer choice and competition. Furthermore, adverts for visitor centres that contain the name of the brand will be severely constrained. Over 2.5 million people visit breweries and distilleries here annually.

Section 13 imposes significant restrictions on what can appear in advertisements and section 14 imposes significant prohibitions on where advertising, particularly outdoor advertising, can be placed. These restrictions will severely constrain how new brands can be advertised and promoted and will give an unfair competitive advantage to established companies. Those restrictions will damage competition and have the potential to decimate whiskey and gin tourism in this country.

In section 2, advertising is defined as any form of commercial communication with the aim or direct or indirect effect of promoting an alcohol product and includes the name of any brand of alcohol. The Bill does not contain any exemption for Irish whiskey, gin, cream liqueur or distillery visitor centres. That is a mistake. All of that means that the section 13 and 14 restrictions will apply to any advertisement for any Irish whiskey distillery visitor centres that contain the name of the whiskey brand produced there. For example, visitor centre advertisements will not be able to contain images of people or a suggestion of a storyline relating to alcohol. Outdoor advertising will be severely limited and advertisements will be prohibited in train stations and at bus and Luas stops. The Bill will simply shift advertising revenue away from Irish media towards international, non-Irish regulated media organisations that broadcast freely in this country.

It is possible to balance the Bill without undermining the important objectives it seeks to achieve. We have already made significant progress in the absence of such unbalanced measures. According to the World Health Organization, WHO, alcohol consumption in Ireland has fallen by 25% since 2005, during which time the alcohol industry has been operating to strict voluntary codes in the context of advertising. Furthermore, in October 2017, an iReach consumer poll of over 1,000 respondents found that only 27% of respondents believe the measures proposed in this Bill will be effective. We need to seriously examine it again.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Bogfaimid ar aghaidh anois go dtí Sinn Féin. Glaoim ar an Teachta Denise Mitchell atá ag roinnt a cuid ama leis an Teachta Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Yes. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important legislation. I want to say at the outset that I am very disappointed at the length of time it took for this Bill to get to the floor of the Dáil for debate.

I am very aware of the intense lobbying of politicians on all sides in respect of this Bill, particularly by the drinks industry. The point of the Bill is to make it clear that alcohol is not like any other product. It is a Bill which has at its heart the best interests of our citizens.

Everybody in this Chamber is aware that we are in the middle of a health crisis. We only have to look at the increased numbers in accident and emergency departments every weekend to see the strain alcohol abuse is placing on our front-line services. Right now across the State, there are 1,500 people in hospital beds due to alcohol related health issues, and that is even before we get into the other areas like justice and social protection on which millions of euro have to be spent every year to deal with alcohol-related issues. This is an issue we need to get to grips with.

Other Deputies and Senators have spoken at length on the various issues relating to this Bill. I want to focus on young people. As I said earlier, alcohol is just not like any other product yet advertisements, which children see, constantly glamorise its use. As we know, young people will often behave in a learned way. In other words, they pick up traits and habits they see being used by people in authority, celebrities or their own parents.

The reality is that alcohol consumption has become totally interwoven into the fabric of our society. That is simply not a healthy development. Sports teams are sponsored by spirits and beer companies. Every time a foreign Head of State visits the country, a pint of stout is shoved into his or her hand in order that a photograph to be splashed across newspapers throughout Ireland and abroad. That is ridiculous.

We all remember when, a few years ago, a grocery chain in Dublin actually advertised, by means of leaflets and posters, a children's allowance day deal that included, alongside groceries, an advertisement for slabs of beer at special reduced prices. It was absolutely shameless and displayed an incredible lack of awareness and cop-on.

We need to ensure the dangers associated with alcohol abuse are taught to children from a young age. I used to smoke but have given it up. I remember how the issue used to come up with my children when they came from school asking "Mammy, why are you smoking? It's bad for you". That hits home with parents and shows how important educating young people is. Its effect is not just on those young people themselves; there is a ripple effect on the people around them. There should be more focus on educating younger people in school on the dangers associated with alcohol misuse.

The problems associated with alcohol misuse are broader than just health. In 2014, the Child Law Reporting Project found that alcohol misuse was a factor in almost one in eight cases in which a child was placed into care. It is clear that there is a close link between excessive parental drinking and child neglect and abuse. The ISPCC found that the life of one in every 11 children is being negatively affected by parental drinking. Some of the stories from children who took part in surveys on this issue are heartbreaking. The burden of problem drinking is not solely on the person who drinks. It is shared with family and friends and it is placed on our public services.

I also want to address an issue which has been brought up time and again, that is how minimum pricing will affect retailers. Below-cost selling by large supermarket chains to drive footfall and sales of more expensive grocery products is a long-running tactic. It is morally wrong. Not only that, it also squeezes responsible retailers such as the local off-licence which simply cannot compete with these supermarkets. I support this Bill fully. It is about taking a responsible approach to the scourge of alcohol misuse in the State. It is about protecting our young people, discouraging the glamorisation of alcohol and increasing public awareness of the health and social problems associated with alcohol misuse.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It is clear not only in its Title but, equally, in the shared intent of its promoters in both Houses of this Parliament, what exactly the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015 is about. The Bill is about public health first and last. There is no other agenda. That its passage into law will have an impact across our communities is not disputed. This will be in evidence in all non-off-licence settings. My hope and indeed my expectation is that the impact will not be as severe for individual businesses as has been either feared or forecast. Once it is done, it is done. That is important. Whether we are retailers or consumers, we will find the new reality strange and challenging at first. As with other significant societal measures in the past, we will adapt. Whether one is a retailer or a consumer, there is a shared responsibility to contribute positively to and accept our role in any measure that can help reduce the simply dreadful impact that alcohol abuse has on the lives of so many with alcohol addiction, their families, their friends, their communities and on Irish society more broadly. We must face up to the facts and our shared duty to accept these statistics and the terrible realities that those statistics represent in the lives of so many, including people and families that we all know. Just as worrying are the effects on those we do not know because the hurt and pain is often hidden from everyone's view.

The following fact has already been recorded in the course of this Second Stage debate. Each day in Ireland, we are reliably informed, three people die in circumstances directly re-

lated to alcohol misuse. The passage of this Bill will not be a panacea for this frightening fact. People are still going to die and lives will still be blighted. We have a duty, however, to take a conscious stand and to do anything and everything we can to help address the carnage of lives lost to alcohol and the ruin of innocent lives, often as those affected suffer in silence. At a time when our hospitals are at breaking point, our accident and emergency units are filled to capacity and more every weekend with people suffering from the effects of alcohol. It is incomprehensible to me and to most people, I think, that there are voices among us that, for some reason, choose to ignore what our hospital staff, doctors, nurses, care attendants and others face week after week, not to mention the frightening impact this has on other patients of all ages, including children. These issues have been raised with me on many occasions over my years in public life, not only during my time as a spokesperson on health.

The warnings that will now be placed on alcohol products are welcome. They have their own difficulties and will, of course, have an impact in lots of ways. Nevertheless, they are welcome. Just because they are not already in use in other jurisdictions does not mean we cannot take the lead. Restrictions on the placing of advertisements and the times at which they can be broadcast are welcome. They are very important measures. Notwithstanding all of the many specific provisions the Bill entails, the main positive the public will take from it is that people will at last realise that alcohol is a product of choice. Up to this point, marketing gurus in the major drinks companies may as well have been opening a drink in front of us and pouring it down our throats. There was no getting away from it. That is the current situation. The Bill will certainly make alcohol a product of conscious purchasing choice, which I welcome. I look forward to a point in the future when we will be able to look back on the passage of this Bill and say it was worth it. If the health of our nation is significantly improved and our relationship with alcohol becomes mature and much more respectful, it surely will have been worth it. Only time will tell.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: Ba mhaith liom a rá ar dtús go dtógaim deoch. Is maith liom é. Is maith liom dul isteach i dtithe tábhairne, is áiteanna sóisialta iad, agus is maith liom fion le béilí. I take a drink, I enjoy it and I also enjoy going into many of the pubs because there is a very good atmosphere. I know the numbers employed in the drinks industry and I know the interest in the growing market in craft beers we have seen recently. Some areas of the country are producing their own spirits and this is having a positive impact on employment and the spirit in rural Ireland. I also know the numbers who visit the breweries and distilleries around the country, and the spin-off merchandising industry from that, as well as the visitors who come to enjoy the pub atmosphere and the music. However, there is no doubt but that we have a very unhealthy relationship with alcohol in Ireland. We know the damage it is doing to individuals, families and communities the length and breadth of Ireland. That damage is physical, mental and emotional, and it is because of the misuse and abuse of alcohol.

Apart from that physical and psychological cost, there is also a very serious financial cost to both individuals and society. We know figures of €1 billion to €3 billion have been quoted between health and justice because of the abuse of alcohol, which is a serious contributing factor in assaults, domestic violence and sexual assaults, as well as in self-harm, suicide and attempts at suicide. Child welfare concerns have also been articulated for those who are living in families with alcohol issues. Even for those young children who do not come to the attention of the child welfare agencies, the evidence is strong of the damage done to children and young people through living with excessive drinking. We also have figures on absenteeism from school and from the workplace. From my knowledge of prison and those in prison, I would venture to

suggest that at least 50% of those who are in prison are there because of alcohol or drug issues. Into that mix come the illegal substances and drugs, and we see poly-drug use with alcohol, which is a lethal mix.

That is the damage from the misuse and abuse of alcohol that has been going on for generations. There is also the association of alcohol with every occasion from birth, when we have to wet the baby's head, to death and on all the occasions in between. There is a drink for every occasion and for every mood or feeling, whether one is sad, happy, lonely, depressed or celebrating. There is now a culture of normalising alcohol with everything that goes on in our lives. Another normalising aspect is that it is almost acceptable, if that is not too strong a word, to be drunk, to be over the limit or to have one too many. It is disheartening that, as a society, we are not shocked enough when we see such examples of excessive drinking.

We know the reports, the statistics and the surveys. I have looked at one from the Health Research Board on the *per capita* alcohol consumption compared with other countries, and Ireland scores highly. The board then makes the point that if one fifth of the adult population is not taking alcohol, that puts the *per capita* figures even higher.

When I was speaking on the Bill on removing the Good Friday ban, I made a point about St. Patrick's Day. I acknowledge what many cities and towns are trying to do to make it more family-friendly but there is no doubt that St. Patrick's Day - a public holiday as well as a day of religious significance - is a drinking day and, unfortunately, it is a drinking to excess day; it is drowning the shamrock. In parts of our cities, the late-night streets are just rivers of broken glass, urine and vomit and that is not just confined to St. Patrick's night but is also a feature on many weekends in the cities. Gardaí, members of the ambulance services and staff in accident and emergency are the ones who bear the brunt of that excessive drinking and drug taking.

That is an overview of the reality, the damage and the negatives from abuse and misuse of alcohol. If one turns to the new strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, I note the expert panel conducted a review of the previous drugs strategy and characterised alcohol as the elephant in the room. The question is how we are dealing with that elephant in the room, that is, with the damage, devastation and harm that is caused by abuse and misuse. This Bill is being presented as a way forward in addressing that and in responding to the damage. It is doing that through a new system of labelling, restrictions on advertising, structural separation of alcohol and measures on promotions and minimum pricing. I have to ask what difference those measures will make to the problem drinkers, to those who misuse and abuse. What difference will they make to excessive drinking and the drinking culture? Will this Bill have the effect it is claimed it will have? I have my doubts, in spite of the statements of welcome and optimism as to what it will do in raising awareness of the risks associated with alcohol and in reducing consumption. To me, this Bill is only a small part of a much bigger conversation. Although it has taken so much time and work, I feel the Bill is just scratching the surface of the issue. While it is about alcohol, the new strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, covers drug and alcohol use in Ireland, which is the much broader conversation we need to have.

When we look at the drug situation, we have legal and illegal drugs. There are frightening statistics on the increase in prescription drugs, such as oxycodone, fentanyl and codeine, with the numbers doubling, trebling and quadrupling. We also have the statistics on the increase in the use of sleeping tablets and antidepressants. These are statistics for medical cardholders, so we do not have the other statistics on drugs bought privately. Then there are the illegal drugs such as heroin, ecstasy and cocaine, as well as the proliferation of tablets on sale. I have to ask

whether we are having the right conversation and how serious we are when it comes to tackling the misuse and abuse of alcohol and drugs.

There is a lot of dishonesty, contradiction and hypocrisy in the whole debate we have about alcohol. I see a positive move in the small craft beer cottage industry that is developing in rural Ireland and the employment it is bringing, and Deputy Catherine Connolly particularly wanted that point to be made. While it is a small but growing export business, however, the labels are now required to have health warnings, although this is not an EU regulation. That will be a serious cost for the small brewer but it will not be anything for the multinationals and the big companies which are producing other forms of alcohol. It will hit the small producer because those products will be on a shelf in European supermarkets with this health warning that if anyone drinks the beer, all these terrible things will happen, but they are side by side with beers from other countries with no health warning at all although they contain the same ingredients. That has to be looked at further.

We could put health warnings on so many things in our supermarkets and shops because most things we eat should carry a health warning in some way. There was a dishonesty in the previous debate on the Good Friday ban. Leaving aside the tradition and religious aspect of it, we were told it was all about tourists but we were not telling the truth. It was not about tourists; it was really about the vintners and what they were losing because of the Good Friday ban.

Part of this Bill relates to young people. The Minister wants to create an environment in which our children are not exposed to alcohol products or advertising of such products daily. Short of putting all the children in Ireland on a desert island with no alcohol, I really have to ask about the practicality of this. I accept the arguments being made about advertising but, to my mind, it is about education and awareness-raising among young people on how to cope and deal with alcohol. It is also about raising their critical awareness of what the advertising industry is about, the work it does in targeting an audience's fears and expectations, the hopes it plays on in order to sell a product, as well as the techniques and the strategies. Whether it is a caption or a jingle, using a famous person or using a whole psychology of colour, young people need to understand that. Such critical awareness would be much more beneficial and effective.

There are mixed views among young people when it comes to advertising being an incentive to drink. I refer to work I did with transition year and fifth year students in second level schools in the north-east and north-west inner city, where we got them to look at the advertising around alcohol and drugs. They made the point forcefully that the lifestyle that was being portrayed was a partying one, with money and celebrations. However, they found the lifestyle portrayed in the advertisements to be totally unrealistic in the context of their lives. They did not see it as portraying something they would achieve because they knew what life was about and they knew what having too much drink was about. They also saw the irony in banning alcohol sponsorship of sports when the pub is often the norm as the place to watch these sports. They were not into who exactly was the sponsor. They also saw the irony in the contradiction of sport and alcohol in the same advertisement because they know that sport is about a healthy lifestyle whereas too much alcohol can be unhealthy. They were very aware of what the advertisements were doing.

They discussed their reasons for drinking. It was to boost confidence and help them relax and have fun. How do we address that? How do we give them the opportunities to celebrate, relax and have fun that do not involve alcohol and drugs? We know confidence comes from a sense of self and self-esteem. That requires joined-up thinking between schools and the com-

munities which have the programmes to work with young people.

I know the argument that the advertising and drinks companies would not spend so much on advertising if it did not have an effect. The 400 young people who were asked over four different events were not taken in by advertising. We need to go beyond that debate and look at the advertising and marketing that encourages young people to stop and think. I want to make the point strongly that the voices of young people should be heard. The work must be done with them, rather than assume that we know what is affecting them, or what works or does not in relation to them. They would be empowered to make the informed choices when they make decisions on alcohol and drugs.

On pricing, no doubt others will have been to supermarkets and hypermarkets in France, Spain, Italy and Portugal where alcohol is often cheaper than alcohol here in Ireland. While those countries have problem drinkers, they do not have the same visible, excessive, out of control drinking that we have here. I am not sure this Bill will make a difference to that excessive drinking. Similarly, regarding on-street drinking, while it can be very nice to sit in the sun at an outdoor café or pub with a drink, whether alcoholic or otherwise, the problem lies where it gets out of hand and that happens because of the culture we have. While each of us is responsible for our drinking, there are irresponsible owners and workers in pubs and clubs who serve those who are clearly drunk. Pubs provide a social atmosphere but they are affected by cheap alcohol and the offers which encourage people to drink at home, where they drink more than they would if they were out. The other side of that is that if no one goes to the pubs, particularly on Monday, they will come up with offers and promotions. I can imagine the offers that we will see this Good Friday.

Another important part of the conversation that we are not having is the services available in Ireland for problem drinkers and drug users, especially for those who do not have private health insurance. We know of the chaos in emergency departments when those presenting with alcohol and drug issues are in the same space as those presenting with coronaries, broken limbs or strokes, for instance. While they are all health matters, there is a need for a separate space. That is not to stigmatise those who are coming in with alcohol and drug issues, but rather a practical suggestion.

I am very struck by all the work that went into the Bill by so many organisations and the Oireachtas staff who were involved in its drafting, along with the extensive lobbying. However, I feel it skirts the real issues. I think of those who are working on the front line in the addiction area and the many projects which have faced so many cuts in recent years but are there for those who want to start a recovery journey, a person in addiction and those affected by the addiction who have a different expectation of what we mean by a public health alcohol Bill. That is the debate we really need.

If one goes to the emergency department drunk, there is an opportunity to sober up before being put out, but at least one project I know takes referrals from emergency departments which gives people the option of recovery. That saves lives. That project has no guarantee of continued funding. There is a lack of residential places for those who do not have private health insurance. I acknowledge the work of Sister Consilio and the opportunities her centres give to those who do not have private health insurance. I also acknowledge the 12-step programmes and the voluntary and community organisations throughout the country which struggle between cuts and the uncertainty of continued funding.

Many people go into prison and get sober and drug-free while they are inside, yet they are then released into the chaos which got them into addiction in the first place. We do not seem to care about that and the revolving door continues to operate.

I also refer to the work of the Recovery Academy Ireland and the number of recovery coaches and the work they do in raising awareness of recovery and providing training and support. They make the point that recovery is possible and achievable.

Overall, I support the Bill and what it is trying to do but there are areas that need further scrutiny, particularly with the unintended consequences of some of its measures. It is disappointing that having taken so long, it only deals with a small part of the problem and what is needed to resolve it.

We need up-to-date, reliable, evidence-based reports. Too many contradictory reports are being published. We also need the same space to be given to young people and those who work directly in areas affected by this in discussing this issue as has been given to the lobbying groups for the drinks industry by Ministers and their officials.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this much debated and much discussed Public Health Alcohol Bill, which is before us. It is a Bill which I know very well. It had a turbulent time in the Seanad last year and is legislation about which many industry and commercial organisations have contacted me since it was published regarding its worrying measures.

I support the overall principles of the Bill and its ultimate policy objective, the Minister for Health's efforts to reduce alcohol consumption. If this Bill was simply about reducing the consumption of alcohol and about reducing the harm caused by the misuse of alcohol in our society, as its listed objectives advise, I do not believe there would be any major cause for concern. However, it is not limited to these aims and features several areas which deeply concern me as an elected representative for Sligo-Leitrim, which I will highlight.

It seems as though, yet again, the hands of the un-named and unaccountable Government officials are all over this Bill and that we as public representatives are expected to run with it, despite its flaws. It is unfair. I speak here as a life-long pioneer and as a person who has never taken a drink of alcohol in my life. As far as I am concerned there is no vested interest on my part.

I strongly believe this Bill goes too far when attempting to address the real problems with excessive drinking in this country and will have many unintended consequences on a wide range of sectors throughout Irish society. These are consequences which could be avoided while still ensuring the Bill's overall aims are met. These are aims which I fully support and Ireland is already on its way to addressing them judging by the fall in consumption levels since 2002.

Whether it is in agriculture, employment, tourism or the economy, this Bill will have many unintended consequences across the country and many jobs will be lost as a result. My colleague, Deputy Eamon Scanlon, highlighted this earlier but I will give an example of how it will affect people in my area. Some years ago, a man named Pat Rigney invested in a small food hub facility in Drumshanbo, County Leitrim with the help of local activists. I have known him since he started in Drumshanbo. This location, since expanded, has become known as the Shed Distillery. This is a small village in the north west with limited industry. However, over

the last two years Pat Rigney has hired 14 local staff and gone on to develop a unique, award winning Irish gin that has taken the world by storm. The success of Drumshanbo Gunpowder Gin proves just what a success rural Ireland can be for investment. The product's incredible growth has meant that further expansion and jobs are planned in Drumshanbo. It is expanding its product range having just received planning permission for a site for a multi-million euro whiskey visitor experience and tourist attraction, which if developed will create a further 20 jobs in the area. It is a wonderful success story for County Leitrim and is something which the local community in Drumshanbo is very proud of. A small start-up company, with limited market share to date, has grown in size as a result of its premium quality and being able to tell the unique story of its production and its humble origins. It is a premium, high quality product that is clearly not being abused in the same way that other cheaper and low-cost spirits are, and as such, causing real damage, yet the consequences of this Bill, particularly sections 12 to 14, inclusive, will ultimately put this greater product's future in doubt. It has already put the new visitor attraction in Drumshanbo in doubt and it will also put all of these potential new jobs in County Leitrim in doubt. It and the high quality premium Irish products just like it are being damaged by this Bill. I believe this is deeply unfair as they are not the root cause of or even associated with the problems we are trying to address.

Moving away from Drumshanbo for a moment, I am firmly of the opinion that the key way to tackle the real abuse of alcohol in this country is to ensure that the below-cost selling of alcohol is tackled hard and that dangerous advertising campaigns and unsafe drink offers aimed at young people are curtailed. It is clear that this is where the real damage is being done and I believe this may have been the original intention of this proposal. However, we are now in a situation whereby this minimum pricing aspect of the Bill is totally reliant on the Government of Northern Ireland passing a similar Bill on pricing to avoid large-scale excursions across the Border and yet there are no guarantees that Northern Ireland will even have a Government in place at Stormont between now and 2020, let alone that it will bring in a Bill to this effect. Let us be clear, the one key area of this Bill which will ultimately have the greatest effect against harmful and dangerous alcohol consumption is simply not guaranteed as we stand here today. This is quite alarming.

The key areas of this Bill which, I believe, are causing the most alarm are the proposed new measures on labelling and the advertising of alcohol products. These dramatic and, in my opinion, unnecessary measures are somewhat excessive and when considered along with the fact that Ireland's alcohol consumption levels are already rapidly declining, can be seen as extreme.

With regards to labelling in particular, whilst I support the concept of any product on sale in Ireland displaying the content and calories contained within for health reasons and also the grams of alcohol along with the written warning, the proposals contained in section 12 will, amongst other things, ultimately lead to unfair stigmatisation of many Irish produced products abroad as many locally produced, as such, by smaller-scale alcohol producers will not be able to afford to have different labels for different countries due to the cost implications involved. This will lead to the stigmatisation of many Irish products internationally and as a result lead to damaging consequences for Irish businesses.

On this basis, I cannot see why the Government has accepted two amendments in the Seanad from Senators Nash and Black which, if retained, will require the introduction of mandatory cancer warnings on all alcohol products sold in the Republic of Ireland and a requirement that health warning labels must make up at least one third of dedicated labelling space. These amendments, in my opinion, have damaged the distinct labelling of premium Irish products,

which are not being abused like cheaper products, and damage the reputation of these brands internationally. I must ask where has the Department of Health presented real scientific or evidence-based argument to justify the introduction of these specific cancer and 30% labels. Are the officials suggesting here that we will soon be putting cancer labels to the tune of 30% of the packaging on labels for bacon, sausages, red meat, butter, smoked salmon etc. for cancer risk also? What will be next? What will these cancer warnings look like? Will they be the same as those on the cigarette packages? As of yet, we do not know as this function will be decided solely by the Minister for Health. I do not doubt the Minister's good intentions here, but can one imagine a bottle of premium Irish whiskey, gin or whatever with such huge labels and images on it and the effect it will have on the potential to sell this product abroad? Who will this benefit when our producers are exporting? It is unworkable and it will greatly damage local business in Ireland and internationally.

The other key area in the Bill I have a major problem with is the way it will introduce advertising restrictions on products almost like a blanket ban. As well as having unintended consequences for the work of agencies such as Drinkaware Ireland, an NGO set up to limit alcohol abuse in the country, this Bill will ensure that the key players in the alcohol market will remain as the kingpins, as new companies and smaller producers will not be able to advertise their product to the market as the larger companies were able to do and as such will not be able to grow to the same extent. How can the Minister seek to compensate for the damage this Bill's measures will do on the rapidly growing craft beer industry, the new local distilleries and the tourism sector as a result?

Section 13 imposes significant restrictions on what can appear in advertisements and section 14 imposes significant prohibitions on where advertising, particularly outdoor advertising, can be placed. These restrictions will severely constrain how new brands can be advertised and promoted and they will clearly give an unfair competitive advantage to established companies. Without doubt, these restrictions will ultimately damage competition.

More critically, these restrictions have the potential to decimate the rapidly growing whiskey tourism sector. This worries me greatly as, aside from Drumshanbo, we have a major new whiskey distillery visitor centre being developed at Hazelwood in Sligo and I fear that any limit on advertising the tourism attraction would bring this major project into doubt.

Under section 2 of the Bill "advertising" is defined as "any form of commercial communication with the aim or direct or indirect effect of promoting an alcohol product and includes...the name of any brand of alcohol product". The Bill, as it stands, does not contain any exemption for Irish whiskey distillery visitor centres. Does the Department for Health really think that the whiskey tourism industry, with all its potential benefits to the economy, is causing the problems which below-cost selling of alcohol is causing? We need to get real.

Sections 13 and 14 restrictions will apply to any advertisement for an Irish whiskey distillery visitor centre that contains the name of the whiskey brand produced there. For example, visitor centre advertisements will not be able to contain images of persons or a suggestion of a storyline. Outdoor advertising will be severely limited and advertisements will be prohibited from train stations, bus stops and Luas stops. This is crazy and it will certainly have a major effect on tourism and jobs in many rural areas of the country.

I reiterate my firm commitment to the overall aim of this Bill, which is to reduce alcohol consumption in Ireland, to limit advertising to children and to prevent alcohol-related harm in

the future. However, I am afraid that for me, personally, as a non-drinker, many of the changes contained within this Bill are a step too far and need to be addressed. We are throwing the baby out with the bath water in our excessive attempts to tackle a problem which, I believe, does not need to damage Irish tourism, jobs and industry whilst successfully achieving its aim.

In my view, the advertising and labelling restrictions contained within the Bill are poorly targeted, are not backed by evidence and will unfairly impact on local industry if left unchallenged. The Bill, as it is, stigmatises Irish products and does not focus on cheaper imports and below-cost selling in supermarkets. It will increase production costs to Irish businesses. It will introduce barriers to trade and will ultimately cost us local jobs.

I believe that we have taken-----

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: Deputy McLoughlin has taken four minutes of my time.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: Sorry, I will conclude.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I hope the Leas-Cheann Comhairle might do me the courtesy of allowing me a few minutes, seeing as my colleague took five minutes of my time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: To be clear, when a party or group has it, I do not intervene. It is a matter for the Member to consider his or her colleague.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I welcome the opportunity to speak, in the few minutes I have left, on this long-awaited legislation. It is the first time alcohol has been dealt with by the Department of Health as public health policy rather than by the Department of Justice and Equality. This demonstrates how central the Bill is to the Healthy Ireland agenda being pursued by the Government, which some people in this House do not seem to understand.

Previous generations understood clearly that alcohol is not an ordinary, everyday commodity like eggs, milk or bread. Medical evidence tells us that it causes cancer just like tobacco and is a psychoactive drug. Alcohol is the biggest drug problem we have in our country. People die every day because of alcohol consumption. Governments the world over recognise that alcohol is not an ordinary product and, as with tobacco, have in each generation attempted to minimise alcohol harm to children, youths and adults in different ways. Governments know that getting their people to reduce alcohol consumption without being prohibitionist about it will improve each person's quality of life. They will have better mental health and physical health; they will manage their weight more easily; they will reduce their risks of alcohol-related liver disease and failure as well as various cancers; there will be reductions in domestic violence, physical assaults, including sexual assaults, and the number of children in care; and there will be less pressure on our emergency services. All this can be expected and should be welcomed by everyone.

Why all the fuss from industry about the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill? The answer is easy: it is all about profit. The global drinks industry wants us all to keep drinking alcohol, just like the tobacco companies want us to keep smoking. The alcohol companies and supermarket chains want our children to be introduced to alcohol as an ordinary product from the time they accompany their parents to buy food or fuel. There it is sitting beside the bread, the milk and the frozen food, usually at heavily discounted prices, so should this be a surprise to any of us? I do not think so. Like any business, profit is the drinks industry's aim. It will do all it can to protect and increase its profits, as is to be expected, including attempting to influence our laws

by lobbying all public representatives from the Taoiseach's office to our local councillors. The Standards in Public Office Commission quarterly published register of lobbyists proves this point. The drinks industry will argue it is only doing its job, and one would have to agree. The job of Government and the role of Ministers, Deputies, Senators and councillors should be protecting the common good, and a duty of care for our people. The common good should always trump vested interests. Recognising that a product can cause well-documented harm to our people and our society means that public representatives have a responsibility to inform our people and to encourage behavioural change.

A consistent message from those representing the alcohol industry is that they were not consulted on this legislation. The facts do not bear this out. The genesis of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill is to be found in Steering Group Report on a National Substance Misuse Strategy, published in 2012. The alcohol industry was represented on this group by the Alcohol Beverage Federation of Ireland and Mature Enjoyment of Alcohol in Society. Based on this report, in October 2013 the Government approved a comprehensive suite of measures to reduce excessive patterns of alcohol consumption. The Bill also has support from the public. A Health Research Board report, entitled Alcohol: Public Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours, noted that three quarters of the people surveyed believe the Government has a responsibility to implement public health measures to address high alcohol consumption. Pre-legislative scrutiny by the Joint Committee on Health and Children followed the publication of the heads of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015 and brought extensive engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. Again, the alcohol industry and its representatives had their opportunity to be heard both in person and by making written submissions. Subsequently, the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill was introduced to Seanad Éireann in December 2015 by the then Minister for Health, Deputy Leo Varadkar. A commitment to the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill is included in the programme for Government negotiated with the Independent Alliance and forms the basis of the confidence-and-supply agreement with Fianna Fáil. Enacting the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill is Government policy.

The resistance that emerged in the Seanad, when I reintroduced the Bill in October 2016, was unexpected as the transcripts from December 2015 gave no indication that a furore would erupt. The effect of the lobbying on the part of the drinks industry and supermarket chains in the intervening year was clear to be seen. Most of the arguments made against the Bill were the same ones I had already heard from the industry when its representatives met me. Many members of the Vintners' Federation of Ireland in Offaly and nationally as well as the National Off-Licence Association, NOFLA, fully support the Bill but they did not seem to get much of a hearing in the debate. Many of those who argued in favour of the Bill were drowned out by the frenzy to sneer at simple, low-cost suggestions for retailers to screen alcohol from view. This measure is simply to convey the message, most especially to our children and young people, that alcohol is no ordinary product.

Those coping with alcohol addiction and recovering alcoholics would also benefit from the Bill, but not much attention was paid to this fact either. The noise created a perfect distraction from the fact that almost 1,100 people die every day because of their consumption of alcohol. This figure equals the entire population of many villages in rural Ireland. There has been much larger public outcry for a lot less in recent years.

The tactics of the alcohol industry to thwart and delay this legislation are exactly those that the tobacco industry has used the world over. It is no surprise, then, that the Alcohol Beverage Federation of Ireland flat-out denied that alcohol causes cancer, despite the fact that the

International Agency for Research on Cancer of the World Health Organization has classified alcohol as a group 1 carcinogen, similar to tobacco, arsenic and asbestos. It is no surprise that the industry is trying to cause confusion and doubt over the fact that alcohol is a carcinogen, or that the alcohol industry has fought Scotland through the courts and delayed its intention to introduce minimum unit pricing for five years. It is no surprise that it is fighting the labelling provisions, because then the consumer would be empowered by knowing about the alcohol content, the calorie content and the nutritional breakdown and by the health warnings, and it is no surprise that it rejects the provisions to control alcohol marketing, because our children and young people are alcohol drinkers of the future. It is also no surprise that it rejects efforts to control sports sponsorship intended to protect children and young people. These are the very same tactics used by the tobacco industry in the past.

Of course, public health is not the responsibility of the drinks industry, but the facts cannot be avoided. Alcohol is a factor in half of all suicides and one in three self-harm cases. The rate of alcohol-related liver disease trebled between 1995 and 2013. One in ten breast cancers is caused by alcohol. A total of 167,170 people have suffered an alcohol-related assault. One in four deaths of young men is alcohol-related, which is twice as many deaths as those due to all other drugs combined. Alcohol is a factor in a third of all drownings. One in four people attending accident and emergency departments have alcohol-related injuries. Half of these are people aged under 30. One in four traumatic brain injuries is alcohol-related. Two in five road deaths are caused by excessive drinking. There is mounting international evidence of foetal alcohol disorders in children whose mothers drank during pregnancy. Alcohol-related dementia is on the rise.

I had the privilege of launching the HSE's Ask About Alcohol website last year. It is a trusted educational resource for anyone who wants to learn about the effects of alcohol consumption or who feels he or she might be having a little too much to drink a little too often. I pay tribute to those who have campaigned tirelessly with little funding, especially the Alcohol Health Alliance. I also acknowledge the parents of young people who died by suicide as a result of alcohol, in particular John Higgins. Professor Frank Murray, one of our leading liver specialists, has played an important part in their campaign to bring hard evidence informed by his own work experience to the debate. I commend the Minister, Deputy Harris, the chief medical officer, Tony Holohan, and their team on the fantastic work they have done on the Bill to date. We must get the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015 enacted without delay because it will save lives. I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for his indulgence.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Well done.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I appreciate the Deputy was involved in the Bill when it was before the Seanad so I used some discretion.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am pleased to speak in support of the provisions of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill. It is clear this country has a real problem with drink, and the numbers speak for themselves. Twenty-one people will die from alcohol-related illnesses this week and every other week this year. This means that five times more people die as a result of alcohol than from road accidents, and this does not take into account the correct statistics Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy mentioned regarding the contributory factor of road deaths. Alcohol-related illnesses cost Irish taxpayers €2.35 billion each year. Some 1,500 hospital beds are occupied right now by alcohol-related admissions. Some 1.4 million people in Ireland have a harmful relationship with alcohol. We consume 25% above the OECD average. In 2016, some

280,000 workdays were lost to alcohol-related absenteeism. Alcohol features as a factor in half of all suicides in Ireland, and this does not take into account self-harm and admissions in the acute psychiatric setting. It is in the context of all this devastation and heartbreak, the ruined lives and broken relationships, and the huge expense and needless waste, that this legislation is so desperately and urgently needed.

The aim of the Bill is to reduce alcohol consumption nationally, and I believe this can be achieved if the legislation is properly implemented. The Bill targets four key areas. First, the price of alcohol is a major factor in consumption levels. My party and I support the introduction of minimum unit pricing, which is an evidence-based approach to reduce alcohol harm. The price of a can or bottle is directly linked to consumption levels. There is a clear correlation between price increases and reductions in consumption and it is estimated that minimum unit pricing could save the Exchequer as much as €1.7 billion over 20 years. These savings involve a combination of cost benefits, including health care costs, a reduction in crime levels and policing costs, and improved quality of life generally. It is also proven to be effective at proportionately targeting the type of alcohol causing the most harm, that is, the cheapest alcohol available. This is often sold in bulk and below cost price. Those who disagree need only look to the volume of evidence available, including a recent study by the University of Sheffield which supports the contention.

Developments at European level have also brought more clarity to the legal landscape in which minimum unit pricing, specifically, and the Bill, generally, are being introduced. Moves to introduce minimum unit pricing in Scotland were resisted by the drinks industry in a long, drawn-out process that went all the way to the European Court of Justice. In December last year, that court ruled that minimum unit pricing can be introduced as a proportionate measure where its aim is to protect the health of the population and there are no alternative measures that could be introduced instead. The situation regarding Ireland's drinking problem is so stark that, unfortunately, there is no better viable option here. Minimum unit pricing has proven to positively change behaviour, particularly among the groups most at risk. It is the only show in town as far as I am concerned.

Another important area the Bill addresses is health information marketing. In a world of fake news this is an industry that is particularly susceptible to well resourced and highly financed multinational conglomerates that aim to obfuscate and confuse consumers with false claims and half-truths. It is regrettable that this legislation has made such slow progress through the Oireachtas. Glaciers have moved faster than the Bill, particularly if we consider its pace through the Seanad and the Dáil. Its slow rate of progress is a national disgrace. The delaying is a direct result of the drinks industry, which has chipped away and eroded the legislation line by line, lobby by lobby, with remarkable persistence and dedication. Only in the past week, for example, we saw the comparison of the link between alcohol and cancer with that relating to toast. I researched the *British Medical Journal* today and did a search for alcohol and cancer. I did not bother researching toast and cancer. There were tens of thousands of references to alcohol and cancer. It is an irrefutable fact that alcohol is a carcinogen that is a contributing factor in tens of thousands of deaths and to significant morbidity development in this country on a daily basis. For the industry to try to confuse this and to inject doubt in the debate is a disgrace. What has happened can be compared with the position regarding smoking and the tobacco industry many years ago, when the latter tried to frustrate every public health initiative and bury the evidence. This should not be allowed to go on any more.

These vested interest groups would have us believe that consumption rates here are decreas-

ing. This is more fake news. It is intentionally misleading. While our intake levels may be down when examined over a particular timeframe, the latest figures from Revenue show that Ireland's consumption of alcohol rose by almost 5%, to 11.46 litres of pure alcohol *per capita*, in 2016. This is the equivalent of 46 bottles of vodka, 130 bottles of wine or 498 pints of beer. Since 1960, Ireland's consumption has increased threefold. Since 2010, our average consumption has been 11.25 litres *per capita*. The EU average is 9 litres, the OECD average is 9.1 litres and the global WHO average is 6.2 litres. Ireland's problems with alcohol are well documented and it is important that we see our consumption in the true statistical frameworks provided by the OECD and the WHO.

In this environment, clear and accurate information is vital. This is about giving people all of the information so they can make a well-informed decision. I support in principle the proposal to print public health warnings on alcohol products so that people are fully aware of the harm alcohol can do. Some technical changes may be required in terms of the export industry. As far as I am concerned, however, there should be warnings for people about cancer and other issues on the labels of products sold on the Irish market. It is important that the Department and the Minister provide clarity on who is responsible for this in order that there will be no uncertainty in the industry. There must also be clarity in the context of EU law.

The multibillion euro drinks firms have argued tirelessly that this is a waste of time and that it will not reduce consumption levels one iota. I completely disagree with that view. Many in the drinks industry, who emailed all Deputies this week, complain about costs of up to €50,000 for designing these labels. They have multimillion euro profits and they want us to have sympathy over a few thousand euro added to their balance sheet, which would give people factual information about the effects of alcohol on their lives. It is important there are facts on products so people can make an informed decision about their consumption. Their argument is self-defeating. There is a reason that companies invest hundreds of billions of euro in advertising and marketing. It is because advertising works. If it did not, the industry simply would not exist. Exist it does, and it is an industry that is growing.

The advertising of alcohol is now believed to be worth almost €1 billion. That is an awful lot of money for something that drinks firms would have us believe does not work. They say restricting advertising has no impact on consumption. Why then do they advertise? Why do they try to link to events such as those relating to sport? I remarked earlier today that in Dublin city at present there is the advertisement with the black and white sock, which is a subtle reinforcement for young people about the Six Nations. People saw Sexton's kick and an hour later if they were getting a bus, driving their car or were in a taxi all they would have seen was the Diageo advertisement with the black and white sock, linking Guinness to rugby and participation in sport. This needs to end in our communities. We cannot have alcohol companies profiteering on the back of good sports results. It is important we put public health above the profits of industries that will continue to thrive regardless of whether we have a Public Health (Alcohol) Bill. They can take a pinch in their profits for the benefit of lives and the reduction of cancer.

It is scarcely believable we require a law to prevent these huge firms from sponsoring events where the majority of participants involved are children, but, in 2018, this is where matters stand. There are areas where people have genuine concerns about some proposals, and my party is seeking clarity on some of these areas. It is important that we do not dilute the legislation. Rather, we must ensure that it is fair, capable of being implemented and delivers what is intended. I am aware of issues and concerns expressed by the *drinkaware.ie* website, which

has evidence on consumption and the effects of alcohol on people's health. It is important it is not restricted from providing factual information to people. This needs to be clarified in the context of public awareness campaigns. An area where there is confusion is whether the new rules on labelling will mean reference to *drinkaware.ie* will be removed. The Minister needs to clarify this. It is important that we do not restrict people from making informed decisions in the context of public awareness.

I acknowledge that more clarity is required on who is responsible for these rules. The legislation cannot be successful unless there is a cultural shift in our attitude towards alcohol. The statistics I outlined at the beginning clearly show the problems we have. Education is crucial to properly tackling this. Those who have alcohol problems often begin to drink in their early teens or younger, before they have been informed on the dangers of alcohol by parents or at home. A review of how children are taught in this regard is required. In the past, there has been reluctance by the Government to tackle this country's alcohol problem, and this goes back decades and through multiple Governments.

I am a spokesperson on drugs. Alcohol has been included in the title of the new national drugs strategy in recognition that alcohol is as harmful as any illegal substance out there. Unfortunately, there was no funding increase when alcohol was added to the latest strategy. Alcohol was, shamefully, relegated to a footnote and we are now playing catch up as a result.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I acknowledge the huge work done on the Bill by Deputy Corcoran Kennedy. It is unfortunate that she was not allowed to complete the job, for whatever reason. The Bill is hugely important. Deputies Chambers and Corcoran Kennedy have given statistics on the impact of alcohol on our daily lives. To those who compared alcohol to burnt toast - it was not just toast but burnt toast - I encourage them to go to an accident and emergency department on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday night and see the real impact of alcohol. Gardaí, nurses and emergency personnel have been assaulted while doing their jobs by people with too much alcohol on board. People cannot take too much burnt toast but they can take an awful lot of alcohol and do a huge amount of damage to themselves, their families and their communities.

Deputy Corcoran Kennedy was right, and I also want to acknowledge the huge courage shown during the passage of this legislation by John and Anne Higgins from my home town of Ballina, who lost their son in 2011. Since then they have dedicated their lives to highlighting the impact of alcohol on people's lives and families. They have shown huge courage. Over that time they have been enormously frustrated and brokenhearted. I refer not just to the loss of their son but at the slow pace of this legislation and that as a country we cannot seem to comprehend we have a bad relationship with alcohol. It is important that we pass this Bill quickly but also that we enforce it as well. The Food Safety Authority of Ireland every month publishes a list of places that have been closed down. I notice in the last number of months its public relations material has gotten much more graphic with pictures of rodents.

That is what we need here. Every month supermarkets not complying with the law on minimum pricing need to be named and shamed. Any group that refuses to comply with this Bill needs to be named and shamed every month. The alcohol industry, as Deputy Chambers has said, is conscious of its reputation and image. Let us start chipping away at that image and use this Bill to chip away at the notion that alcohol is a product. The concerns about advertising are completely misplaced. Advertising alcohol is there to make it look cool and as something needed in life. It is not being advertised at 5 p.m. because of a cheap slot. It is because younger

people are watching television at that time.

It is so sophisticated that, as Deputy Chambers said, within minutes of any major occurrence the alcohol industry tags advertisements on social media, television and other forms of media to try to link any kind of achievement to alcohol. I refer to needing a drink or alcohol to celebrate a communion, a confirmation or Johnny Sexton winning a rugby match. I saw it in my own county last September when we qualified for the All-Ireland again. I want to come back to the whole area of supermarkets. However, I refer to multiple supermarkets putting on incentives and offers around the weekend of an All-Ireland to encourage people to buy more drink. It worked. That kind of thing has to stop.

The big multiple supermarkets that do not give two damns about people need to be tackled even harder than is laid out in this legislation. I refer to selling slabs of beer as well as bringing in minimum unit pricing. Does anyone need a slab of beer? We need to look at controlling further the volumes that can be sold as well as the cost. We need further controls on the promotion of alcohol within these major multiples as well. They are the factors driving people to drink at home. People are leaving the controlled atmosphere of the local pub and drinking at home. There is no control and no concept of that. Alcohol is seen now as a daily product as opposed to a drug, as Deputy Chambers said.

The legislation also needs to be practical. There are areas around labelling that need to be defined and dealt with. It would be ridiculous if all this effort and goodwill that is there for this legislation was to be wasted in a challenge to the legislation from one of these industries because of some weakness within the legislation. We have to look at specific areas as well. Nobody goes into a craft brewery or distillery to bulk buy alcohol. They go in because they have an appreciation and understanding of the damage alcohol will do to them. We need to ensure we do not crucify them with the same kind of regulations that are needed in multiple supermarkets and drink sellers.

There needs to be caution in terms of the impact labelling may have on small operators in this sector. I welcome the changes made in the Seanad in respect of the display of alcohol within supermarkets. However, they need to be enforced. That enforcement should be a job given to the local authority because the Department of Health does not have the resources to do that. If this legislation is to be successful, it must be enforced. We need to be imaginative in using every avenue of State, the Department of Health, local authorities and the Revenue Commissioners to ensure this legislation hits home and has the success we need it to have.

It is unfortunate the debate on this became obsessed today with a call to close the Dáil bar. That does not do this House, the debate and the seriousness required around it any service. We have a serious problem as a nation. We woke up in respect of smoking. We need to wake up in regard to alcohol. For those very highly paid people living around here for a while, and for those highly paid company executives who compare alcohol to toast, I finish as I started. Come with me any weekend and visit families that have lost a loved one to alcohol or an illness as a consequence of alcohol. Go and meet a nurse, a garda, an ambulance driver or a paramedic. Talk to a security officer who has been beaten up while doing his or her job because of alcohol. Do not immediately link it into sport or family celebration. Talk to the people on whom alcohol abuse and this country's warped relationship with alcohol is impacting on a daily, weekly and often nightly basis.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): Deputy Durkan is next to speak. Is the

Deputy sharing time?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Not that I am aware of. I do not think so.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Until 10 p.m.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: We will go as long as we can. When we need help, we will sit down.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): We will give Deputy Durkan 20 minutes.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): As my constituency colleague I am more than happy to extend the opportunity.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Absolutely. I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on this legislation. I agree with the concept of the Bill and what it attempts to do. I refer to introducing a recognition of the danger of alcohol and to control it to some extent. A few years ago we had numerous examples of violence breaking out outside pubs, nightclubs and in the streets of our towns and cities, sometimes with fatal consequences. Irresponsible use of alcohol led to altercations and sometimes death. There was then and still remains an urgent need for legislation and for a change in attitudes generally to enlighten the general public and young people in particular. I refer to the dangers of the irresponsible use of alcohol, drinking of alcohol and relying on alcohol. In comparison with other European countries, we do not come out of the league too well, although many other countries do not come out too well either.

We need to recognise that there will always be exceptions in particular places. I do not think it is true to claim that all of our ills and ailments are down to alcohol. People go into a supermarket and buy a slab or two of beer and have it delivered, by motor vehicle in some cases, to a party being held in a private location, before going out for a night's entertainment. I cannot understand that. It is dangerous and irresponsible. The sale of alcohol in those circumstances below cost has done an awful lot of damage. It has probably created a dependency on alcohol among a certain part of our population. That is worrying.

Another issue we should not let pass is the increased incidence of drinking and private parties. I refer to recognising that is the way things have gone for a variety of reasons. There is no single reason why that has happened. There is, for example, no barman to tell people they have had enough and should go home. There is no barman to control the levels and measures that go into the glass and to call order. There is nobody to control what is happening there at all, other than the appetites of the people concerned.

We have had lots of incidents and instances where alcohol use went wrong throughout the length and breadth of this country over the last number of years. There have been tragic consequences but there have also been very far reaching social consequences. The problem that has arisen is that a part of a generation has become dependent and reliant on alcohol as part and parcel of its daily fix. That is extremely dangerous.

It can lead to accidents and altercations, as I mentioned, as well as deaths. That has happened, and it cannot continue. Deputy Corcoran Kennedy in particular, as well as others, went to a great deal of trouble researching for this legislation in the first instance, to determine all the things that were wrong and had to be dealt with. The objective was more to reverse the trend

than to contain it, and that takes time. There is a recognition that irresponsible advertising in association with various sports is not useful. It does not lead to the responsible use of alcohol. There is a growing awareness within the industry as well. The Drinkaware Ireland organisation is a classic example. The industry recognises that there must be some type of order in the way alcohol is consumed, how people are educated on its use and how warning signs must be taken on board.

Other speakers have referred to the use of alcohol and other drugs. It is often the case that more than one substance is used at the same time. This leads to dysfunctionality and the result is a serious problem for society. Over the years all Members of the House have regularly dealt with cases where people have become reliant on drugs, including alcohol, to such an extent as to make their lives miserable. Occasionally we have had to advise people to seek treatment for their own benefit and the benefit of their families. There is an urgent need for people in such circumstances, for the sake of the stabilisation of family homes and peace within families, to seek medical aid and counselling to deal with it. Some people can drink with moderation. They know they cannot abuse it and that the body cannot withstand it. Others do not, unfortunately. Some people do not recognise the point beyond which there is no return. There is medical advice on the indiscriminate consumption of any substance. We all know that if we do not take account of the advice there will be consequences.

That does not mean everybody who takes a drink will automatically become an alcoholic or will carry out some depredation such as break into a premises to feed the habit. That does not happen, and it should not happen that way. The Drinkaware organisation has been important in making sure that people realise it is a dangerous route to take. Recognition should be given to the work done by Drinkaware Ireland and other groups that have, from the inside as it were, helped to control the indiscriminate consumption of alcohol and have brought it home to consumers that they must take account of certain situations for the sake of their own health and benefit and the health of their families. Given the situation we have now, it is a good time to do so.

We are in the international arena. The legislation controls all drink imported into the country as well. Other speakers have referred to the fact that the drinks industry employs many people here. That is correct. However, I do not believe that the responsible use of a product necessarily means that we will stop its use. Responsible use of the product can mean that everybody's requirements are met in so far as possible. There might be a clash over advertising, as we saw with the tobacco business. I used to be a smoker. I did not give up smoking for health reasons. I just gave it up; there was no reason for it.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: The Deputy had to stop talking.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: No. In fact, I gave it up because I found it a nuisance and unnecessary. It was baggage to have to light up and all the nonsense that goes with it. I just gave it up. Some people, including my wife, said that I was an addict and I would never give it up. I remember saying at the time, "Let us see what happens". I simply stopped and did not smoke anymore. It was the original cold turkey. I have not felt a need to return to it since, even though I smoked for 27 years. The odd thing is that I have not noticed any great difference in my health in the meantime. Perhaps there was. However, it was the thing to do.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: It did not slur the Deputy's speech.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I have not made up my mind about it yet. I always enjoyed a smoke even though it was not good for me, especially when I was driving on a long journey. Obviously, one could not have a drink on a long journey. That might upset the entire theory.

We must have balance. What if Ireland became a dry country? That happened in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s with Prohibition. The industry went underground. I hope we do not take that route as a consequence of what we want to do. There was an element of that in this country in the 1940s and 1950s when the homemade brew called poitín became an instant prop to society. It caused a great deal of trouble and many difficulties in homes. It caused friction and rows at parties and among groups throughout the country. The newspapers at the time were full of court reports and reports of what happened as a result of the indiscriminate use of that drink. Of course, “indiscriminate” is the operative word. There was nobody to control it. When it was available people drank it until it was gone. When it was gone there was a dry house until the next time it was available. In the United States the underground industry became huge, with massive consequences. When Prohibition was lifted, and this applies to other drugs as well, drink usage increased by 4,500%. It is a sobering thought - no pun intended. People tell us today with regard to other drugs that if the ban was lifted and all drugs were readily available, people would feel better as a result. That is not true. They also say that consumption would stabilise. That is not true either. The American experience after Prohibition was that the use of alcohol increased by 4,500%.

Other speakers have referred to the consequences of alcohol abuse for accident and emergency departments in our hospitals, particularly over weekends. I agree. It is the result of the abuse of a product. If we were educated properly, we should be able to recognise that it is not necessary to be tanked out of our minds and to fall over witless onto the pavement before we realise that we have had enough. There is an urgent necessity for that education. It must be done in the primary and secondary schools. As a result we might learn to moderate our consumption. There is a similarity with alternative energy and a reduction in our carbon footprint. Some people think that the only way to reduce our carbon footprint is to close down the smoking sectors - every car and truck in the country, the beef sector and everything in the country should be closed down. That will definitely reduce the footprint, but it will not necessarily improve people’s quality of life. In fact, it will do the opposite and will do all sorts of peculiar things to the economy.

“Responsibility” is the word that comes to mind, that is, the recognition of the need to apply responsibility to the consumption of alcohol and the circumstances in which it is consumed. We need to recognise and emphasise that the most dangerous misuse of alcohol occurs during private parties when groupings of people get together and, without logic, consume alcohol to excess and very often break down into argument, dispute and acrimony, which sometimes has tragic consequences. That must be addressed by educating people about alcohol.

As has been discussed many times in the House, publicans believe their biggest competitors are supermarkets, which sell alcohol massively below cost price in order to get a share of the market. There is no need for that to continue. While the Bill makes provision for restrictions on the packaging and display of alcohol, if alcohol continues to be available for purchase at far below cost price, we will not solve the problem. It will continue in private circumstances no matter what else we do.

I do not blame young people in regard to alcohol misuse because they do not have the experience to know what is likely to happen. They can say that people have been drinking for

years and if alcohol was so harmful, such people would all be dead. However, that is not how one should look at it. What they and we must do is recognise that if everybody abuses alcohol, there will be sharp consequences for those concerned and we will not be able to reverse that at a later stage. Ultimately, people will end up in accident and emergency departments and possibly in long-stay accommodation in our hospitals as a result of the need to take action on alcohol misuse.

One could speak on this issue for a long time. Some people believe that pubs in rural Ireland have been ruined. There is no doubt that, for many reasons, it is difficult for pubs to exist in rural Ireland. One such reason is the issue of transport and drink-driving. As I have stated previously, it is possible to manage that by having nominated drivers and we must get used to that, although not everybody agrees with me in that regard. It is possible to have a level of community transport that will ensure that at a minimum, people have transport of a reliable nature in rural parts of the country that have no public transport, which is the issue. Nobody wants to face up to the fact that the footfall in rural Ireland has diminished. That is so for a variety of reasons, such as emigration from some parts of the country, people moving to towns and cities from others or both. That contributes to a decline in population and the diminution of the social life in those areas.

There are reasons for the Bill and it is up to each Member to recognise them. The Bill must and does recognise that groups such as Drinkaware have done a great deal of work to tackle alcohol misuse. They may have done so with the support of the alcohol industry but the industry itself recognises the need for moderation, education and responsible use. If the Bill is successful in achieving its objective, there will be recognition of responsible drinking, that we must have rules and that the abuse of drink and the wholesale abuse involved in alcohol being available at a low price to people of a vulnerable age will have all kinds of consequences, some immediate and some over the longer term.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): Deputies Breathnach, Darragh O'Brien and O'Keeffe are sharing 20 minutes.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: What was once referred to as uisce beatha, the water of life, now seems to be demoted to being uisce an bháis. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. There is an issue of harmful drinking in Ireland, as all Members are aware. We are told that up to three people die every day in this country as a result of the abuse of alcohol. The Bill introduces minimum unit pricing and the structural segregation of alcohol from other products in supermarkets and other retail outlets, provides for detailed health warnings, including information on links between alcohol and cancer, on labels and imposes restrictions, including a 9 p.m. broadcasting watershed before which alcohol advertisements cannot be aired. I welcome any measures to tackle alcohol abuse, change our drinking culture and discourage the scourge of underage drinking.

As the Acting Chairman knows, I am from Dundalk, which is very close to the Border. I agree with the intent behind the introduction of minimum unit pricing. However, as I have said previously in the House, it will send thousands of people across the Border to purchase alcohol more cheaply. A collaborative approach with the Northern Ireland authorities should be taken in an attempt to introduce minimum pricing here, which should be matched with a similar regime in Northern Ireland.

As regards the separation of alcohol products, I welcome its objective of restricting access

to alcohol products by making them less visible. However, the many businesses that will be affected and which are struggling at the best of times should not be unduly required to provide additional finance or staff in order to implement the measure.

On the labelling and advertising aspects of the Bill, although I understand that the aim is to provide consumers with health information on alcohol products, I have grave concerns, which have been voiced to me by craft brewers and distillers in my constituency. There is broad agreement on the inclusion on labelling of nutritional information and a health warning regarding the consumption of alcohol when pregnant. However, no country has introduced a mandatory cancer warning on alcohol products and in this respect the Bill goes too far. It will have a huge impact on the smaller producers, distilleries and craft brewers of Ireland. The Cooley Distillery is a very successful distilling operation in my constituency that directly employs more than 70 people and indirectly employs many more across the county. It has invested €14 million in its site since purchasing it in mid-2012. This investment has increased productivity, promoted sustainability and has protected and increased jobs. The impact on the Cooley Distillery and similar enterprises is that there will be a perception that Scotch or American whiskey is less harmful to a person than Irish whiskey and our exports will, therefore, be affected if the cancer labelling measure is not restricted. There are huge opportunities to export to Asia and the Middle East but our product will suffer compared with products from other jurisdictions if the proposed labelling requirements are implemented. A focus on one health issue alone, namely, cancer, does not give a full or accurate picture to help consumers make an informed choice about their drinking. What about the many processed foods and meats that have been proven to be carcinogenic but are not so labelled? Will there be cancer health warnings on such products or only on alcohol? The restrictions will damage smaller producers, which will not have the capacity of huge producers such as Diageo that will be quite capable of meeting the ensuing demands.

It is possible to go too far. The Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland has stated that radon gas is the major carcinogen in this country. Are we going to tell people who are experiencing problems with radon gas and having to take remediation measures that it is time to put a sign on the door warning people that they could be entering a carcinogenic environment? I draw this comparison because I believe we can go too far.

In my constituency, the Teeling Whiskey Company operates out of what was the old Harp brewery in Dundalk. We also have the Carlingford Brewing Company, the Listoke Distillery and Gin School, Jack Cody's Brewery and the Dundalk Bay Brewing Company. All of these small breweries and distilleries bring great benefits to the community, not just in the context of the sale and export of alcohol but also in terms of visitors who like to understand how the product is made. With the labelling restrictions being proposed here and with the severe restrictions on advertising, I believe that these businesses will be disproportionately impacted upon. Some of them may not survive. This is the context in which we need to ensure a balanced approach in supporting the Bill.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I want to put on record my support for this Bill. It is very important legislation. The facts regarding our relationship with drink are borne out by evidence published by Revenue's statistics and economic research branch recently to the effect that Ireland's alcohol consumption *per capita* has increased by nearly 5% year on year up to 2016. Per head, people in Ireland are drinking 11.46 litres of pure alcohol per annum. This is equivalent to nearly 500 pints of beer, 46 bottles of vodka or 130 bottles of wine per year. We have a problem and there is an issue with alcohol consumption and our relationship with alcohol. This does not mean it is all negative but the measures within the Bill to protect the most vulnerable,

especially children, from the normalisation of alcohol consumption through advertising are very much welcome. Deputy Breathnach referred to some very valid concerns regarding jobs in the industry, but they can be managed.

I want to talk about my own position as the chairperson of the north Dublin regional drugs and alcohol task force, a position I have held for nearly five years. The Government has a lot of focus and commitment in respect of this matter and has put a lot of effort into the legislation, and rightly so. The Bill is welcome but it is not a silver bullet. I do not see increased supports, such as those necessary on the ground, being provided in tandem with this. Under the new drugs and alcohol strategy published by the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, the community action on alcohol has been put in place. It has asked each of the 14 local drugs task forces and the ten regional drugs and alcohol task forces to implement the community actions on alcohol. That is a really good idea because this is how each community deals with alcohol, not by banning, shunning or parking the issue but by members of communities taking a role in respect of how alcohol is perceived and through events. In my area in Fingal, we got the local authority and the sports clubs involved. Each of the areas needs an extra €45,000, at a minimum, to implement these. If the House will excuse the pun, that is small beer. We do not have that money. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, and his colleagues to look at how these areas are resourced to implement the community action on alcohol. We need to do that.

In the context of the task forces areas, my area in north Dublin has a catchment of 330,000 people and has not received an increase in funding in eight years. Our funding for the entire service is €777,000 per annum. That is for more than 300,000 people. We do not even have an education and prevention worker in the area. We can talk about the legislation, which I welcome, but we must also talk about what is happening on the ground. In the area in which I live, Swords, we set up a community care team because there was no such team for the whole of the north County Dublin area. We had to pull funding from other projects to employ people directly. More than 1,000 people have been treated by the service, which is based in Swords and which provides outreach services to places such as Rush, Malahide and many other locations throughout the north of the county. We did not get one extra cent for that. We did it ourselves. When the Government talks of the need to legislate to protect people against the ills of alcohol or to at least redress the balance, it is absolutely right. However, let it put its money where its mouth is in order that we might deal with education, treatment and rehabilitation, which are simply not available across large swathes of the country. That needs to be discussed as part of this debate and as the Bill proceeds to Committee Stage.

As the chair of the regional drugs and alcohol task force, I wholeheartedly support the Bill. There will be issues for the industry to deal with but these will have to be worked through. I would love to see the same commitment from Government and for it to say that while a good job is being done on the ground by the community sector and the HSE, they are wholly under-resourced. If we want to stop people falling into problematic drinking in particular - and I am focusing on drinking as an example - then we must provide resources. How is that the case when we publish a new national drugs and alcohol strategy - which I welcome - but do not offer additional resources? The community action on alcohol project has not received any additional resources. We need those resources and I ask the Minister of State to consider the position in this regard. I will also be asking the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, about this because I believe a meeting is scheduled for 28 February. We need Government support.

I am certain - and also from the perspective of the Fianna Fáil spokesperson, Deputy Jack Chambers - that we can effect real change from the ground up. Legislation is about setting the

rules. If we do not change how we operate within our communities, the Bill, upon enactment, will not protect people or change their lives. We can only do that through our communities. This is why the community action on alcohol project is a really important part of the strategy. Let us resource it and let us properly resource our regional and local drugs and alcohol task forces. That is where we are making real interventions and real strides with this.

I ask the Minister of State to take those points on board. I look forward to seeing this Bill proceeding through Committee Stage. Let us resource the people on the ground who are doing the real work to protect our kids against alcohol and drug abuse.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: It is a pity we have a Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in the Chamber. I want to acknowledge that we were one of the first to propose the abolition of drink advertising at sports grounds and at sport-related events. It has been progressive. When we see the way our sportsmen and sportswomen travel abroad to attend major events, even having taken a drink, Irish fans can be the best and most well-behaved in comparison with their counterparts from other countries.

We know the Bill is needed because there are problems with excessive drinking. The big question is how to control it. The thrust of the Bill is welcome. It was going fine until a few amendments were added. These have given rise to serious concerns on my part. Are we jumping the gun with this Bill? We are proud members of the EU and I am led to believe that the Commission is putting together some proposals regarding labelling. Why do we not wait for those proposals? The Government and those which preceded it have always been very good at enforcing EU directives. In those circumstances, why not wait to see what the Commission says in respect of labelling?

I very much support the section on below-cost selling. As was stated in the debate on this issue last night, one of the former Ministers of State in the previous Government, Deputy Róisín Shortall, acknowledged that when below-cost selling was brought in, we could see an increase in alcohol consumption. We should give the proposed measure in respect of below-cost selling a chance to take effect. One can walk down some Dublin streets and see some people who are homeless or dropouts and they are drinking cheap beer and liquor. I welcome that measure and I hope it will be a hindrance to people drinking.

I am from an agricultural background. Anything that prohibits the promotion or selling of drink would have an impact on the agricultural and industrial sectors. I shall give an overview. Members are throwing around figures regarding hospitals and the excess burden of costs. I acknowledge that there are costs and that these can be avoided, but we must consider what we are attempting to do. The alcohol beverage sector makes a significant contribution to the economy. The drinks sector supports the employment of more than 200,000 people. This includes brewers, distillery workers, suppliers, farmers, distributors and those working in the hospitality sector. Each year, the alcohol beverage sector generates wages of €2.9 billion and purchases of Irish produce worth over €1.1 billion. It exports goods worth over €1.25 billion and provides the State with over €2.3 billion through excise and VAT income. It generates hundreds of millions of euro in income tax, PRSI receipts and tax on profits annually. Ireland exports drink products to 130 markets worldwide. This reinforces our reputation as a premium food and drinks producer.

We are proposing to send Ministers abroad on expeditions to various countries. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine does a good job when he goes abroad to promote

Ireland as a centre for the production of food and drink. What is going to happen now when the Minister goes to China to promote Irish drinks and obtain a share of the Chinese market? Ireland is not the major exporter or producer of drinks. We are competing with Scotland. It is a contradiction that the Minister will be promoting our products in China even though, back home in Ireland, we almost decided to require drinks to be put behind black curtains. I would not say it is like a form of prohibition, but it is something akin to what is happening with drugs. The biggest exporter of illegal drugs is Colombia, which foists its problems on other countries. Are we telling people elsewhere in the world to take our products because we do not want them here? That is what we are saying. It will portray a bad image of this country.

As I said earlier, farmers and others involved in agriculture are the main benefactors of our drinks industry. The Irish Distillers facility in Midleton is a major employer in my own backyard. It is expanding every day to increase its markets, create jobs and thereby benefit tillage farmers. Tillage farming is under fierce pressure. The only way tillage farmers can make a proper income is by selling premium malt. The Eight Degrees micro-brewery in Mitchelstown is expanding on a daily basis, including through export sales. It is ironic in the context of this legislation that one of our colleagues in the Labour Party has proposed a Bill which seeks to allow drink to be purchased on site at breweries. I am in favour of the Bill in question because there is no point in going to taste a product if one cannot buy it there and then.

There is another contradiction from the Government with regard to tourism. Two weeks ago, we made it more accessible for people to get drink by permitting pubs to open on Good Friday. I am not against it, but I think it is another example of people talking out of both sides of their mouths. If we are saying we need pubs to be open to keep tourist numbers up, where are we going with that kind of talk?

Enforcement is one of the big problems with this country's alcohol policy. Not enough is being done to restrict underage drinking. I could attack another member of the Labour Party, who proposed a Bill earlier this week that would criminalise parents who do not ensure that their children attend school for a specified number of days, on the basis that I do not see any proposal to criminalise parents who allow their children to engage in underage drinking. I am not looking for a nanny state, but I am saying that people who make proposals should be balanced when they come forward with initiatives. Binge drinking is happening on back streets and in parks, alleys and derelict buildings. We need proper enforcement to monitor this activity, which is associated with drug use. I have heard of people coming out late, after drinking behind closed doors where there are no controls, and arriving into nightclubs where they have just one drink. When such people end up totally intoxicated, it is suggested that the staff of the nightclub must have been irresponsible. Maybe they should be more observant when these people are going in the door. I suppose they do their best.

There is a need for balance when it comes to drink. There are health experts and professionals who tell us that one or two drinks can be good for us from a health perspective. This is another contradiction that needs to be considered when people quote figures.

My final point relates to the proposed restrictions on advertising and labelling. When clubs and organisations organise fundraisers and get-togethers in local villages, they often look for spot prizes. What is going to happen now when they go into local pubs, which tend to be the most obliging suppliers of sponsorship? Will local pubs be thanked for offering a bottle of whiskey as a spot prize?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): The next speaker is Deputy Harty.

Deputy Michael Harty: Deputy O'Dowd and I are proposing to share the remaining time up to 5 p.m.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): That is agreed. The Deputies have 24 minutes. The debate will adjourn at that point.

Deputy Michael Harty: I thank the Chair. I am happy to contribute to this debate on an issue which is pretty close to my heart. The aim of this Bill is to tackle Ireland's ongoing unhealthy relationship with alcohol misuse. It is not just about the consumption of alcohol. I agree with Deputy O'Keeffe that everything should be taken in moderation. In this Bill, we are tackling the misuse of alcohol and seeking to reduce this country's overall level of alcohol consumption, which is far too high. The Department of Health has a modest target of reducing alcohol consumption in Ireland from 11 litres to 9 litres per person per year over the coming years.

We are not talking about not drinking - we are talking about controlling the misuse of alcohol. Any measure that helps to reduce alcohol consumption has to be welcomed. This Bill is the first step in that regard. The intention behind the legislation is to ensure that the supply and pricing of alcohol are regulated and controlled. The Bill is designed to delay the initiation of the use of alcohol in our younger population. This is critically important because young people are starting to drink at a much younger age. Those who drink before the end of their teenage years are much more susceptible to the effects of alcohol.

The power of the alcohol industry has been evident throughout this legislative process. It took two years for this Bill to pass through the Seanad. The power of the alcohol industry and related industries is quite awesome. The alcohol industry is fighting with the health sector on this issue. It is important for us to highlight the health issues in relation to the misuse of alcohol. Strong and subtle lobbying has challenged the medical evidence of the harm that alcohol causes. It has also challenged the evidence of the effects on alcohol consumption of advertising, of the public display and availability of alcohol in small and large supermarkets and shops, and of alcohol being closely aligned with food. The industry has also challenged the placement of the warnings that need to be placed on alcohol products. It is very important that people know what they are consuming, what the safe levels of consumption are and what harm can arise if those limits are exceeded.

We need to embrace the opportunity that this House has been given to agree legislation that can save lives, just as the legislation that introduced the smoking ban over a decade ago saved a number of lives. This Bill is the first step in reducing alcohol consumption. It will move us away from the existing system of self-regulation. The problem with the consumption of alcohol is that it involves self-regulation in areas like marketing and pricing. We need to introduce legislation that will control those two areas. We need to consider alcohol as a drug rather than a commodity. Unfortunately, the way alcohol is sold and displayed in shops and supermarkets makes it seem just like any other food or drink product. Alcohol is a drug and we have to see it as such, not just as a food commodity.

The safe limits of alcohol consumption are 17 units for males and 11 units for females per week. A standard glass of wine is one unit and a standard pint is two units. If a female drinks six pints every week, she will exceed the limit and if a male drinks nine pints, he will exceed it.

Everything in moderation - we are not trying to stop people drinking but we are trying to bring to people the safe amounts that they can consume.

Three people die every day and 1,000 people die every year of alcohol-related illnesses. We now have a phenomenon whereby people are going into liver failure in their third and fourth decades of life. Liver failure was something that happened to people in their 60s and 70s but now it is happening at a much younger age. The incidence of head and neck cancer, breast cancer, bowel cancer, heart disease and stroke increases as people exceed the safe limits relating to alcohol. This tends to hide the psychological and social destruction that alcohol can bring about in our society. Depression and suicide are increasing and one in ten psychiatric admissions is related to excessive alcohol use. There is social, physical and psychological destruction of our society because of the adverse effects of alcohol.

Some 1,500 beds are occupied in our hospitals every day by people who have alcohol-related diseases. This equates to three large regional hospitals. If we could build three large regional hospitals, we would solve many of the problems in our health service yet here we have 1,500 beds occupied by alcohol-related illness.

There is a problem with crime. Others have spoken about the destruction that alcohol causes at weekends and the problems that spill over into our casualty and emergency departments. Anybody who has visited or worked in a casualty department will say that alcohol is a huge problem at weekends and not necessarily just then.

The Bill can achieve a great deal. It will not achieve it overnight but over the years it will certainly provide a huge health dividend to our society. The difficulty can be encapsulated by the fact that it is as easy to buy a bottle of alcohol as it is to buy a bottle of milk. That must change. We have to change our attitudes towards alcohol; it is not a food. This can be done through a number of means which are referred to in the Bill. Minimum unit pricing, the visibility and advertising of alcohol and the labelling of alcohol to include health information. Minimum unit pricing is core to the Bill. The aim behind it is to tackle the cheap availability of alcohol. There is well-established international evidence that consumption decreases as price increases. This can be achieved by raising taxes, as we do every year, by means of increasing the excise duty on alcohol. That in itself is not effective because we have to introduce minimum unit pricing. Putting a tax on the alcohol can be negated by below-cost selling. That is what supermarkets do. If there is a minimum unit price, they cannot do that. The Bill proposes that there would be a 10 cent per gram of alcohol minimum unit price, which would be enforced and highly regulated. This will have the effect of reducing the amount of alcohol consumed and consequently the health issues in respect of our association with alcohol in this country.

A female can exceed her safe limits by spending just €7 a week and a male can exceed his by spending just €10 a week, which is within the reach of every member of this society. We have to increase the price to reduce our alcohol consumption. That would translate into a bottle of wine costing €9. Some Deputies referred to buying bottles of wine for €30. They would be able to buy three bottles of wine if that was to be the case. Certainly, a bottle of wine costing €9 is not outlandish. A pint of beer or cider would be a minimum of €2.50 and a bottle of spirits €28.

We also have to address the issue of advertising, particularly as advertising is addressed towards children. We need to reduce the exposure of children to alcohol through advertising and by seeing it freely available in supermarkets. TV advertising needs to be limited, as does online advertising. The latter can be targeted at younger age groups and children and young adults are

spending increasing amounts of time online. Alcohol companies will certainly direct advertising towards them in that regard. We also have to limit the advertising of alcohol at sporting events. We know children who are exposed to alcohol at a very young age are at an increased risk of being damaged later in life.

Finally, I wish to address the structural separation of alcohol in supermarkets. It is extremely important that alcohol is not visible in supermarkets. We talk about the “supermarket burka”. This is going to be an imposition on small supermarkets and shops that will have to make changes to how they sell alcohol. However, it is not going to be an insurmountable challenge. It is extremely important that the close association in a supermarket between alcohol and food, milk and all the other commodities is restricted.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: This is a very important debate. There are differing views on either side of the House. I would like to share my thoughts with those who are concerned about this issue. One of the saddest images of how alcohol affects people is the road safety advertisement which shows a mother looking at a picture of her child after the latter was killed in a road traffic accident because somebody was over the limit. This Bill is about trying to make sure that the person who drinks and drives does not drink over the limit and controls the amount of alcohol he or she takes. Preferably, someone who is drinking should not drive at all. We have hundreds of road deaths every year, a very significant number of which are due to alcohol abuse. That is unacceptable.

We all sadly know people who have died from suicide. I know one family whose son spent the whole night drinking spirits before, sadly, killing himself. He can never come back. His family remains deeply distressed. He had other underlying problems, as many people do, but alcohol was a very significant factor in his death. I wish we could help people in that situation who suffer from depression and have other issues, emotional problems and so on to drink less and get help sooner, and wish there was better help available as Deputy Darragh O'Brien pointed out about the drugs task forces. We need to assist more people who are in deep emotional and personal distress, who abuse alcohol and sadly in many cases pass away.

I also think of somebody I knew quite well. I used to have a drink with him occasionally. When I would meet him in the pub at about 10 o'clock at night or whatever, he would have a glass of clear liquid which I thought was soda water or water. When he got cancer, I was told in fact that it was a half pint of neat vodka that he had every night in the pub. That is what happened to him. He cannot come back either. His family would love to still have him. They believe that the alcohol caused the cancer that killed him. To my mind, the Bill is about ensuring that we abuse alcohol less and provide more help to those who do abuse it. One of the key issues relates to education and support.

I happened to be in Nice on Bastille Day some years ago. There were tens of thousands of people present. The city was chock-a-block. My family and I walked up and down the promenade that evening. Nobody was drinking at all, either on the promenade or on the beach. The French, on that night anyway, had an entirely different attitude to alcohol than that which might be seen after an all-Ireland celebration. Unfortunately, we do not have those types of celebrations very often in Louth, but perhaps I can refer to other counties. The question of using alcohol on days of national celebration arises. St. Patrick's Day in some towns is awful. People drink themselves sick and silly and go out on the streets at 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. All sorts of court cases arise as a result.

We have to educate for change but we also have to reach out and support people who have significant problems. The Red Door project in Drogheda, in my constituency, does not have enough support. It has outreach workers who help people with drug and alcohol abuse problems. It needs support. Deputy Darragh O'Brien is absolutely right that we must reach out, support and financially resource community organisations that help to deal with alcohol abuse. That is key to dealing with the problem.

The question of educating and supporting young people in relationship formation and dealing with relationships that break down naturally arises. As they go through life - particularly early in life - people experience relationships that do not work out. That is just as well for most of us, and for the other party as well. The point is that young people in particular are often not able to deal with a breakdown in a personal relationship or they may not have the confidence to actually develop a relationship with a person without alcohol being present. It is hugely important, particularly in schools and as people move up through secondary level in schools, that people are educated so that they can deal with relationships, disappointments, sadness and the sticks and arrows in all of our lives. Turning to alcohol is a key difficulty which causes problems. We can educate, inform, support and nurture people so that when those tough times come - and they come to everybody - they are able to deal with it in a mature, responsible way.

One of the key things about this legislation is that it particularly targets young people and protects them even more. It is appalling that 61% of children surveyed by the Health Promotion Research Centre at NUI Galway owned alcohol-branded merchandise. Alcohol is ubiquitous and present in the items owned by 61% of young people. We are talking about children here. That is utterly unacceptable. I welcome and support the strong language in this Bill, which seeks to penalise and ban the sale in Ireland of imported children's clothing that promotes alcohol products. It is absolutely insidious and must be stopped. It must stop now and that is why I support this Bill.

There are tens of thousands of people working in the alcohol industry in Ireland, in our pubs and restaurants among other places. These people provide an excellent service, but it is critical to note that society is changing. When people went out to the pub years ago, there was nothing other than the demon alcohol available. Now, people go out for meals and social evenings. Pubs and places which do not change the services they provide or add value to them will go to the wall because many people nowadays do not just want the seat and the glass; they want a meal and they want to have a different type of life. Many pubs and restaurants are changing very significantly. I welcome that. We talk about European culture, coffee culture and the coffee bar where one can have a coffee or a drink and socialise in a new and different way. This is now becoming available in Ireland. I welcome all of the changes in our culture in that respect.

The core of the Bill for me is the protection of young people and the support of young people in relationships. We need to educate and inform people and support them in how they manage in relationships as they grow older. We need to help them to deal with tough times, the loss of people they care about, family breakdowns and all of those issues.

The question of the insidious presence of alcohol in sport is hugely important. We speak about the Heineken Cup and the Guinness All-Ireland. That is not acceptable any more. Sports sponsorship from alcohol companies, in my view, should be significantly reduced. I am aware that it takes time to phase it out. There is also a *quid pro quo* for that. We must acknowledge that we either require greater taxation on alcohol to fund other activities or the taxpayer will fund other activities themselves. It is not acceptable that lives are destroyed by what happens.

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The familiarisation of people with alcohol in social and sporting occasions plays a part in that. This legislation is hugely important.

As is the case with Deputy Breathnach's county, companies that produce alcohol have operations in my county and they provide many jobs. I want to sustain and nurture them. In many ways, the alcohol industry is a specialist industry. There are craft breweries and special new brands of whiskey or gins, such as that produced by Listoke Distillery, for example. That market is a different place. It is about a unique and special product that is unique and special to the town or the location. I am not saying that it is never abused, but I believe that these are different products that are branded differently and they are not part of the abuse of alcohol which happens elsewhere. I obviously support those businesses.

I listened to the comments made in this Chamber earlier. I hope this legislation is passed. If there are good and enlightened amendments put in the next Stage, that is fine but I believe that the drive, energy and support from our community to avoid alcohol abuse must be absolutely paramount. That is the most important aspect for any of us. Nobody wants to lose a family member to alcohol abuse. I believe the intention of this legislative assembly is to ensure that does not happen and that we have fair but firm laws on this issue.

Debate adjourned.

Topical Issue Debate

Garda Deployment

Deputy John Lahart: It is a pity the Minister for Justice and Equality is not here. We want to highlight the decline in the number of front-line gardaí in Dublin, particularly over the past year or so. The figures tell us that Dublin has lost almost 100 gardaí since last year, despite what the Minister and the Government are telling us about increased resources and increased numbers. In real terms, Dublin has lost 1,000 gardaí since 2010. At a time when Garda numbers in the rest of the country are increasing, we have to ask what it is about Dublin and this Government when it comes to the provision of adequate policing for the communities that live here.

It was summed up best by Assistant Commissioner Pat Leahy, who commented publicly at the end of January. He stated:

Despite the fact that there are new personnel, drainage into specialist units and transfers continue to reduce frontline policing. We have hit rock bottom.

That is a direct quote from the Assistant Garda Commissioner.

There have been 15 gangland killings in 27 months. In my constituency there are 110 fewer gardaí in Dublin metropolitan region south compared to 2010. That takes in Tallaght, Rathfarnham, Crumlin and Terenure Garda stations. Community gardaí are down 20% in the same metropolitan region, and we may as well say that the Garda Reserve numbers have collapsed.

Regarding detection rates for burglaries, any of us who are members of joint policing committees, and most of us are, know that burglaries are down from the spike in 2014-2015, but the

detection rate in the areas is mind-bogglingly low. Three houses were burgled one afternoon recently in one of the parishes in my constituency. There are complaints of poor response times, mainly because the Garda is under-resourced and there are not enough gardaí. In Rathfarnham Garda district, in which there are approximately 15,000 or 20,000 houses, robbery from establishments has soared by up to 140% and theft from the person is up 84%. In regard to Terenure Garda station, the figure for theft from the person is up 100%. In terms of detection rates across all these, the figures are 9% in Tallaght Garda station, 5% in Rathfarnham Garda station, 10% in Crumlin station and 7% in Terenure station.

As the numbers of gardaí in Dublin have fallen, curiously, the numbers in Portlaoise Garda station have risen year on year and the biggest increase in Portlaoise Garda station, in the Minister's constituency, has taken place since his appointment. What is it about Dublin that our numbers of gardaí are falling but in the Minister's constituency and throughout Garda districts across the rest of the country, Garda numbers on the street are rising?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I reiterate and reinforce what my colleague has said. I have great regard for the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, but I am disappointed that the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, is not here to take this issue. It is an example of the way he and the Government treat Dublin when it comes to policing.

We have to get serious about crime and criminality in the city and county of Dublin. I raised issues directly with the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, just before Christmas. In the Dublin metropolitan region, DMR, north, which is much of the area I represent, with over 300,000 people, we have lost 147 gardaí since 2010. I want to start on a small positive. As a result of the community action in places like Balbriggan and Swords, and supported by myself - I have continually raised the issue of the lack of community gardaí - the Garda Commissioner announced an additional five community gardaí in Balbriggan, which will increase the number from two, for a population of 38,000 people. That is welcome and long overdue but very badly needed. In Swords, which is the size of a city, with a population of over 50,000, we have ten community gardaí. An extra five were announced, which I welcome, but I put it to the Minister of State that it is because of the continuing pressure we are putting on the Minister and the Department of Justice and Law Reform to deliver the additional gardaí.

The Minister of State will agree with me that people deserve to feel safe and secure in their own homes and communities. There are large rural swathes in my constituency, including Garlistown, where we have one garda. Rush Garda station was closed. Malahide Garda station closes at 9 p.m., and there are no community gardaí in Malahide for a population of just under 30,000. Fingal is the fastest growing part of the country and we have lost one in five gardaí in five years. That is 20% of the force. Not only has that an impact on intelligence gathering and on experience within our force, it has an effect on the community.

I want to hear from Government today that policing in Dublin is a priority. I meet with the chief superintendents and inspectors in my district and I see the work they and the rank and file gardaí are doing. We have just had a debate on the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill and the issue of illicit drugs. Our drugs unit in north Dublin is half of what it was in 2010. We have lost one in two, or 50%, of the gardaí in that unit. It cannot continue. Fianna Fáil in Dublin, with four Deputies, is putting Government on notice that it will no longer accept that. We want it to resource the Garda in Dublin county and city. Deputy Lahart outlined the figures. In my DMR district, 147 gardaí are gone, with a population that has grown nearly 8% in that intervening period.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: The message we want to get across to the Minister of State this evening is that the Government needs to wake up to the fact that crime in Dublin is a serious and growing problem. We have known for many years, unfortunately, that we have a problem in Dublin in respect of gangland crime. That is being dealt with by An Garda Síochána as best it can, provided it is given the resources, but the Government needs to wake up to the fact that what would be called middle of the road crime in terms of burglaries, thefts and attacks on the individual is growing.

To deal with one particular sector of our economy, the Irish Pharmacy Union recently did a survey on pharmacists and how they have been subjected and targeted in terms of crime. The survey found that 79% of pharmacies have been the victims of crime. On Pearse Street recently, in my constituency, pharmacies have been targeted. It is unacceptable that people who are in business, and most of them are sole practitioners trying to do a decent job, cannot rely on the fact that there are Garda resources out on the street to protect them. We know we will never resolve these criminal problems fully but the most effective way of dealing with them is to have a strong policing presence on the ground. One does not need to be a famous criminologist to realise that that provides confidence to the people in the community and a deterrent value to individuals who are thinking of getting involved in crime. If we could have more gardaí on the street it would be very effective in deterring people who believe they are entitled to go into a premises and get away with any small criminal acts they do such as theft.

My colleagues mentioned burglaries. Burglaries are a huge issue throughout my constituency also. Another further deterrent for them is technology but also gardaí on the street. If one goes to any community in our country, the one response from victims of crime and people who believe they are threatened by crime is that they want to see a greater Garda presence. Unfortunately, when we look at the figures for the gardaí who are present in Dublin, we see there has been a significant drop since 2010. In 2010, the number of Garda members in the Garda divisions was 4,160. By 2016, that number had dropped to 3,516. The Government may legitimately say that was because of the economic decline but that does not explain the fact that in the past year, the number of gardaí in Dublin has gone down to 3,409, a drop of 100 members of An Garda Síochána.

What the figures indicate is that this Government does not take seriously the problem of crime in Dublin. We know it will intervene on operational matters in respect of An Garda Síochána where it suits the interests of perhaps a member of Cabinet. We saw that when it came to Stepside Garda station. If the Government is able to do it in respect of opening a Garda station, it should be able to do the same to ensure there are more gardaí on the street. I ask the Government and the Minister for Justice and Equality to take this issue more seriously to ensure that Dublin is properly protected.

Deputy John Curran: While the Minister is very welcome to this debate, like my colleagues, I am disappointed that the Minister for Justice and Equality has not found it possible to attend because this is a very serious issue and we are coming to it from four different constituencies across the greater Dublin area.

I want to preface my remarks by putting on the record both my appreciation and the appreciation of thousands of our constituents and our community for the work that is done daily by the men and women of An Garda Síochána. It is precisely because they value the work of An Garda Síochána that we are here today because they are under-resourced in Dublin. The figures have been outlined. In the past year in Dublin we have had a reduction of 100 gardaí. Dublin has a

growing population. It has increased economic activity yet all the figures are down, whether it is in each of our metropolitan areas, in terms of community gardaí and the Garda Reserve.

I looked at my diary before coming into the Chamber. Next week and the following week I have meetings in two communities, one in Rathcoole and the other in Palmerstown. Policing is top of the agenda in both areas. The communities have clearly referred to the fact that they do not have the Garda presence they traditionally had. In my area, DMR west, the numbers have declined by 129 from 788 in 2010 to 659. What does it mean and is it significant? In the likes of Rathcoole Garda station it means a decline from 26 gardaí to 15. That means a Garda station which is supposed to be open during the day is only open subject to a garda being available.

Most of the serious and gangland crime committed over the last year or two has occurred in the greater Dublin area. Part of the impact is the way in which crime scenes take gardaí away from their normal duties. Crime scenes must be protected and door-to-door inquiries must take place. The Garda presence one would normally see on the ground is not there. One of the best assets An Garda Síochána has is the community garda. Community gardaí earn the respect of the communities in which they work and they act as a liaison between communities and various other Garda units. In my area, the number of community gardaí has declined by 24 to just 65.

While I am disappointed the Minister is not here, I could nearly have written the reply he will have given the Minister of State. It will refer to the reopening of Templemore in 2014 and his target of 15,000 gardaí by 2021. It will refer to increased civilianisation and new targets for the Garda Reserve. We have heard it all before. The problem is that as Templemore has sent increased numbers of gardaí to other stations, Dublin has experienced a continuous decline across every metropolitan district. That is the crux of the problem. The Minister of State cannot give us that stock reply. Year after year, the Government is recruiting and training gardaí and then distributing them to other areas at the expense of Dublin where we have serious crime, a growing population and increased economic activity.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton):

I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter. They are passionate and serious about it, which I appreciate. I am taking the issue on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, who cannot be here this evening and who sends his apologies.

The distribution of gardaí is exclusively the statutory responsibility of the Garda Commissioner. That said, I am aware that the Minister met with the acting Commissioner and his management team as recently as Monday of this week and the issue of resources was one of the matters discussed. The acting Commissioner has advised that the overall Garda strength in the Dublin metropolitan region, DMR, as of 31 December 2017 was 3,485. When appropriate, the work of local gardaí in the DMR is supported by a number of Garda national units such as the armed support unit, the national bureau of criminal investigation, the Garda national economic crime bureau and the Garda national drugs and organised crime bureau. The Deputies will be aware, as Deputy Curran predicted I would say, that the Garda College in Templemore was closed in 2010.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: How long did the Government keep it closed?

Deputy David Stanton: Even though the Deputy does not like me saying that, I will say it anyway. It was closed by the then-Government because of the severe and catastrophic economic crisis that the country was plunged into. The closure of the college and the moratorium

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imposed at that time has obviously had an impact on numbers in An Garda Síochána and it would be disingenuous to attribute the decline in numbers to anything other than that factor.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is nonsense. Fine Gael kept it closed.

Deputy David Stanton: The Deputies opposite do not like hearing this, but it is a fact.

Deputy Pat Deering: They want to rewrite history.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): Please, Deputies, respect the Minister of State.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Acting Chairman for his protection. When the last Government came into office, the initial focus was on stabilising the public finances and returning the country to growth. Once that had been achieved, one of the Government's first actions was to reopen the Garda College in Templemore.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Which the Government kept closed for three years.

Deputy Pat Deering: Fianna Fáil closed it.

Deputy David Stanton: Since the reopening in September 2014, just under 1,600 recruits have attested as members of An Garda Síochána and have been assigned to mainstream duties nationwide. Of these, 719, or 45%, have been assigned to the Dublin metropolitan region. I am aware that while Garda strength in the DMR east, north and north central divisions shows an increase, albeit slight, between 2015 and 2017, the overall strength of the DMR shows a marginal reduction at the end of 2017 compared to 2015.

As the Deputies will appreciate, the challenges presented by gangland crime over the past two years have necessitated investment in specialist units to enhance their capacity to support the fight against this scourge. I am advised by the Commissioner that 100 extra gardaí were assigned to specialist units within special crime operations in 2017. In addition, a dedicated armed support unit for the DMR was established at the end of 2016 in order to enhance armed support capacity in Dublin and to free up the resources of the emergency response unit.

I assure the House that the Government is committed to ensuring a strong and visible police presence throughout the country, including on the streets of the capital, in order to maintain and strengthen community engagement, provide reassurance to citizens and deter crime. To make this a reality for all, the Government has in place a plan for an overall Garda workforce of 21,000 personnel by 2021, including 15,000 Garda members. Real and tangible progress has been made towards this goal. Taking account of projected retirements, Garda numbers increased to 13,551 at the end of 2017, which represents a net increase of over 600 since the end of 2016. I am pleased to note that funding is in place to maintain this high level of investment in the Garda workforce.

This year, a further 800 Garda recruits will enter the Garda College, 200 of whom have already entered since 29 January. Another 800 Garda trainees are scheduled to attest during the year which means overall Garda numbers will reach 14,000 by the end of 2018, even taking account of projected retirements. Undoubtedly, the ongoing recruitment process will support all Garda activities and enhance visibility within our communities. As new Garda recruits come on stream, it will enable the acting Commissioner to provide additional resources across the Dublin metropolitan region.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): Deputies have one minute each for a supplementary and I have been reminded to keep them closely to the time.

Deputy John Lahart: I will do my best.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): No, I will.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State for a well read response. He says the distribution of gardaí is exclusively a matter for the Garda Commissioner, but he fails to explain why there is a huge increase relatively speaking in the Garda station in Portlaoise, one of the stations in the Minister's constituency. The Minister of State referred to Templemore, but its closure does not explain the discrepancy between the increase in numbers at Portlaoise Garda station and the decrease in the numbers in Dublin Garda stations across all services. The numbers are down 1,000 gardaí since 2010. The number of community gardaí has dropped from 508 to 310 in 2017. Garda Reserve numbers have dropped from 508 in 2010 to 175 in 2017.

People want gardaí on the beat, visible community gardaí, proper resources and reasonably rapid response times for people who are in need. We will continue to drive this message home until Dublin gets the deserved and warranted number of gardaí relative to the rest of the country.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The reply was the same response the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, gave before along with a bit of nonsense in the middle blaming Fianna Fáil when Fine Gael has been in government for seven years.

Deputy Pat Deering: It is a fact.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Relax, Pat. Over the seven years Fine Gael has been in government, it has presided over the decimation of An Garda Síochána, certainly in my area. Does the Minister of State remember smart policing, which was a policy of Government under his former colleague, Alan Shatter, who the Minister of State might also remember? It was not very smart for the communities out there. Repeat offending is an area in which the Government has abdicated its responsibility completely. Why have we had 15 gangland murders in this city in 27 months? The Government is asking gardaí in Dublin city and county to operate with one hand tied behind their backs. They are not being given the resources they deserve. They put their lives on the line for us but the Government does not prioritise Dublin.

I attended a meeting in Donabate this week, which was attended by more than 300 people. The population of Donabate and Portrane is over 11,000 but we have no gardaí there. It is also designated as an area for future growth. The population is crying out for a new Garda station, but there is no point having one if there are no gardaí to staff it. I ask the Minister of State to take seriously what Fianna Fáil in Dublin is saying, prioritise the DMR and ensure that, at the very least, we are not disproportionately impacted relative to other parts of the country, including, co-incidentally, the Minister's own constituency of Laois.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to answer the questions put down by the four of us, but he has been given a very hard task by his senior Minister. The person who should be responding to these issues is the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I suspect the reason he is not here is his great discomfort about

what the statistics reveal for Portlaoise. The Minister of State said the reason for the decline in Garda numbers was the economic crash to which Fine Gael refers three times a day. However, that does not explain the decline in Garda numbers in Dublin between 2016 and 2017. What was the Fine Gael slogan during the last election?

Deputy John Lahart: “Keep the recovery going”.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: The recovery was ongoing in 2016, which does not explain why there was a decline. The credit for adding 800 gardaí each year goes to Fianna Fáil because of what we achieved in the confidence and supply agreement.

Deputy Pat Deering: No.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: It is true.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: One need only look at the Fine Gael manifesto from before the last election. It included no commitment to bring Garda numbers up to 15,000. I refer finally to the assertion that the distribution of gardaí is a matter exclusively for the Garda Commissioner. If that is so, there are some very odd things to be explained when we look at the figures on increases for Portlaoise and what is happening in respect of Stepside. It seems that, on certain occasions, operational matters coincide very much with the interests of certain Government Ministers.

Deputy John Curran: I will try to stick strictly to the point. In the Minister of State’s answer to this House, he said that during 2017 the number of gardaí increased to 13,551, an increase of over 600. Can he explain to us why, if we have 600 extra gardaí in the country, there is a decline in the number of gardaí in Dublin? Why are we not seeing the increases that are happening in other parts of the country? That is the crux of the problem. We have gone through every constituency and metropolitan region and we have highlighted the issues, and whether it is in regard to community gardaí, local drugs squads, traffic corps, all are showing a decline. That is why the Minister is not here. He sent in the Minister of State to say we have 600 extra gardaí but a decline in Dublin. That is the crux of the problem - the areas where we have more serious problems such as gangland crime and related crime have fewer gardaí. There has to be political accountability and a political response. We cannot preside over a continuous decline in the number of gardaí serving in the greater Dublin area.

Deputy David Stanton: I am not sure if I detected an apology there for the closure of Templemore in 2010 and congratulations that we managed to get it open and that we are recruiting these extra numbers.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: It was kept closed for four years.

Deputy David Stanton: I will wait for that. I would expect that every time Fianna Fáil speaks here, its members would apologise first for the mess they made of the country and the catastrophic disaster they made.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: This is more of the same.

Deputy John Curran: Will the Minister of State just explain why we are not getting more gardaí?

Deputy David Stanton: They forget that and they wipe it out.

I assure the Deputies that Garda management keeps the distribution of the resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities and that the needs of all divisions are taken into account. They have made significant progress in tackling the threat of organised crime, particularly in Dublin's north inner city. Operation Hybrid has been established to co-ordinate the response to violent crime in Dublin and to address public safety concerns about community safety, particularly in the north inner city, and benefits from significant support from the armed support units.

As of 21 January this year, this response had included 72 arrests; 13 charges in total, ten charges related to murder investigations and three charges related to other offences; 34 firearms seized related to murder offences; in the region of 260 searches; and 15,000 lines of inquiry conducted, with more than 50,000 high-visibility checkpoints implemented and with significant support from the armed support units. In addition, a significant amount of CCTV footage, mobile phone traffic and forensic evidence has been examined. The Government also enacted new legislation to further target criminal activities, including the Proceeds of Crime (Amendment) Act 2016, which provides additional powers for gardaí, in particular powers to deal with the immediate seizure of assets suspected of being the proceeds of crime in order to prevent them being disposed of. In addition, the Government's plans for an overall Garda workforce of 21,000 is complemented by substantial investment in the Garda fleet and technology across the organisation.

We are now in a position to make real progress and it is being made. The gardaí are being attested in Templemore, there are more gardaí on the streets and there will be more.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Not in Dublin.

Deputy David Stanton: I take into account the genuine concerns of colleagues here and across the country. We have to fight this together. The Deputies are right to bring it up and to keep arguing about it. We are listening and we are working to increase the numbers and to maximise the turnout from Templemore. That is the essential point. I thank Deputies for their time.

Garda Vetting

Deputy Pat Deering: I thank the Ceann Comhairle's office for selecting this issue. I recognise the fact considerable progress has been made on the Garda vetting issue in recent years and I recall raising a similar Topical Issue on the subject a number of years ago, given the difficulties at the time. Nonetheless, more progress needs to be made. The considerable duplication involved needs to be eradicated in order to make the system more efficient.

I will give an example of a case I encountered recently. Tom is a teacher who changed from one teaching post to another last September. He had to be Garda vetted in his original post and had to be vetted again to go to his new job in September. Tom also wanted to get involved in his local community. He joined the GAA club to become a coach and had to be vetted to do so. He also wanted to get involved in the local rugby club and had to be vetted again. He was a serious guy who wanted to be involved in the community so he also got involved in coaching at the local soccer club, and he had to be vetted again. Within the space of one year, he was vetted five times to do his coaching and his teaching job.

There is too much duplication in this regard, although I recognise that Garda vetting is very

important. A simple response to this duplication would be if the person was Garda vetted once and then given a card which would last for, say, a two-year period. Such a process would mean that, after two years, he would be Garda vetted again, the card would be renewed and he could use that card for teaching and to go to the GAA club, soccer club or whatever organisation he wanted to go to, rather than having to go through the process time and time again.

The Minister of State might argue it is now a very easy process that can be done online, which is a fair point, but it can be very slow to go through this whole process when it is not necessary. To have the same individual Garda vetted time and again within a short space of time is inefficient. In order to make it more efficient, I believe we should introduce a card system whereby the person would be Garda vetted at the beginning of the year and this would last for a two-year period before the card was renewed. I ask the Minister to consider this option, which is reasonable and would simplify the system, not just for the Department but for everybody involved, and would avoid a lot of the duplication.

Deputy David Stanton: On behalf of the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, I thank Deputy Deering for raising this important issue. As the House will be aware, Garda vetting for employment purposes is carried out by An Garda Síochána primarily in accordance with the provisions of the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012. In this regard, the primary focus of the Garda national vetting bureau is to seek to enhance the safety of children and vulnerable adults. This is, I am sure everyone agrees, a very important task and it must be done thoroughly and correctly.

The processing system for vetting is working well at present. The Minister is informed by the Garda authorities that the vast majority of vetting applications - in excess of 80% - are processed by the national vetting bureau in five working days or fewer. This timeframe represents a very significant improvement in turnaround times in recent years. In mid-2013 an application for Garda vetting took an average of 14 weeks. This improvement has come about as a result of an unprecedented investment by the Government and the Garda authorities in providing this service, including an increase of over 80% in staffing levels and the roll-out in 2016 of the e-vetting system. The online processing of applications has strengthened the vetting process enormously and the e-vetting service is available to all registered organisations.

In certain circumstances processing times for a given application can be longer when, for example, additional inquiries may be necessary or there are errors in the application in an individual case. Delays can also occur in other aspects of the application process which are outside of the control of the Garda authorities, for example, in the submission or return of applications by registered organisations.

I would emphasise that the vetting process demands rigorous procedures to safeguard its integrity and to maintain the highest level of confidence by the public and organisations availing of the service. We must ensure, as far as we can, the safety of children and vulnerable adults, which is paramount. I chaired the committee at the time the pre-legislative scrutiny was proceeding on the national vetting Bill. I would invite colleagues to look back at the committee report and the submissions, which make for very interesting reading. The members of the committee at the time were of the view that we needed a very rigorous process with no wriggle room at all. I am glad to say it is working well, with a turnaround time of five days. I am surprised to hear it would be onerous as it is quite a simple procedure. However, it does, as far as possible, guarantee the safety of children and vulnerable from adults who are sometimes very clever indeed in manipulating and getting around systems in order to get involved with children

where they should not.

Deputy Pat Deering: I thank the Minister of State. I concur that the main aim is to ensure the safety of children and vulnerable adults, which nobody would deny. I made the point in my initial contribution about how quick the turnaround has become since 2013, when it was very slow and laborious. However, I repeat the point about the same person being vetted on a number of occasions during a year when doing similar jobs. I gave the example of a teacher who was doing his important day job and who also wants to get involved in the local community and sports clubs but has to get vetted again to do those jobs. I concur 110% with the importance of the safety of children and vulnerable adults, which is essential in any community. However, the point I am making is in respect of the duplication relating to the vetting process. It is more than likely that the person involved would also be dealing with the same children. For example, a teacher could be teaching children in the morning and coaching them in the afternoon and then again at the weekend for a particular sporting organisation. My point relates to the same person being vetted three or four different times. It is irritating people, especially in schools and sporting organisations. It is essential to ensure that the people involved in working with children are held in the utmost regard across the board and that the systems are credible.

I compliment the Minister of State on the very good work he did in this regard in his previous position as Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality. I ask him to look again at the duplication in the system in order that it might be more flexible for organisations and individuals who go about their everyday work and deal with the same people in different capacities.

Deputy David Stanton: The investment in the vetting system in recent years is a clear indication that the Government is taking this matter very seriously. There has been a very significant expansion in the capacity of the vetting bureau, especially since the introduction of the e-vetting system. In 2017, the vetting bureau received 497,026 applications, that is almost half a million, which is an increase from 389,548 in 2016. The need for the allocation of resources for vetting is kept under continuous review by the garda authorities who continue to engage with registered organisations to maintain standards and promote best practice in vetting. The responsibility is with organisations to ensure that the people they engage are vetted. Each organisation is responsible.

On the question of duplication, section 12 of the 2012 Act does provide for a degree of flexibility which helps to lessen the administrative burden for relevant organisations. The Act provides for certain limited circumstances where organisations can share a single vetting disclosure where this is agreed to by the vetting applicant and also makes specific provision in respect of persons who may be employed on a recurring but non-continuous basis. Nevertheless, we must always be careful to ensure that vetting disclosures are up to date in order to take account of the most recently available information. They must be current, rigorous and certain. We cannot take any chance that somebody might slip through, and some people are very clever in trying to do that.

I will take on board what the Deputy said. It is something that has been raised before. The fact that it usually only takes five working days for the applications to be processed and returned makes it easier for everybody. It must also be borne in mind that it is the organisation that is responsible. If somebody appears with a card to an organisation, it is the organisation rather than the person with the card who is ultimately responsible. It is an important and serious topic and one about which we must be very vigilant. I thank the Deputy for his interest and for

raising it this evening.

Sitting suspended at 5.35 p.m. and resumed at 5.45 p.m.

Parental Leave (Amendment) Bill 2017: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time”.

With the Acting Chairman, Deputy Lahart’s, permission, I will share time with Deputy Catherine Murphy.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to bring the Parental Leave (Amendment) Bill 2017 to the House.

The Bill seeks to provide better job protection and work-life balance for parents by extending the entitlement to parental leave. Enactment of it would mean that parents with qualifying children would have an entitlement to 26 weeks of unpaid leave instead of the current 18 weeks. It would be available to either or both parents. The Bill also allows parents who have already taken their leave and still have a qualifying child to enjoy an extra eight weeks of that leave.

Why do we need this? Working parents lead incredibly busy lives, constantly striving to balance the needs of their children with making ends meet and planning for the future. The pressure can be enormous. Many struggle, especially during school holidays or with child appointments or periods of illness. As families grow, it gets even harder. For many, it is an impossible task and causes huge family pressures and stress for working parents.

In addition, the high cost of child care in this country means that for some parents there is little financial gain from returning to work after the birth of a child. Some decide not to return at all for this reason. Others return, not because it is their first choice or to make money, but simply because they want to protect their employment and extending the period of leave on offer to parents allows them extra time out with their children at a time when it often makes no financial sense to return to work.

The current regime for parental leave in Ireland is very weak. It offers 18 weeks of parental leave, the minimum required under EU law. In fact, virtually all of our parental leave law is derived from the European Union. It gets so little attention that the Government does not even bother to ascertain how many people take it up or in which ways it is taken, or how many people get income support. Indeed, in bringing forward this Bill, it was surprising how many people were not even aware of the existence of parental leave.

Ireland compares very poorly to other European countries in terms of child-related leave. Across Europe, there are four main types of leave: maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave and what is variously described as family leave, home-care leave or child-care leave. Many countries offer a mix of leave, often extending beyond the child’s third birthday.

The countries with the best systems incorporate lengthy and generous paid leave and extensive periods of unpaid or low-paid leave. In Ireland, we have neither. We are an outlier on many levels. First, unlike the vast majority of other developed countries, we have no system of paid parental leave. In terms of the overall length of parental leave, Ireland is counted among the list of short-leave countries. The average length of the combined maternity and parental

leave among EU member states is 97.8 weeks. In Ireland, the maximum amount is just 60 weeks. For a man, and even after the recent introduction of paternity benefit, it is still only 20 weeks.

Only in terms of the length of maternity leave do we compare well internationally. However, even then, when the value of the maternity benefit payment is factored in, we have one of the weakest support payments for mothers in the EU. There is no provision for child-related leave beyond parental leave, as exists in countries such as Belgium, Croatia, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Poland and Portugal. We are one of the worst countries in terms of parental leave payments and one of the worst countries in terms of the length of parental leave. Everyone loses from such a poor regime and the lack of commitment to work-life balance. It strains relationships. It undermines parent-child attachment. It can act against good diet and participation in sports or other activities. It adds to mental health pressures. It exacerbates work absenteeism and undermines productivity. Providing job protection for working parents and allowing them the choice of taking extra time out, if that is their wish, is a win-win for parents, children and employers. It is also a win society.

This Bill seeks to address one aspect of these shortcomings in Ireland — the length of unpaid parental leave. Under Dáil rules, we are prevented from passing an Opposition Bill proposing a new payment for parental leave, although we would dearly love to do so. In our alternative budget proposals for each of the past three budgets, the Social Democrats showed how a parental payment could be afforded if it was truly a political priority for the Government. The commitment in the programme for Government of extra parental payments is welcome but has not yet materialised. There is no provision for it in this year's budget and there is still no sign of the much promised family leave Bill.

We note and welcome comments made at the weekend by the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, that the Government plans the introduction of parental leave payments. However, this merely restates what is in the programme for Government. There is still no budget for it, no legislation for it and no definite timeline. Indeed, no Minister has been talking about it until the Government knew this Bill was coming before the Dáil.

Since the publication of the Bill, the EU Commission has made extensive proposals on flexible working arrangements for parents. It has proposed a series of work-life balance measures for parents and carers. These include paid parental leave of four months, provision for a qualifying age of 12 years, and a right to request flexible working arrangements. We believe this Bill presents an opportunity to bring forward some of these proposals. The current regime in Ireland rightly tries to balance employer and employee needs but is too far skewed, in our view, towards protecting employers. Parents should be offered more flexibility on matters such as term time and when they can take their parental leave, and these should be put on a statutory footing. We recognise that many employers do facilitate this flexibility but, unfortunately, many do not, and it is important we move towards a statute-based system. In particular, we see no reason the child qualifying age for parental leave cannot be raised to 12 years if and when this Bill is taken on Committee Stage. We will certainly bring forward proposals in this regard.

I will now outline the sections of the Bill. Section 1 deals with interpretation. Sections 2 and 3 provide for a change of entitlement to parental leave. They amend sections 6 and 7 of the Parental Leave Act 1998 by extending the current entitlement of 18 weeks to 26 weeks. Section 4 sets out the Short Title and collective citation.

Extending parental leave has many benefits for families, employers and society. It allows parents not only to hold on to their jobs and protect the security of their income, but also to spend more time with their children. It serves the interests of children that they have more engagement with parents from an early age and can make strong bonds and enjoy sustained attachment to their parents. Various studies have shown that strong parental supports, including parental leave, improve female participation in the workforce. Parental leave provides flexibility to parents. With no statutory entitlement to term-time leave in Ireland, it can be used to cover some term time. By reducing demand for formal child care, extra parental leave can help reduce the cost pressures for everyone in this sector. There is no cost to the State and in most cases there is very little net additional cost to employers. From an employer's point of view, parental leave can be critical in retaining key staff and can help succession planning, reduce absenteeism and improve productivity. Extending parental leave also opens up opportunities in the workforce for people who are unemployed. We believe everyone wins from the extension of parental leave. We should not have to wait yet again for the EU to tell us what to do when we should already be doing it ourselves. We very much look forward to the debate and we hope our proposal will meet support from all sides of the House.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The issue of child care in its overall sense was very much pushed to the centre in 2005, when two by-elections were held in which child care became an issue because the by-elections happened to be in commuter belt areas. People were commuting and trying to have their children cared for, and I was one of the people who was successful in those by-elections, as was the late Shane McEntee. It was a very important issue and it really came to the fore at that point, yet 13 years later we are still grappling with it and we have not managed to deal with it in any kind of comprehensive way. Those who do manage to go back to work after having their children either pay what people describe as second mortgages or rely on family or friends to mind their children, particularly in the first year. That is the year in which people will most likely opt for flexible time that is available to them. Neither situation is ideal or desirable but for many families, there is simply no other option but to have family or friends mind their children or to pay astronomical amounts in child care costs.

The Bill we propose is just one step in what we see as a suite of measures to help parents manage the competing demands of a work-life balance. As Deputy Shortall outlined, we are an Opposition party and, as such, are precluded from introducing a Bill that would place a cost on the State. For this reason we have had to focus specifically on the issue of unpaid parental leave, but this merits legislating in its own right. The measures in the Bill are to be seen as an additional opportunity for parental leave, which would be available to parents in addition to our manifesto call, which is for 12 months' paid parental leave. We very much welcome the Minister, Deputy Regina Doherty's comments that she intends to pursue the programme for Government commitment on paid parental leave. We acknowledge and accept that it will be introduced on an incremental basis but we need very firm timelines because promising this when it is in the public spotlight or when it is being highlighted is not enough. We need a strategy and a timeline for implementation.

Our proposal to extend parental leave for those with qualifying children is based on a number of factors, but first and foremost among them is the undeniable link between early-years parenting and the future success and health of the child and the family and the associated benefits to the wider society. Many other countries have recognised the enormous payback that is reaped from a societal point of view when parents are supported to spend time with their children during these formative years. Let me be very clear that when we speak about parents, we

are speaking about many different types of family formations, including single parents, same-sex parents, adoptive parents or any of the other most wonderful family formations that exist in our society. The benefits to society are tenfold when parents are supported in this way - not just for society, but also for the child, the parent or parents and, in many cases, the employer too. It is far easier for parents to make the choice to continue in employment if they know they have the option to spend time with their child when it is most needed, that is, when their children are young and growing. One can see the options that very many parents are taking - for example, in work-share arrangements - in order that they can have that flexibility, even beyond the time envisaged in this Bill. Equally, the effect of parental leave on wider issues of gender equality cannot be overestimated. There are probably many dads who do not realise they have entitlements. While we would encourage the take-up of the entitlements that are already there, they need to be extended. We believe a firm and tangible timeline for the introduction of paid parental leave in conjunction with the proposals in this Bill for the extension of additional unpaid parental leave will provide a culture whereby parents of young children are free to make the arrangements that work best for their lives.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton):

I am very happy to have the opportunity to join the debate on the Parental Leave (Amendment) Bill 2017. This is a significant Bill, and it is regrettable that we do not have pre-legislative scrutiny of Private Members' Bills. I have said this here previously and I will say it again. When I was Chairman of the Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality, we dealt with many topics and Bills over five years and the value of pre-legislative scrutiny cannot be overestimated. I have to hand the submissions received on the sexual and domestic violence Bill. Private Members' Bills do not have that added value at all.

I believe this Bill could be greatly enhanced by the benefit of a consultative process that would engage key stakeholders such as the National Women's Council of Ireland, the trade union movement and the business sector. They have considerable expertise in this area. It would be very beneficial if the justice committee could undertake legislative scrutiny of the Bill, hold a consultative process with key stakeholders and receive detailed briefing on the work under way domestically and at EU level, including on gender equality. It is important that our policies in these areas are coherent in both a domestic whole-of-government and EU context.

However, tonight is an opportunity for Members to put their views on the record and I have been pleased to have had the opportunity for this engagement. In particular, I am pleased to have the opportunity to update the House on the work undertaken in government on this important policy area.

I commend the aim of the Bill. It seeks to support parents and give families more options when it comes to meeting their child care needs. I am sure that all of us in the House are supportive of the tenets underpinning the Bill. As presented by the Deputies, the Bill provides for the extension of the existing entitlement to parental leave from 18 weeks to 26 weeks, and creates a further entitlement to an additional eight weeks parental leave for those parents who have already used their 18 weeks.

I am sure the majority of the Members of the House will agree with me when I say that we must do our utmost to help and support parents. I remind the House that over the past three budgets the Department of Children and Youth Affairs has secured an increase in the child care budget of an unprecedented 80%, reflecting the Government's commitment to parents

and children. In 2018 alone, investment in child care will be €487 million. This investment is being used to improve access to high quality, affordable child care for approximately 170,000 children and their families.

As the House is aware, free pre-school provided under the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme has been extended. From September 2018, all children will be eligible for two full years of free pre-school education before transitioning to primary school. This delivers on a commitment in the programme for Government. In addition, a range of new and improved measures to reduce the cost of child care was recently introduced. These include a non-means tested universal subsidy of up to €1,040 per year for children under three years of age and significantly increased targeted supports of up to €145 per week through existing child care subvention schemes. These too deliver on commitments in the programme for Government.

The development of the affordable child care scheme, which was announced in budget 2017, will add to these measures. The affordable child care scheme will radically redesign how support is delivered to make high quality child care more accessible and affordable for families in Ireland. This scheme will replace all existing targeted child care subvention schemes with a single streamlined scheme that will provide the framework for increasing public investment in child care over the years ahead. Work on developing the affordable child care scheme is well under way. The Childcare Support Bill, which will provide the critical legislative underpinning for this scheme, will be considered on Committee Stage in Dáil Éireann shortly and the development of a new IT system is also being advanced.

The Government agrees with the Deputies as to the need to support families. It agrees with the Deputies on the principle of improving family leave available to parents. It is for these reasons the Government will not oppose the Deputies' Bill this evening. However, the Government believes the focus should now be on introducing parental leave on a paid basis. The provision of paid leave would bring much greater benefits to parents and children at this stage than the further extension of unpaid leave. The House will already be aware that A Programme for a Partnership Government includes a commitment to increase paid parental leave during the first year of a child's life, as research shows children benefit most from parental care in the first year of life. To further this commitment, the Government has established an interdepartmental working group to develop proposals to give effect to the programme commitments. The key objectives of this group are to develop options as to the duration of the leave, the age of the eligible child and the level of payment to be offered; determine the usefulness of adopting a phased approach; estimate the likely costs arising; and align any proposals as much as possible with a European Commission proposal for a directive on work-life balance for parents and carers, which I will address now. The group is also working on a policy approach and I expect it to report with its proposals at the end of April.

The move to introduce a paid parental leave entitlement is aligned to the policy approach put forward by the European Commission in its proposal for a new work-life balance directive. That directive is under discussion at working group level under the Bulgarian Presidency of the EU. The directive's key proposal is that parental leave should be made available to parents on a paid basis. The directive recognises that the provision of paid parental leave will be more effective and more appropriate in terms of encouraging fathers to share the role of caring for their children, thus contributing to the promotion of gender equality. The directive is part of a package of EU measures aimed at addressing the under-representation of women in employment and supporting women's career progression by creating improved conditions whereby they can

reconcile their working responsibilities and family commitments.

We have to support families. However, we also have to promote the objective of gender equality. For too long, the majority of caring responsibilities has been shouldered by women. We now have to put in place policies that encourage fathers to share that caring role. Children do best when both parents are facilitated to take an active role in parenting them. It makes sense in terms of child welfare. Equally, it makes sense in gender equality terms. Women's equality has been constrained within the workplace because of their caring roles. Often, they have not had the same opportunities or pay as men as a result. Women's empowerment is a key theme running through A Programme for a Partnership Government.

Last May, the then Tánaiste, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, and I launched the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020. I am sure Deputies are well aware of the strategy, have studied it from front to back and have it close by for reference. The strategy agreed by Government has as its overall goal over its four year timeframe changing attitudes and practices preventing the full participation of women and girls in education, employment and public life at all levels and improving services for women and girls, with priority given to those experiencing or at risk of experiencing the poorest outcomes. The strategy includes a set of actions specifically aimed at supporting parents.

The Government has committed to providing a platform of parenting supports for families and working parents. It has undertaken to publish proposals to expand paid leave in the first year of a child's life and to legislate for these proposals as soon as possible, as set out in A Programme for a Partnership Government. I invite all Deputies to read the strategy. It is a living document and we welcome the input of anybody and everybody into the strategy. We have other strategies we are working towards but this is the one most pertinent to this debate.

When it comes to improving and expanding our current family leave system, there are wider and more complex factors, which I have set out, that the Deputies' Bill does not consider. Because of this, it would be remiss of me not to say that the Government has concerns with the approach proposed in the Bill. Extending an unpaid family leave requirement would make it more likely that the lower paid of the two parents, often the mother, would take the unpaid leave, with consequent impacts for these mothers in terms of pay and pension entitlements. It potentially perpetuates the tendency whereby caring responsibilities are seen by employers as the responsibility of mothers rather than of fathers. This has negative implications in terms of gender equality and in terms of the opportunities potentially available to women within the workforce. Equally, only parents on higher incomes may have the resources needed to avail of the leave. I feel very strongly that fathers should be facilitated to undertake a caring role for their children. I was proud to bring the paternity leave legislation through the House in September 2016, which provides two weeks' paid paternity leave for fathers on the birth of their children.

The Deputies' Bill, while laudable, does not take account of the moves domestically and at EU level to introduce parental leave on a paid basis or of the need to promote gender equality for fathers and mothers in terms of caring responsibilities. As I mentioned earlier, this is why I believe it is important that the Oireachtas committee, which I chaired in the past and I know what valuable work it can carry out, has the opportunity to scrutinise the proposals and their implications, intended and unintended. It would give stakeholders outside the House an opportunity to feed into the process. This is the value of pre-legislative scrutiny and it is a shame Private Members' Bills do not have this facility. They could be hugely enhanced and helped.

All Government Bills have to go through it. They are enhanced and improved and flaws are discovered at an early stage before they are published. I encourage all of us to discuss whether we can do this with some fantastic legislation emanating from the Opposition benches.

We all share the objective of wanting to support families. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the Government and all Members of the Oireachtas are committed to providing the utmost support to parents and families in the State. I remind the House it was the then Minister for Justice and Equality, Alan Shatter, who extended parental leave from 14 to 18 weeks, demonstrating the commitment of successive Fine Gael Governments to improving the entitlements offered to parents. Members of the House will also recall that only recently we introduced and passed legislation that provided additional leave and financial support to parents of children born prematurely. Our focus now is on introducing parental leave on a paid basis. The benefits of such an approach for families and for children are obvious. I urge the Deputies to work with the Government to see how we can develop legislation that builds on what is already in train in the EU and domestically. By collaborating on an agreed approach we can develop legislation that responds more effectively to the needs of women, men, parents and children alike. With this in mind, I propose that if Deputies Shortall and Catherine Murphy are willing, I will meet them in the coming weeks to discuss their proposals and to examine how their approach, that of the Government and the European Commission's proposal for a work life balance directive, once finalised, can be aligned for the benefit of all families.

I thank the Deputies for bringing forward the Bill and for giving us an opportunity to discuss this very important policy matter.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I commend Deputies Shortall and Catherine Murphy for introducing this important legislation. It will not come as a surprise to many people to hear that Fianna Fáil will support the legislation. The reason it will not come as a surprise is that when Fianna Fáil was in government back in 1998 it introduced the Parental Leave Act. It was also Fianna Fáil, when in government in 2006, that introduced the Parental Leave (Amendment) Act. They had the effect of providing parental leave up to a period of 14 weeks. As the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, said, it was the former Minister, Alan Shatter, who increased it from 14 weeks to 18 weeks. The legislation was introduced in 1998 partly due to the fact there was a European directive that had to be transposed into Irish law. However, the legislation was also introduced because there was a recognition of the extraordinary burdens being placed on working parents at that time, at the end of the last century. If anything, those pressures have increased on parents today who find themselves in difficult situations where they have to devote huge amounts of time to their work lives. Only limited amounts of time are being devoted to looking after their children and indeed to watching their children growing up. Most people will agree having a child is one of the most fulfilling things a person can do.

We sometimes talk about the rights of the child. Children, of course, have many rights. We should not ignore the fact that parents have a right as well to enjoy the upbringing of their children. Childhood passes quickly. It probably does not pass that quickly for children but it passes very quickly for parents. The heart of the proposed legislation recognises that parents want to be as much a part of their children's growing up as possible.

One of the advantages of being self-employed is being able to devote as much or as little time to one's work as possible. There are many disadvantages to being self-employed in that if one does not work, one does not get paid. However, there are advantages in self-employment over those employed in contractual relationships. This legislation deals with the latter. It deals

with circumstances where parents are in employment and feel they want to devote more time to enjoying their children's childhood and to take time off in order to participate in that. Like many people in this House, I would like to see a situation where we have paid parental leave. The Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, spoke about that and he is correct.

I know the proposers of the Bill, and probably every other Deputy who will speak on it, are in favour of that. One of the downsides of having unpaid parental leave is that to a large extent, and I do not have the statistics but I suspect this is the case, it is the mother who engages in the parental leave and who takes the time off. It must also be recognised that parental leave can only be taken, when two parents are bringing up a child, if those parents and that family can survive on one income. I know there is nothing discriminatory about parental leave but that point must encourage the Government to do as much as possible to expedite the introduction of paid parental leave.

I was pleased to hear the Minister of State say the Government has set up an interdepartmental working group to develop proposals to give effect to A Programme for a Partnership Government. Deputy Shortall said that the first time she heard the Government making any points in respect of this was after the introduction of this legislation. I welcome the fact it is in A Programme for a Partnership Government. However, I would also be interested to know when the interdepartmental working group was established. I do that not for the purpose of trying to have a political row. It will be important for the determination of what is the level of commitment within Government to introducing paid parental leave. The Minister of State can go back to his Government colleagues and say there will be significant if not universal support for the proposal if that legislation can be brought forward.

The Minister of State also mentioned how he would favour pre-legislative scrutiny for Opposition Bills. In fairness, he said this to me before. It is important to make the point, however, that it is not the case that Opposition Bills are not subjected to pre-legislative scrutiny. They are. The only difference is that scrutiny takes place on Committee Stage. The Minister of State may be correct in stating that it would be preferable if legislative scrutiny took place in advance of publication of the Bill. That, however, may ignore the political realities of life on the Opposition benches. Opposition parties do not have the same ability to ask departmental groups or civic groups in society to produce working papers, to come back with those and reconsider legislation from them. There is a certain immediacy to life in Opposition.

The proposal at the heart of the legislation is to introduce parental leave from 18 weeks up to 26 weeks. There needs to be some recognition that this is available. I am concerned that at present there is not much awareness that parents can take leave in respect of their children up to their eighth birthday. Alternatively, they can take parental leave in respect of a child who has a disability or a long-term illness up to the age of 16. I do not know if there is the same level of awareness about those rights that individuals have in the same way as there is awareness about the rights of mothers in particular to maternity leave. Recently, a proposal in respect of fathers paternity leave was enacted.

However, at the heart of this debate is the fact that we have to recognise as a society that there is more to life than work. Many working parents are stretched to the limit by having to get up at inordinately early hours. They have to bring their children to a crèche. It is usually a lengthy drive in order to be near a place where they work. They then have to drive home in the evening, on many occasions having collected their child late from work. In many instances, people are leaving the house at 7 a.m. in the morning and only getting back at 7 p.m. in the

evening. They only get a couple of weeks holiday a year. There is a time when people have to recognise there is more to life than work. We cannot just have a situation where parents devote themselves to working for some big employment group, which is simply generating profits for the owners of that company, while at the same time, they do not get the enjoyment from the great experience of their children growing up.

I welcome the legislation and Fianna Fáil supports it. It will come to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality at which legislative scrutiny will take place. I suspect the proposers of the Bill will have no objection to that as it is a worthwhile process to go through. If the Government wants to bring forward its own proposals on paid parental leave, it will meet with a very favourable response not just from Fianna Fáil but I suspect from every Member of this House. Once again I commend the Deputies on introducing the legislation which will get Fianna Fáil's support on Second Stage.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I wish to compliment and commend Deputy Róisín Shortall and Deputy Catherine Murphy on introducing this Bill. It will be no surprise that the Labour Party will wholeheartedly support it and the principles set out in it. While we welcome it, we see it only as a first step or a start. I am sure the proponents of the Bill will agree with this sentiment. It is a strong overview to having gender-equal paid parental leave being introduced over a period of time.

The Bill is laudable and we are very supportive of it. However, I have a small concern. The Bill could have a unforeseen and unanticipated consequence. Parents in the higher income groups and with adequate resources could be in a position to avail of this unpaid leave. It would be people who would be better off, notwithstanding the laudable objective. I am sure that can be circumscribed in the scrutiny the Bill will undergo at Joint Committee on Justice and Equality.

A growing body of research outlines the benefits of paid parental leave to the health and well-being of a child. It also facilitates greater involvement of the father in the long-term care of the child. It would also facilitate and acknowledge the father's rights to parenthood as well as its benefits. Indeed, it was the Labour Party that pioneered and successfully introduced in the budget of 2015 two weeks paid paternity leave which came into effect in September 2016. It was the former Minister for Social Protection, and then leader of the Labour Party, Deputy Joan Burton, who was the driving force behind that significant change.

It was a clear recognition that fathers should have the opportunity to bond with their new born children and a further acknowledgment of the clear evidence that children perform best when they remain within the home of their parents for the first 12 months or so of their life. I recall the Labour Party election manifesto which was launched in February 2016 for the 2016 general election. We committed to protect firmly the six months paid maternity leave which had been in existence and the two weeks paternity leave which had been introduced in the 2015 budget. In addition, there was a commitment to provide a further two weeks paid paternity leave and three months paid parental leave, with at least one month reserved for each parent, ensuring that every child could be cared for by their parents for the first nine months of life. That is essential and we must move towards it. We further committed to increasing this to 12 months over a five-year period. That commitment recognised the prevailing resources situation, which was meagre and challenging. Clearly, it could be accelerated in the current resource context and accommodated in an incremental way. It is probably not feasible to get all of this paid parental leave in one fell swoop, notwithstanding it would be desirable given the huge pressure

parents are under and the wider pressures. However, it is important to get the acorn planted and the first seeds going with regard to paid parental leave. I have no doubt that is what the authors of the Bill are seeking and they see the Bill as the first step on the ladder, which is also laudable.

The Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, indicated in November that she wished to see shared parental leave introduced during the lifetime of this Government. The Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, referred to it as part of the programme for Government and I spoke about achieving this in a debate in the House three or four months ago, with combined leave of 52 weeks being divided between parents. This is in line with the European pillar objectives and the EU Commission proposals on extending parental leave, which would be shared leave between the parents. That would bring us into line with European norms, although it will take some time to achieve because we are somewhat slower than others.

As Deputy Shortall mentioned, the take-up of paternity leave is hovering at approximately 55%. It reminds me of the family income supplement, because many people are often not aware of the existence of schemes. I do not condemn the Department as it is good at advertising schemes, but sometimes things do not get across. Sometimes when people call to our clinics we are shocked that they do not know about some schemes. That is where the interface with the politician can be helpful, notwithstanding the abuse that can be hurled at us at times about clientelism and building up clients. The take-up of the paternity leave scheme is disappointing, but understandable. In many cases men are the principal earners and they often earn more than the mother of the child. The paternity leave payment is clearly not as attractive or adequate to enable them to take the leave. That might be a reason too. New fathers tend to take the two weeks in a continuous block but it can be taken anytime in the 26 weeks following the baby's birth or adoption. I recall explaining that to a father when he asked how one should take it. I told him he could even take it a day at a time if that suited him. The payment is approximately €235 per week. Employers need to top it up to make it more attractive.

I support the Minister's ambition to have one year's paid parental and maternity leave. It would be a significant game changer and move us in line with the system that prevails in the Nordic countries. I read with interest an article in *The Times* newspaper last December by Charles Bremner. He focused on the cultural phenomenon in Finland where the level of paid leave offered to parents has enabled that country to become the first in the developed world where fathers do most of the child care. Apparently, fathers spend more time with school age children than mothers do. There are 5.5 million people in Finland so it is not dissimilar to Ireland in terms of population. Mr. Bremner pointed out that an OECD study had concluded that Finnish fathers spend an average of eight minutes more a day with their school age children than mothers do. Fathers in Finland can avail of nine weeks paid leave after a child's birth. That probably accounts for it. Mothers only get four months, which is not as attractive as our system when one considers it overall. After that period, however, one parent can receive €450 per month and stay at home with the child. That provides the choice. Perhaps in Finland some of the mothers are higher earners so the fathers mind the baby. It is all about household income. That informs the choice. The advertisement promoting parental leave in Finland states:

This time creates the foundation for a lifelong bond. Working careers are long [one could say in excess of 40 years] ... Family leaves are quite short. Being a parent is your most important job.

US multinationals are in the news for many reasons but Google and Facebook offer fa-

thers up to four months paid paternity leave. Obviously, they are very rich companies. This is clearly dependent on the private sector and it can be hit and miss depending on the size and the wealth of the company. The best solution is state-sponsored supports and regulation. Most countries with paid parental leave draw on public funds to support the policy. I support that, but it means we will have to pay more in taxation. I cannot speak about the Nordic services without pointing out that those countries have a higher level of taxation for them. We cannot speak with forked tongues. Most Nordic countries offer gender equal parental leave. They reserve a quota of non-transferable leave for the fathers. Professor Ingólfur Gíslason of the University of Iceland recently noted that a crucial element of increasing fathers' take-up of leave is economic compensation, which should not fall below 75% to 80% of their regular salary. He said, "Most young couples walk an economic tightrope and cannot really afford a major reduction in family income". As already stated, on average, men earn more than women so the family is very much dependent on the father's share of the family income.

All of that must be taken into the equation. The Minister of State is advising that we examine this in the overall context of how it would work in practice. This turns us to the argument now taking place across the globe, including in this country, on the necessity of closing the gender pay gap with regard to some of the major corporations and bodies, some of them in the public service. That would make it economically viable for men who are usually the higher earners, although clearly not in every case, to take time off to look after children. This dialogue has been focused on and advanced significantly in the Nordic countries, and it underlies their success in this area.

I support Deputies Shortall and Catherine Murphy on this Bill. Last November, the Government was a little slow in response to the EU directive. The Minister of State spoke about implementing it on a phased basis and the cost implications. Parents did not get much in the budget. The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, economic analysis showed they got very little, despite the cost of child care and everything else weighing down on them. There are only six countries where workers are not entitled to paid parental leave and this is one of them. There has been much talk about it and it is time we set about delivering it. It might well be on a phased basis but if we get on the first rung of the ladder we can achieve a great deal. This is an important debate and I again compliment Deputies Shortall and Catherine Murphy for bringing the Bill forward. It is an important contribution on this important issue.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I support the Bill and I commend Deputies Shortall and Catherine Murphy and the Social Democrats on bringing it forward.

Ba mhaith liom cuidiú leis an reachtaíocht luachmhar seo, a thabharfadh cuid mhaith solúbthacht do theaghlaigh agus a chuirfeadh níos mó roghanna ar fáil dóibh. Ba chóir go dtiocfadh sé chun cinn in éineacht le tuilleadh íocaíochtaí leasa shóisialaigh chun cúnamh a thabhairt do theaghlaigh agus do thuismitheoirí. Fiú gan na híocaíochtaí breise sin - ní féidir le lucht an Fhreasúra an méid sin a dhéanamh - tá luach sa Bhille seo.

Sinn Féin has long advocated extending parental leave and parental benefit and has included that in its alternative budgets. There are a number of elements in the proposal before us. The Government says it will not oppose the legislation, which is welcome, but its commentary has been to the effect that the priority is to increase paid parental leave. I welcome that. Clearly, it is not in the gift of the Social Democrats Deputies or any Opposition Deputies to introduce a Bill in respect of that matter, particularly as it would give rise to a charge on the Exchequer. I have always believed that rule does not make sense. It should at least be an option for Deputies

to bring such a Bill to Second Stage and perhaps at later Stages there would be some logic to the Government. However, it causes restrictions in terms of both legislation and amendments and blocks Bills of that nature from the Opposition.

The provisions in the Bill extend parental leave from 18 weeks of unpaid leave per child up to the age of eight to 26 weeks or six months. The State is already doing the bare minimum in this regard. A period of 18 weeks is required by EU legislation and it is high time the provision in Ireland was revisited and expanded. There is flexibility within that arrangement and the leave can be taken all at once or in blocks of a minimum of six weeks. There is further flexibility where there is agreement with an employer, which is of benefit. However, there is no doubt that the extra weeks of leave proposed in the Bill would be of enormous benefit to parents. The proposal will not suit everyone and many parents may not make use of it. However, it would make an enormous difference for many parents on occasions such as a child's school holidays or if a parent wished to spend more time with his or her children in their formative years and might be of benefit in cases where parents had a child with a lengthy illness and compassionate leave did not apply or had been exhausted, as well as many other sets of circumstances. In that regard, this legislation is very valuable.

Sinn Féin has stated for some time that we must go much much further on this issue. In Ireland one is entitled to 60 weeks of maternity and parental leave combined, whereas the EU average is 97.8 weeks, according to a journal article written by a representative of the Social Democrats. There is a clear and substantial disparity in that regard. We need to move towards it being possible to share parental leave and parental benefit and their being more substantial. As a first step, the alternative budgets brought forward by Sinn Féin in recent years proposed extending the period of maternity benefit by two weeks and increasing the rate by approximately €40. Studies show that the presence of parents during the first year of their children's lives is vital to their development.

Although they are entitled to parental leave, many mothers still believe they have no option but to return to work early. Ireland ranks poorly on the issue of maternity pay, being 32nd out of 34 OECD states in that regard as of the end of 2016. Unpaid leave for mothers or fathers is welcome, but if one cannot afford not to work which is the reality for many families who may be under pressure to pay a mortgage or rent and so on, that is a difficulty. The rate of maternity benefit in the period in question is too low for many. *Caithfimid déileáil freisin leis na rátaí agus an leis an mhéid airgid a fhaigheann daoine. Tá sé an-dheacair do chuid mhaith teaghlaigh, fiú leis an mbriseadh ón obair, a gcuid billí, morgáistí, cíósanna agus gach rud eile a íoc.*

Although it is important to address the issue of parental leave, there is also a need for the period during which parental benefit is payable to be extended and the rate increased. The period of unpaid leave should be lengthened to match European norms in that regard. Ultimately, there is a need to develop a block of paid parental leave and parental benefit which could be divided between parents as they choose. The division of the leave and benefit would be entirely the decision of parents. That model would suit families and be appropriate for the world in which we live. Parents need choice, flexibility and a lengthier period of paid leave at a better rate and which could be supplemented by further unpaid leave, as required. That is the model recommended by Sinn Féin.

A related issue which has arisen recently is that of maternity leave and benefit for elected representatives. The Minister of State is familiar with Councillor Danielle Twomey, a Sinn Féin representative for an area close to his constituency, who has drawn attention to the issue,

for which I commend her. The matter needs to be addressed. Progress has been made on the representation of women in the Seanad and the Dáil, in particular, on the basis of the gender quota legislation which I commend. We must now consider how we can further increase female participation in national politics and local government. Gender quotas should be considered in respect of local government elections. However, as well as getting women onto the ballot paper, we must tackle the cultural issues that prevent them from taking on positions in local authorities and the Oireachtas. One such issue is that it is not currently possible to avail of maternity leave or maternity benefit if one is a Deputy, a Senator or a councillor. That issue should be addressed by the Government and I hope it will consider doing so.

I support the Bill which is very progressive legislation. I hope the Government will fully engage on it as it progresses through the pre-legislative scrutiny stage and on Committee Stage. I am sure the Minister of State will ensure the required money message will be forthcoming to ensure the Bill can be enacted.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): This has been a very interesting debate. Deputy Róisín Shortall commenced by stating the Government paid scant attention to the issue of family leave. However, that claim does not stand up because the Government brought forward the Paternity Leave and Benefit Act 2016 which provided for extra leave from 1 October 2017 in respect of premature babies, the programme for Government contains a commitment to expanding paid leave in the first year and Ireland is taking part in negotiations at working group level on the EU proposal for a work-life balance directive which proposes the introduction of 18 weeks of paid paternal leave. That is all ongoing and much work is being done in that regard.

I agree with Deputy Catherine Murphy that there is a payback when parents are supported to spend time with their children, in particular during the first crucial and formative years. That is important, which is why the Government is committed to expanding paid leave in the first year.

As I stated in my earlier contribution, the Bill could be enhanced through a consultative process with the main stakeholders. That is very important and it would give people an opportunity to have an input into the legislation.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan spoke about the immediacy of life in opposition and Bills having to be produced straightaway and brought forward. I do not agree with him fully in that regard. If heads of Bills are produced and sent to committees which then have an opportunity to invite stakeholders to make submissions and come and engage with Senators and Deputies, the debate improves enormously. When a Bill is finally published and brought before the House, far more will have been learned and there will have been much input by citizens and stakeholders which can only improve it.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire addressed the issue of maternity leave for politicians. I raised that issue at the most recent meeting of the working group on the national strategy for women and girls 2017 to 2020 and it was debated and discussed. Other groups are also looking at the issue and I agree that it should be considered. We should try to make progress in that regard.

On the issue of money Bills and the Opposition not being able to bring Bills forward, I was on the other side of the House for 14 years and appreciate how frustrating that issue can be. However, it is a constitutional issue, by which we are all bound. The Oireachtas cannot change

that rule; rather, a referendum would be required to so do because taxation can only be raised by the Government, which is the reason for the rule.

As I said in my earlier contribution, this is important and significant legislation and this is a very important debate. It is welcome that Deputies Catherine Murphy and Róisín Shortall brought the Bill forward. I again point to the significant increase in the child care budget, as referenced by Deputy Willie Penrose and others. It has gone up by an unprecedented 80%. From September 2018, all children will be eligible for two years of free preschool education, which is important. There is a non-means-tested universal subsidy of up to €1,040 per year for children under the age of three years. The affordable child care scheme is to be radically redesigned. Members are aware that A Programme for a Partnership Government includes a commitment to increase paid parental leave during the first year of a child's life. To answer Deputy Jim O'Callaghan's question, the working group was established in January and asked to report by April. There will be no delay in that regard.

The European Commission is working on a proposal for a new work-life balance directive, of which we must be cognisant. The directive will recognise that the provision of paid parental leave will be more effective and appropriate in encouraging fathers to share the caring role for their children and thus contribute to the promotion of gender equality. It is part of a package of measures at EU level. I agree that we must support families and promote the objective of gender equality. The empowerment of women is a key theme running through A Programme for a Partnership Government. In that regard, I again draw attention to the national strategy for women and girls 2017 to 2020 and invite Members to study its contents. It sets out actions specifically aimed at supporting parents.

We have some concerns about this Bill. As Deputy Penrose agreed, extending unpaid family leave would make it more likely that the lower paid of the two parents, often the mother, would end up taking the unpaid leave and this would actually exacerbate the potential for caring responsibilities to be seen by employers as the responsibility of mothers rather than fathers. This is something we want to get over, right across the way, if we can. If two people, a young man and a young woman, go for a job interview we want to be in the situation where the employer, all things being equal, would not be thinking of the woman as the one who would need to take a long maternity leave and therefore pick the man over the woman. We want to change that. We also want to have more women on corporate boards at decision making level. This is all part of the thinking here.

I look forward to the committee discussing this issue, debating it, looking for submissions from stakeholders, weighing those submissions and maybe then inviting people in to discuss and debate the whole area at the committee. It would be a very useful exercise. As I said earlier, I did this on many occasions when I was the Chairman of the last committee. It is extremely worthwhile. Our focus is now on introducing parental leave on a paid basis. I agree with Deputy Shortall that we need more data.

I thank the Deputies for bringing this Bill forward and for the opportunity to discuss it and debate it. We will not oppose the legislation. I look forward to the whole area being debated and discussed, developed and fleshed out, as we move forward.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I thank the Minister of State for his contribution and those Members who attended the House this evening, who contributed to the debate and pledged their support for the legislation.

The Minister of State spoke quite a bit about a significant increase in the child care budget. While there has been a significant increase the point is that we started from an extremely low base. Ireland is an outlier in European terms in this area. Developments in recent years have been very welcome but we must bear in mind that they are only small steps in getting towards the EU average. We are currently a very long way from that.

It is important to note that when we talk about child care, parental leave is a significant and important part of the whole child care provision. We must also bear in mind that Ireland fares very badly compared to our European counterparts in this regard.

I welcome that the Government has recommitted to the principle of paid parental leave. It is a welcome development that the Government is talking about that again but where is it exactly? This Government is two years into perhaps a five-year lifespan and there has been no progress at all over those two years. We are now in a third year where there will not be any progress again because there is no budgetary provision for it. Three years down the line in the Government term we have not seen any progress whatsoever in delivering the programme for Government commitment on paid parental leave.

The Social Democrats totally supports the principle of paid parental leave. We have been looking for it for a long time. We want to see it happening as soon as possible. Paid parental leave is very important and I absolutely support the principle that parents should be facilitated and supported in being able to care for their child for the first 12 months in their own home. It is a really important thing that we can do, but where is the progress on this? The Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, spoke about the matter on radio this morning and she referred to doing it in a phased and incremental way. This does not raise our confidence levels in the context of the Government being able to deliver, even if it does have a five-year term of Government. How serious is the Government about this commitment in the programme for Government? It is impossible to see the Government being in a position to deliver on that commitment before the next election.

Equally, the Minister of State has quoted a number of times the fact that there is an EU directive under discussion. Again, this is a welcome development but as the Minister of State knows with EU directives, it could take years. There may not be any practical implications from that directive for several years. Why do we have to wait for Europe to tell us what we should be doing? Other countries have not done this. They have realised it is very important to support parents and families and those countries have gone ahead with their own domestic legislation, which is what Ireland should be doing also.

The Minister of State and his colleagues have made much of the line that they are not really interested in unpaid parental leave as they want to introduce paid parental leave. Of course we all want to see paid parental leave and we want to see that happening as quickly as possible but nobody, and certainly not the Social Democrats, is suggesting that improving access to unpaid parental leave is in any way a substitute for paid parental leave. We fully support that aspiration and we want to see it being given practical effect as quickly as possible to allow parents to look after their children in the first 12 months and to have a regime that allows a payment during that period. Unpaid parental leave is a different thing entirely. We are calling for that in addition to paid parental leave. Unpaid leave is used in a very different way by parents. It is currently available to parents of children up to the ages of eight. We would like to see this continued and would be open to the idea of it going beyond that age. Unpaid leave is not about the first year in life, it is about those other issues that arise throughout a child's younger years where parents

really struggle to get the balance between their parental and work responsibilities. That is very stressful for a lot of parents. It is very difficult to do it, especially at particular times such as the preschool years when there is a short day at preschool. It would be very helpful for parents if they could get some relief or breathing space during this time to allow them to manage that situation better. It would also be important for unpaid parental leave to be used when children are in primary school, especially in light of the difficulties that the long summer holidays can pose for parents. If they were helped to juggle the responsibilities that arise at such times, they would be able to spend more time with their children during the summer or Easter holidays. Many parents like the idea of a four-day week. They should be facilitated in that regard.

From a productivity perspective, I do not think anyone would dispute that in the main, a parent doing a four-day week does the work of a five-day week during that period. This is about the welfare of parents and children. It is about making sure that employees who are parents feel generally valued in their dual roles. We know that employees who have a sense of being valued and have access to flexible work options tend to be much more productive. This deals with the challenge of retaining well-qualified and experienced staff, which is a problem that many employers are facing. To a large extent, public servants have access to these arrangements at the moment. Teachers, for example, can take the remainder of the year off at their own expense. There is a high take-up of this popular option.

It was extraordinary to hear various speakers from Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil claiming credit for the introduction of unpaid parental leave. On the one hand, the Minister of State said the legislation we are proposing does not represent the road we should go down, but, on the other, he was claiming credit for the fact that a previous colleague of his introduced unpaid parental leave. Such leave is a good thing and it makes a lot of sense. For that reason, we are saying it makes absolute sense to extend it further. It is very popular and it works well. Some Deputies suggested that, potentially, the only people who will be helped by this proposal will be the better-off. I do not accept that fully. It might look like that on the surface, but I suggest that the cost of paid formal child care is so high that it will benefit many families when they do the sums. Given that significant costs are associated with going out to work, including transport and lunch costs, there are significant savings to be made if one parent does not go out to work. It often makes financial sense for a family to decide that one parent will take the opportunity to avail of unpaid parental leave. This proposal is not geared solely at better-off families. In our view, it can bring benefits for all families and across all income levels.

I welcome the support this legislation has received in the House. We have received a very positive response to it since we launched it last April. Since it was highlighted in the news yesterday and earlier today, we have received several messages and queries from parents who have been welcoming it and asking when it will be implemented. The creation of access to flexible work options is invaluable for many parents and they would very much like to see it happening. The Government has said it does not oppose this Bill. That is different from saying it supports it. I suggest it would be much better if the Minister of State were enthusiastically supporting the Bill. I think there is support for it all around the House and it is achievable. There is a clear and strong demand for it, and it can be done at minimal cost. Everybody wins in such circumstances. The Social Democrats will be pursuing the Bill actively through the justice committee. I ask the Minister of State to stop disingenuously referring to the provision of paid parental leave. While I agree that it should be provided, the unpaid element must also be enhanced because it serves a different purpose. Maybe he will rethink his position in this regard. We would welcome his enthusiastic support for the Bill when we pursue it on Committee Stage.

8 February 2018

Question put and agreed to.

Parental Leave (Amendment) Bill 2017: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Justice and Equality pursuant to Standing Orders 84A(3)(a) and 141.

Question put and agreed to.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.55 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 13 February 2018.