



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 20 Feabhra 2018

Tuesday, 20 February 2018

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: Many thousands of people in the State right now are living in fear and with a considerable degree of anxiety following the news that the PTSB is about to offload some 20,000 mortgages to unregulated loan owners, or vulture funds as they are commonly called. These loans are to be sold to unregulated, out of State vulture funds. With one decision or one stroke, this will double the amount of such loans under the ownership of vulture funds currently.

This is not an every day, ordinary business decision of a bank. Clearly, it will be a decision that will come before the Minister for Finance's desk, if it has not already done so, in the form of a consultation briefing. It is important that in the relationship clause it is open to the Minister to respond and the banks to take into consideration the Minister's response.

By any definition this is a step change in behaviour by a majority State-owned bank which will have severe repercussions. Other banks will follow, such as with AIB's project redwood. If a mortgage is not in this bundle it could be in the next bundle of mortgages to be sold. The fear is in the almost anonymous and detached nature of vulture funds that will not respond effectively or properly, or engage with many mortgage owners, even with those who have re-structured their loans.

Perhaps the Taoiseach will elaborate on why the Government did not follow the advice of the Central Bank with regard to the regulation of vulture funds. For some time prior to the enactment of the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2015, the Central Bank consistently advocated to close the gap around regulation for loan transferees. The Central Bank said that its "preferred policy approach was for the regulation of the actual loan owners". This would have given considerable protection to people who had their mortgages transferred to other loan owners. Will the Taoiseach indicate why the Government did not take on board the consistent position of the Central Bank, which was that such vulture funds should be regulated? The Minister will be consulted. Will the Taoiseach indicate what his response will be? The Minister should robustly advise the bank to desist from this and not to proceed

with this particular sale.

More importantly, our spokesperson on finance will today be introducing legislation to introduce regulation for such vulture funds in line with the policy of the Central Bank. I ask that the Government support this constructive, effective legislation which has the potential to make a difference and to offer protection to many mortgage holders who are currently very anxious and worried about what the future holds for them.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Micheál Martin and the Fianna Fáil Party for raising this issue. I know there is considerable concern about it at the moment. It is important to put some facts on the table before we begin this discussion. First, Permanent TSB has not yet sold any of these loans. It has not yet put them on the market and it has not found a buyer. There is an assumption that the buyer will be a so-called vulture fund but that may not turn out to be the case. Permanent TSB has not yet consulted the Minister for Finance on the sale, but it is required to do so when the sale is at a more advanced stage. We do have time, some weeks or perhaps some months, to put in place any new additional protections that might be required. The Government very much stands on the side of people and families who are making an honest attempt to settle their debts, pay their mortgages or pay down their personal or business loans. It is very much the job of Government and of this Oireachtas to ensure that people and businesses have the protections they need. If additional protections are required, we are certainly open to considering them.

I acknowledge the work of Deputy Michael McGrath on this matter. He has made a strong case. I understand that he published a Bill this morning, which I have not yet had the chance to see or review. I have asked the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, to meet him this week to explore how we might work together to put in place any additional protections that may be necessary. Obviously, this will have to be done within the constraints under which we are operating. The Single Supervisory Mechanism has determined that Permanent TSB is carrying too many non-performing loans. It is a bank that employs 2,500 people, has 1 million customers and holds €17 billion worth of their deposits, so it is necessary that the bank continue to improve the health of its balance sheet in order to protect its customers and staff.

As already stated, Permanent TSB has not yet sold these loans. It has not yet found a buyer. It is speculation to suggest that the buyer may be a so-called vulture fund. The bank has not yet formally consulted with the Minister for Finance but it is required to do so before any sale is made. As I have said, we have time to put in place any further protections that may be required.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The banks have an obligation, particularly those that were bailed out by the State, because they are essentially proposing to outsource their difficult or dirty work rather than doing it themselves. No one has any difficulty with improving the health of the balance sheet but it is critical that it is not done at the expense of ordinary people in business, small and medium enterprises, farmers or those in family homes or who have very basic mortgages. Many significant, high-flying businesses got very significant reductions on their loans and were treated very differently. Mortgage holders could have a reasonable expectation that they would get the same discount as any vulture fund.

I take the Taoiseach's constructive statements on board but it is important to note that we do not have a huge amount of time. The Bill will be introduced today and we will bring it to the Dáil as soon as possible. However, we will need the co-operation of Government and the remainder of the House not just to progress the Bill through Second Stage in a thorough man-

ner but also to deal with it expeditiously on Committee Stage in order that it can become law. It cannot be allowed to languish on Committee Stage for ever and ever. This is a crucial Bill which will affect the daily lives of many families. We have an obligation to protect them and to put flesh on the bones of our words and rhetoric. The only effective way to do that is to pass this legislation and send a message to the State-owned banks that the State is the shareholder and that this is behaviour it does not countenance or want to proceed.

The Taoiseach: It is important to acknowledge that there is a range of protections already in place for mortgage holders and borrowers. For example, even if a loan is sold on, the full contractual rights are retained and follow on to the new owner. The Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2015 was designed to protect borrowers whose loans are sold on to unregulated entities. Under this Act, either purchasers of the loan book must be regulated by the Central Bank or the loans must be serviced by a credit servicing firm that is regulated by it. To answer the Deputy's earlier question, a view was taken at the time that as the purchaser or its agent had to be registered by the Central Bank, it was not necessary to require that the purchaser be regulated by the bank in all instances.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Central Bank believed that it was.

The Taoiseach: That is something we are willing to discuss with the party opposite and take into consideration. There is also a code of conduct on mortgage arrears which remains in place after the sale of any loans to the bank. The code says that the lender may only commence legal proceedings for repossession of a borrower's primary residence where the lender has made every reasonable effort under the code to reach an alternative repayment arrangement with the borrower. In addition, the specific timeframes set out in the code have to be adhered to.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Permanent TSB may not yet have sold on any mortgages but we know it is preparing to sell 20,000 of them to vulture funds. Permanent TSB is a State-owned bank and the Minister for Finance is the majority shareholder. Let us not make any bones about it; these vulture funds are prepared to pick the bones of mortgage holders as and when it suits them. Their interest in the acquisition of these assets is purely short term and focused on turning a quick buck. They are unregulated, they are not governed by the Central Bank and they are not accountable to the Oireachtas. I do not know how the Taoiseach would feel if his home was turned over to a financial firm that does not have to abide by any rules. I know I would feel alone, afraid, abandoned and probably depressed. Allowing vulture funds to operate so recklessly is clearly Government policy, and I include Fianna Fáil in that context. We only have to look to the evidence. In 2015, the Government had a chance to ensure that vulnerable mortgage holders would have some level of protection. However, Fine Gael and the Labour Party refused to support Sinn Féin in making such vulture funds fully regulated. Fianna Fáil also failed to support that proposal. In fact, its Deputies did not even bother showing up for the vote.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not true.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Not true. Was Deputy Pearse Doherty present for the vote?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The hypocrisy today is odious as Fianna Fáil and the Taoiseach now pretend to champion the very people they helped feed to these vultures three years ago. I have a response to a parliamentary question submitted by Deputy Pearse Doherty which demonstrates that the former Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, and officials from the De-

partment met representatives of vulture funds 60 times in less than two years. That is a serious level of access for the vulture funds. It only serves to emphasise the very cold shoulder and deaf ear that vulnerable mortgage holders have been given.

It is time to be honest and clear. Deputies who oppose this sale and others are obliged to intervene. They must do so to prevent not just this sale but also others from proceeding. I urge the Taoiseach to do the right thing and spare people this nightmare. I am asking him to lift the phone to Permanent TSB and tell it that he and his Government will not permit the sale. I urge him to deal with the current situation. He might also support the legislation Sinn Féin has brought forward to protect homeowners affected by sales to vulture funds. How about this for an idea? Will the Taoiseach issue a direction to the banks and NAMA today that under no circumstances should any domestic mortgages be sold to any vulture fund, either now or in the future? Will he make that phone call? Will he support the legislation and will he issue that direction?

The Taoiseach: As it is Deputy McDonald's first occasion here in her new role as president of Sinn Féin, I take this opportunity to congratulate her on her election to that office. I know what it feels like to be elected to the leadership of a party one has worked in for decades, and I congratulate her. Becoming president of her party must be a very proud moment for her, her family and her supporters. She is also only the third woman to lead a major political party in Ireland. She has all of our best wishes in that regard.

On the substantive issue at hand, Permanent TSB has not yet sold any of these loans. It has not identified a buyer. Some people are making the assumption that the buyer will be a so-called vulture fund. It might not be; perhaps it will be another bank or financial institution. Permanent TSB has not yet consulted with the Minister for Finance. It is required to consult with the Minister for Finance before the sale is advanced, as a consequence of the fact that the State owns 75% of that bank. The Government will take that opportunity to present its views very clearly to Permanent TSB.

We stand very much on the side of families, mortgage holders and people who are making an honest effort to pay their debts and to pay down their mortgages and loans. There are already considerable protections in place, and we are open to considering any constructive proposals that might allow us to enhance those protections if necessary.

In terms of the specific issues raised by the Deputy, the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2015 requires that the purchasers of loan books must either be regulated by the Central Bank or the loans must be serviced by a credit servicing firm which is regulated by the Central Bank. It is a little disingenuous to say that loans are being sold on to an unregulated entity. It is the law. It became law in 2015 that any purchaser of a loan book, or its agents, must be regulated by the Central Bank. We are open to considering any proposals to further strengthen that protection.

On the Deputy's suggestion that a directive be issued to a bank, under the relationship framework it would be illegal for the Minister for Finance to act in such a way. The relationship framework was agreed with the European Commission as part of the recapitalisation and bailout of the banks to make sure that those banks continue to operate on a commercial basis. It is important that those banks continue to operate on a commercial basis. We should not forget that banks have millions of customers whose deposits are held in those banks, and the safety of those deposits is dependent on the fact that banks operate in a commercial way.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is also essential that holders of distressed mortgages are not put through further distress and perhaps rendered homeless, which would add to the crisis we are facing. The time for the Taoiseach to stand by the people and to make sure that we got the legislation right was in 2015. He is correct to say that the servicers of the mortgages - those companies hired by the vulture funds - are regulated, but the big gap in the legislation is that the funds themselves are footloose and fancy-free. The purpose of our amendment in 2015 was to set that right, but the Government chose to look the other way.

The Taoiseach said that these loans have not yet been sold and that we still have time. I want clarity around what he proposes to do with that time. People need to hear that An Taoiseach and the Government will stand by mortgage holders, families and people who have already been through a very testing nightmare scenario. I want to hear that as well. What will the Minister say when Permanent TSB contacts the Minister? Will the Minister tell it that under no circumstances can this sale go ahead? Is the Taoiseach prepared, in the common interest - in the interests of citizens and not balance sheets - to issue the directive as suggested? The big dilemma now is that, by definition, the interests of vulture funds in these mortgages is short term. Distressed mortgage holders - in fact, any holder of a mortgage - enters into a long-term contract that can hit bumps in the road. That is the reality, and everybody here knows it. I believe the Taoiseach must act. Rather than sounding a concerned note, he needs to be more substantive in his reply.

I thank him for his good wishes on my election as Uachtarán Sinn Féin

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is correct. Distressed mortgage holders are under enough stress so we should not add to that unnecessarily by causing them undue concern. As I said, PTSB has not sold any of these loans. It has not identified a prospective buyer. It is an assumption by some people that that buyer will be an unregulated so-called vulture fund. That may not be the case. It may turn out to be a regulated bank or another institution. It is required that the bank consults with the Minister for Finance when it has something to consult with him on in detail, which is an advanced sale proposal. No such proposal yet exists. The Government will give open and constructive consideration to any proposals for additional protections that may be necessary so that we ensure that the rights and freedoms of borrowers and mortgage holders are protected.

I make one final point and it is an important one. We have made enormous progress in this country in recent years when it comes to mortgage arrears. They have been falling here in every quarter for more than four years. The percentage of people in mortgage arrears has fallen from a peak of 12.9% to 6.9%. There will always be a certain percentage of people in mortgage arrears. The percentage has fallen by more than half in four years. There have been a very small number of reposessions in this country relative to other countries. This is an area where we have made some important progress and it is important to acknowledge that.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Seventy-five per cent of Permanent TSB is owned by the people of Ireland. It is a bank and, God knows, the people of Ireland have contributed significantly towards it, but it still has many issues to overcome. However, instead of doing the hard work itself, it now appears to be outsourcing that difficult job to get that off its balance sheet. The Taoiseach is right. It has not identified a buyer yet and perhaps it will not be a vulture fund, but it might be and there is no point in this House saying calm words if we do not give real reassurance to the people who fear that might be the outcome.

Last Tuesday, the Cabinet waved through the news from the Minister for Finance that this was planned by the PTSB. It is interesting that there was no reported opposition from Government colleagues in the Independent Alliance. Before he became a Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran was loudly promoting his Keeping People in their Homes Bill. Where is that now? There was not a bank AGM that was safe from a visit from the Minister, Deputy Shane Ross.

A Deputy: Who?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Maybe he is too busy now fixing the delays in the Luas.

Fianna Fáil is rightly raising the issue of regulation, but legislation will only go so far. The laws were changed in 2015 to ensure that companies that manage loans are regulated, but regulation is not the main issue. That focus misses the point. Based on European Central Bank and Single Supervisory Mechanism, SSM, rules, 28% of the PTSB loan book is now classified as non-performing. However, of the 20,000 loans thus classified, 6,500 are split mortgage loans. Those split mortgage loans under ECB-SSM rules are deemed to be non-performing, but splitting mortgages was one of the key responses to the arrears crisis. These are homeowners who have engaged with the bank, are paying what they can afford and are meeting their obligations. A portion of the loan was warehoused while repayments continue to pay down the capital on the rest. It is a betrayal of those homeowners the Taoiseach has referenced who engaged with the bank to the best of their ability to allow them now to be sold off to a vulture fund. Those mortgage holders who have engaged with the lenders should not have their mortgages sold off because of the quirks in the rules of the SSM.

As this issue is being examined by the ECB-Single Supervisory Mechanism and has been the subject of detailed work by them, and the Taoiseach says there are consultations pending, will the Government instruct the PTSB, as the main shareholder, to halt the sale at least of the split mortgages until the rules are changed? Will the Government impress on the ECB and the SSM the need to change the characterisation of non-performance to exclude people who are delivering on their commitment to the banks?

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, informed the Cabinet last week that this might be coming down the tracks as an issue. We were not given any details as none are yet available and there was no Cabinet decision on the matter. It was solely for information. The Bill being sponsored by the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, is at an advanced point and is being taken up by the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, as a Government Bill. It will form part of the legislation the Government will pilot through the Dáil and Seanad and will require judges to have regard to the family situation of someone who may be facing repossession and the loss of a home.

Deputy Howlin characterised split mortgages very well. It is where someone with a mortgage of €250,000, for example, continues to pay a mortgage on €150,000 while the other €100,000 is warehoused for a period of time to be repaid at a later stage. I understand the single supervisory mechanism, SSM, considers those loans to be non-performing notwithstanding the fact that to Deputy Howlin's mind and to mine the person is making his or her best effort to pay back as much as he or she can. The loan is at least partially performing rather than non-performing. However, the rules are made by the SSM. While some people may regard those regulations as too strict, we should not forget where we have come from. It is only ten or 12 years since financial regulation which was too lax and too light-touch led us to an enormous

property crash and financial crisis. If financial regulations are going to be relaxed to go back to looser, lighter regulation, which I understand from Deputy Howlin's contribution is the Labour Party proposal, it should only happen after careful consideration. We must ensure it is the right decision with regard to the future.

As I explained earlier, it is not possible for the Government to issue instructions to the banks. That is illegal under the relationship framework which was part of the whole agreement around recapitalising the banks. While it is not possible for us to instruct banks, this bank is 75% owned by the State. That matters and it makes a difference. It means the bank is required to consult with the Minister for Finance before advancing a sale. We are nowhere near that point yet and we have an opportunity over the next number of weeks to put in place any additional advisable protections.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach will be aware or should be that the ECB's single supervisory mechanism is looking at the rules again. That is a fact. What I propose is not a loosening of regulations, but a rebalancing of regulation to be more pro-people as opposed to so emphatically pro-bank. We endured that through the period of time when the country itself was insolvent because the banks were insolvent. It is a different time now and it requires a different outcome. As such, I ask the Taoiseach again, from the dismissal of the suggestion I have made, whether he or the Government has a view on the review of the SSM which is under way and, in the interim, if he will give assurances and reassurance today to people who are already under stress that they will not be in the hands of people with even less regard for their future than the banks in this country have proven to have had in the past.

The Taoiseach: One person's loosening of financial regulation could be another person's relaxation of financial regulation. From calls for 97% mortgages to be offered by the State to people who have been refused mortgages-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: As opposed to Daddy paying.

The Taoiseach: -----to calls now for the loosening of financial regulation, it is strange to hear that coming from a Labour Party and a centre-left party.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is the mainstream of social parties. We do not all have the bank of mum and dad.

The Taoiseach: It is calling for looser financial regulation and 97% mortgages for people who have been refused loans. Regulation has to be dynamic and I am aware that the SSM is considering the way split mortgages are classified. Perhaps a decision will be made to change those regulations. If we are going to loosen financial regulations, make credit more available and bring back 97% mortgages, we should do so with the medium and long-term horizon in mind and ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The week before last, on promised legislation, I raised the plight of homeowners residing in defective buildings and their urgent need for State assistance. Their situation is so worrying - in some developments it is escalating - that I must raise it again today. I recently met with homeowners in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown who have received their first bills for remedial works that are only necessary as a result of poor construction. Along with these substantial bills came the pre-emptive threat of legal proceedings being instituted if bills are not paid by a specific deadline. Recently, they have received follow-up warning letters threatening that they will be hauled before the courts of justice if they do not

pay. In the latest sickening phase of their plight they are being pushed up against the wall and asked to pay the price for the greed and incompetence of reckless builders who built dangerous, shoddy homes, unmonitored by an indifferent State.

Last summer the Dáil passed a Green Party motion calling on the Government to regulate the construction industry and institute a redress scheme for such homeowners. Last month the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government published a report which called for a redress scheme for such homeowners. Yet, instead of rising to and responding to these calls, the Government has done nothing. These homeowners feel alone and abandoned and the Government does nothing to assist them. These are not buy-to-let properties or speculative properties: these are their homes. This poor building happened under the State's watch with little or no substantive regulation, certification or supervision. The Government simply cannot wash its hands of this issue. Practical, reasonable measures which could ease the burden on homeowners include relief on property tax, relief on income tax for works to be carried out, creating a loan fund for those who cannot pay and VAT relief along the lines of the home renovation initiative.

What will the Taoiseach do to assist these homeowners who are in desperate need of help? Will he enact a comprehensive legal reform to create new remedies for victims of poor building practices? This problem will not go away. The remedies simply are not there and the Government must take action to create them. The Dáil has called for that, the joint Oireachtas committee has called for that and homeowners across the length and breadth of our country are calling for that. How much longer will the Government remain silent? When will the Government do something constructive and effective to help these homeowners?

The Taoiseach: I am very much aware of quite a lot of people around the country, in the city but certainly not just in the city, who bought apartments and houses that are now in need of substantial repair. Obviously, those people bought those homes in good faith - they are not all homes and quite a lot of them are buy-to-let properties but in many ways that is beside the point. People who bought those properties in many parts of the country now face a loss in the value of their homes, which are virtually impossible to sell on. Despite the recovery in house prices, house prices in those developments have not recovered for obvious reasons. Moreover, people living in those developments are now facing very large bills to repair and bring up to standard the apartment buildings and homes they live in. It is certainly something that affects my constituency as well as the Deputy's.

A lot of reforms have been brought in since 2014, including the construction industry regulation legislation, which is coming, and the building standards and building control regulations, which set out the primary purpose for which building regulations may be made. In order to address the unacceptable situation of building failures in the past, the Building Control (Amendment) Regulations 2014 were introduced to empower competence and professionalism in construction projects and establish a chain of responsibility that begins with the owner. The owner must assign competent persons to design, build, inspect and certify the building works, who in turn must account for their contribution through the lodgment of compliance documentation, inspection plans and statutory certificates. The statutory certificate of compliance on completion, signed by both a registered construction professional and the builder, must be in place prior to occupation. Oversight of governance of the building control system is also undergoing major reform to improve its effectiveness.

The increase in construction-related insurance products also demonstrates that the insur-

ance industry has made an assessment that the risk of building failure in regard to buildings completed in accordance with the new building control system is low. It is worth noting that the increase in the availability of construction-related insurance products, such as first-party latent defects insurance, is taking place at a time of retrenchment in the wider industry since the introduction of the Solvency II directive. The main objective of the building control (construction industry register Ireland) Bill, which is being brought forward by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, is to develop and promote a culture of competence and good practice in respect of and compliance with the building regulations among builders within the construction sector that will benefit the public. The establishment of a robust statutory register is critical to the development of a culture of competence.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The Taoiseach mentioned the 2014 regulations but what about homes built before 2014? Are homeowners who bought prior to 2014 to be cast aside and forgotten? What about homeowners who have exhausted all legal remedies and who now need some form of State assistance. They are facing bills of up to €30,000. In the past, the State intervened in respect of private contracts in circumstances such as this. Priory Hall set such a precedent. Furthermore, the Government gives tax reliefs to land hoarders and speculators, to the construction industry and developers, but it has nothing for these people. They are simply asking for some practical assistance and some recognition from the State that they will not have to face this nightmare entirely alone. I have written to the Minister asking him to meet some of the homeowners but I have yet to receive a reply. Will the Taoiseach meet them in order to hear, at first hand, about their ongoing stress, anxiety, worries and fears. Perhaps then the uncertain futures which they face, and the need for intervention and support would become abundantly clear to the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I assure the Deputy that I have met these people already. I represent the Dublin West constituency, most of the homes in which were built in the past 20 or 30 years. Several developments were not built well and now need very significant investment in order that they might be brought up to standard. This is an issue of which I am very aware. It involves people who have bought properties which have not recovered as property prices have generally risen because they cannot be sold on. Many people are facing very large bills of €5,000, €15,000 or even more to repair the buildings in which they live.

On the pre-2014 builds, my previous answer outlined what is being done to stop this happening again. It is very much a legacy issue, part of the damage done to the country during the construction boom period. When it comes to pre-2014 builds, responsibility for any repairs should, in the first instance, fall on the builder or the company that developed the houses and buildings. Where that builder or development company no longer exists, ideally it should fall on groups such as HomeBond or insurers of constructions. I cannot remember the name of the second body involved at present. I am aware, however, that, after ten years, this responsibility runs out. If faults are not discovered within ten years, people can find themselves in a difficult position. That may be where the State can step in to help. However, I absolutely must say that, in the first instance, the cost should not fall on the general taxpayers and it should not fall on people's neighbours. The cost should fall on the developer first and the insurer second.

20 February 2018

Order of Business

Deputy Maria Bailey: Today's business shall be No. 7, motion re seventeenth report of the Committee of Selection; No. 8, motion re Sectoral Employment Order (Mechanical Engineering Building Services Contracting Sector) 2018, back from committee; No. 9, motion re report on service by the Defence Forces with the UN in 2016, referral to committee; No. 10, motion re parliamentary questions rota change; No. 11, motion re Health and Social Care Professionals Act regulations, referral to committee, and No. 29, statements on Project Ireland 2040. Private Members' business shall be No. 172, motion re Dublin traffic, selected by Fianna Fáil.

Wednesday's business shall be No. 29, statements on Project Ireland 2040, resumed, if not previously concluded; No. 3, Public Service Superannuation (Amendment) Bill 2018 - all Stages, to be taken at 4.15 p.m. and to conclude within three hours; No. 29, statements on Project Ireland 2040, resumed, if not previously concluded; No. 30, statements on the Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, to be resumed at 7.15 p.m. and to conclude not later than 8.15 p.m., if not previously concluded, and No. 29, statements on Project Ireland 2040, resumed, to adjourn not later than 8.15 p.m., if not previously concluded. Private Members' business shall be No. 173, motion re agriculture trade talks, selected by Fianna Fáil.

Thursday's business shall be No. 29, statements on Project Ireland 2040, resumed, to adjourn if not previously concluded. Second Stage of No. 48, the Digital Safety Commissioner Bill 2017, will be taken in the evening slot.

I refer to the second revised report of the Business Committee, dated 16 February 2018. In relation to today's business, it is proposed that: (1) the motions re the seventeenth report of the Committee of Selection, the sectoral employment order, the report on service by the Defence Forces with the UN in 2016, the parliamentary questions rota change and the Health and Social Care Professionals Act regulations shall be taken without debate; (2) in the opening round of the statements on Project Ireland 2040, statements of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons of parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed 30 minutes each, all other Members shall not exceed ten minutes each with a ten-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time, and the statements shall adjourn not later than 8 p.m., if not previously concluded; and (3) notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 143F, the rota for Private Members' business from 20 February to 7 March shall be in the following temporary sequence: Fianna Fáil, Fianna Fáil, Rural Independent Group, Fianna Fáil, Social Democrats-Green Party, Independents 4 Change, whereupon the sequence in the Standing Order shall continue.

In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that: (1) statements on Project Ireland 2040 shall adjourn not later than 4.15 p.m., if not previously concluded, and shall resume, time allowing, after the Public Service Superannuation (Amendment) Bill 2018 and the resumed statements on the Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution; (2) the proceedings on Second Stage of the Public Service Superannuation (Amendment) Bill 2018 shall commence at 4.15 p.m. and shall be brought to a conclusion after two hours and 30 minutes and any division demanded on the conclusion of Second Stage shall be taken immediately; the Speech of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties or groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed ten minutes each, all other Members shall have five minutes each with a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister

of State, all Members may share time; and proceedings on Committee and Remaining Stages shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 30 minutes by one question, which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice and Equality; (3) statements on the Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution shall resume at 7.15 p.m. and conclude not later than 8.15 p.m., if not previously concluded; and (4) Private Members' business shall be taken at 8.15 p.m., to conclude after two hours and the Dáil shall adjourn on its conclusion.

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that statements on Project Ireland 2040 shall adjourn not later than 5 p.m., if not previously concluded.

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

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is my genuine belief that there are many children in the country who are not being looked after and who are in vulnerable situations, from those with disabilities to those waiting for hospital and outpatient appointments. The programme for Government makes it clear that we need to plan ahead for this new generation by putting in place measures that provide them equality of opportunity, etc.. However, the latest figures from, for example, the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, show that 8,726 children have been waiting over 18 months for outpatient appointments with consultants. Further analysis shows that overall 52,000 children are waiting for appointments and that 15,000 of them have been waiting for more than a year. By any yardstick, these are worrying figures in terms of how children are being prioritised by the health service and they illustrate that commitments in the programme for Government in respect of children and young people in general are not being realised.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's minute is up.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Why are the lists in respect of children getting longer? Can the Taoiseach outline the Government's intention to get to grips with this issue?

The Taoiseach: I do not have the breakdown of the different lists to hand-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was published yesterday.

The Taoiseach: -----but the Government certainly does not wish to see anyone, child or adult, waiting long periods for treatment. I know the figures that came out just last week show that the number of patients waiting for an inpatient or day case procedure such as procedures on hips, knees and cataracts - all those procedures that people need - was down another 1,264 on the previous month and from a peak of 80,000. We are, therefore, very much going in the right direction when it comes to procedures and surgery. I absolutely accept that we are still going in the wrong direction when it comes to outpatient appointments. Regarding children on outpatient waiting lists, I am told 64% wait less than a year but that more than 36% can wait more than 12 months. The HSE has confirmed that there had been challenges in reducing outpatient waiting times for both children and adults due to difficulties recruiting consultants arising from retirements and vacancies-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach must conclude now.

The Taoiseach: -----but in the past two years the focus has been on inpatient day case waiting lists, which-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I was glad to hear that this morning the Minister for Health brought to Cabinet the draft legislation to allow for a referendum to repeal the eighth amendment. This is a very welcome step, and we in Sinn Féin for our part hope this Bill will come before the Dáil at the earliest possible opportunity. In a tweet this morning, the Minister, Deputy Harris, said the referendum Bill will be finalised in the coming days and that he will publish the Bill on 6 March. If matters will be concluded in the coming days, why the delay until 6 March? Furthermore, will the Taoiseach clarify whether the referendum date will in fact be 28 May? The Minister, Deputy Regina Doherty, intimated that it might drag into June. I wish to establish that it will in fact be a May referendum. I know many people who are following this debate closely are concerned about the date of the referendum, not least young voters and students-----

An Ceann Comhairle: May we get an answer then?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----for whom a June voting date is highly problematic.

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Health sought and received approval today to draft the referendum Bill to delete Article 40.3.3° from the Constitution and insert a new article enabling the Oireachtas to regulate abortion services in Ireland. The wording is the wording we gave at the press conference some weeks ago. The intention is to publish the Bill in the first week of March but we need to get some further legal advice on the precise wording. We are confident it is fine, but we need to get some further advice on it and the place in the Constitution where it should rest. We anticipate having the legislation ready in the first week of March. It is the Government's intention to hold the referendum before the end of May, notwithstanding some reports I have read to the contrary. We are on schedule in respect of the timeline we have set out. However, I cannot make any promise to the Deputy in this regard because I do not control this House or the other House and it will be in the hands of the Houses-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time. I call Deputy Howlin.

The Taoiseach: -----to ensure that the referendum Bill passes this House and the other House quickly and is not held up. I cannot make any promise in this regard.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I wish to return to the point made about the commitment in the programme for Government to reduce waiting times for hospital outpatient appointments. I note what the Taoiseach said about slipping and going in the wrong direction. Yesterday, I was contacted by a constituent living in the town of Wexford who had been referred to a neurologist in St. Vincent's University Hospital. He got a letter from the hospital on 14 February - he was very happy even to be given an appointment - stating an appointment had been arranged for him at the waiting list triage clinic in the neurology department on the ground floor of St. Vincent's Hospital at 9 a.m. on 1 January 2024. It almost takes the proverbial when the next line states:

Please present this letter to the receptionist on arrival ... If you are unable to [make] this appointment, it is important that you phone [to] cancel on the number above. We may be able to give your appointment to another patient.

The letter then states the hospital may be able to give the appointment to another patient.

That is six years from now. What is happening with outpatient appointments? Is this in any way acceptable?

The Taoiseach: I imagine or suspect that is an error. I worked in hospital medicine and community medicine for seven years and I often saw people get appointments for six months or four months later but I never saw anyone get an appointment for six years' time. If the Deputy would like to pass it on to me or the Minister, Deputy Harris, we will have it examined. As I said, there are different types of waiting lists. The waiting list for people awaiting procedures and operations for hips, eyes, knees and cataracts has fallen from a peak of 86,000 to 80,000 and we expect it will continue to fall. We know what needs to be done now, which is to apply this to outpatients.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Cabinet met this morning to discuss the promised legislation relating to the referendum to repeal the eighth amendment. This has already been raised. The one thing the Taoiseach can control is the bringing of the Bill into the Dáil for debate. Why will that take two weeks from today? The Government has known about the Citizens' Assembly's recommendation since last April and it has had a chance to draft many possible Bills. The danger is that if we wait, we will not be able to meet the May deadline, which is the optimal time to vote for young people and students most affected by this. The campaign has begun already. Graphic images are being put in front of students at colleges and people walking down the street. We cannot set up the referendum commission until the Bill is brought to the Dáil. I do not understand the delay in bringing the referendum Bill. There is no need to wait until International Women's Day. If it is for publicity or kudos, that is a bit selfish because people really need to have this referendum at a time which facilitates most people. It is clear the burden of passing this referendum will fall to civic society because of the disunity of the establishment, so at least bring us the Bill quickly.

The Taoiseach: As is always the case, to ensure a referendum passes will require both political leadership and civic society. If we just have one and not the other we will be in difficulty but I am confident we will have both and that the referendum will be approved by the people. I can understand where the theory comes from on the link to International Women's Day. That is not the reason. I am conscious of the separation of powers in answering this question. There is a case before the Supreme Court with regard to the definition of "unborn" and it may be prudent for us to see what that judgment does.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: There are many failings in our health system and many waiting lists in various areas but what is most serious is when we hear of people waiting on the flat of their back to get a bed in the coronary unit in Cork University Hospital, CUH, and that they cannot be operated on. They wait two or three weeks for aorta valves and various procedures. A queue is building up as no beds are available in the CUH coronary care unit. This is very serious. We asked this question last year and it was dealt with at the time but we are in trouble again. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister to see what is wrong and alleviate the pressure? Families who have a loved one waiting for a serious heart operation are wondering whether the person will stay alive long enough to have the operation. The worry of this is immense and it needs to be dealt with.

The Taoiseach: I do not have information on that particular service but I will raise it with the Minister for Health and ask him to contact Deputy Healy-Rae about it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I want to raise the issue of the closure of two theatres in

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Merlin Park University Hospital in the context of the commitment in the programme for Government to reducing waiting lists. On 3 March, the two theatres will have been closed for six months. We are in the second decade of the 21st century and two operating theatres in Merlin Park University Hospital have remained closed due to a leak in the roof. The issue has been raised many times in the Dáil by me and other colleagues. We were told that once the leak was repaired the operating theatres would be opened. Since then we have been told they cannot be opened because the clinical assessment now is that their design is not suitable, begging the question as to why the design was not dealt with beforehand. My specific question is whether the Taoiseach can stand over a situation whereby, six months later, the two main orthopaedic theatres in Merlin Park University Hospital remain closed. We are still looking at a tender process for modular theatres. Tied in with that, the Taoiseach made an announcement on Friday about an elective hospital. Is that elective hospital based on the options appraisal that is still under way and will not report until May, or has it been picked out of the sky?

The Taoiseach: There is no legislation promised on this matter, nor is it covered in the programme for Government, but I did give a detailed response to Deputies on the question of Merlin Park University Hospital specifically last week during Questions on Promised Legislation. I refer the Deputy to that answer.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There are 120,000 recorded monuments in the country, and only 1,000 of them are owned by the State. The vast majority are not accessible and are not cared for in a proper way. Perhaps the biggest example of that is recent evidence from independent experts which has been presented to our party's Senator Grace O'Sullivan, showing the damage done to Skellig Michael in recent years. Damage has been done both to the wildlife, despite it being a special protected area for bird life, and also to the physical archaeology there.

The only interest Fine Gael seems to have in heritage matters is in progressing the Heritage Bill 2016, which it has placed before the Dáil. That Bill is about burning our uplands and cutting our hedges in a way that threatens wildlife. Could the Taoiseach hold that Bill back at this stage and recognise that it is a deeply flawed piece of legislation? Instead of forcing it through, could he introduce a heritage Bill which actually develops and protects our natural heritage sites in a cohesive and comprehensive way? Why is the Taoiseach burning and cutting up our heritage rather than protecting it, which is what he should be doing?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Briars are also burnt out on the road.

The Taoiseach: I am not sure what is the connection between Sceilig Mhichíl and that particular legislation.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Bird life.

The Taoiseach: However, I understand-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The birds are not so foolish as to be on the side of the road.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please let the Taoiseach speak.

The Taoiseach: One would have a hard time setting fire to the birds on Sceilig Mhichíl. I guarantee it.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The birds need wing mirrors.

The Taoiseach: I understand that legislation is being advanced for reasons of road safety and other matters.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I compliment the leaders here today on raising the very important issue of distressed mortgage owners and the fact that they are terrified and worried. I want to give the Kerry perspective, because I was asked to raise this very important issue here today. I appreciate the response that the Taoiseach has already given. However, it is a most serious issue. We must think of these people, working every day of the week trying to pay their mortgages. Vulture funds can come along and buy their loans at a massive write-down, but the mortgage holders cannot benefit from that. If this Government, and the Opposition working with it, want to be remembered for doing one positive thing, that would be protecting those people. There are businesspeople with mortgages that they desperately want to pay. As the Taoiseach said earlier, they are respectable people. All they want to do is to pay off their loans, but they do not want to be robbed by these vulture funds. If the legislation is not prepared, it should be drafted and introduced, and it should be watertight to protect these people.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: On that same subject, I strongly support the points raised by the various spokespersons on this issue today. This is a means of protecting those mortgage holders who are making a deliberate, specific and valiant attempt to meet their requirements. We must differentiate them from those who do not wish to pay, do not engage and have made no attempt to pay. It is hugely important to reassure the thousands of people who are likely to be affected, as well as the other banks that are about to take similar action. It is utterly unthinkable that nothing would be done about it. As I have said before, I have already circulated a Bill to the Minister that would do a similar job. The purpose is to introduce a code of conduct to take this away from the sole control of the banks and to put it in the hands of legislators.

Deputy John Brassil: I wish to add to the debate, given that Independent, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin Front Bench and back bench Members have now all spoken on this issue. I also spoke on it last Thursday. I re-emphasise its importance and I want to let the Taoiseach know that there is 100% support across the floor for the Bill that will be introduced by Deputy Michael McGrath tomorrow. I urge the Taoiseach not only to support it, but also to ensure that it passes speedily into law.

3 o'clock

The Taoiseach: This is a hugely important issue for Deputies given the number of people who have raised it today. I reiterate that, as a Government, we stand on the side of people and families who are making an honest attempt to settle their debts and pay off their mortgages and loans, whether business or personal loans. PTSB has not yet sold any of these loans and it has not identified a buyer. People are assuming that the buyer will be a so-called vulture fund. I am not sure if that assumption is correct. PTSB is required to consult the Minister for Finance before advancing any sale because we are the 75% owner of the bank. That has not yet happened.

A Code of Conduct for Mortgage Arrears is in place and it applies to loans and mortgages that are sold on to another buyer. Under the code, a lender may only commence legal proceedings for repossession of a borrower's primary residence where the lender has made every reasonable effort under the code to agree alternative repayment arrangements with the borrower and the specific timeframes set out in the code have been adhered to or the borrower has been classified as not co-operating and notified in accordance with the code. When the courts are presented with repossession cases, they take that seriously.

Deputy Noel Rock: The programme for Government contains a commitment to tackle illegal dumping which has blighted many communities, both urban and rural. Only last night, residents in the Tolka Valley area of south Finglas asked when technology could be further utilised to tackle this scourge. Page 136 of the programme promises precisely that. What is the Government doing to tackle illegal dumping in respect of the utilisation of new technology such as drones and closed circuit television, CCTV, systems?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. The Tolka Valley straddles his constituency and mine, and a few others. It is a very beautiful place that is often blighted by illegal dumping. Under the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment's new 2018 anti-illegal dumping initiative, €2 million has been allocated for smart technology, including imagery from drones and satellites as well as CCTV. The drones, satellites and other technology will allow us to identify illegal dumping and identify the perpetrators.

Deputy Shane Cassells: The "Creating A Social Economy" chapter of the programme for Government commits the State to using its bank shareholding in the best interests of the Irish people. At 7.15 this morning, three of what I can only describe as "heavies", dressed in black and acting on behalf of a vulture fund, seized a factory in Navan and told the 20 employees turning in for work at 7.30 a.m. to go home. The company had its loan book sold on by a bank to the vulture fund and it seized that viable factory this morning. How is the Government using its bank shareholding in the best interests of the Irish people beyond the commercial interest the Taoiseach cited earlier? I have 20 people standing outside in the cold in Navan anxiously waiting to know.

The Taoiseach: It is in the best interests of the Irish people that they get their money back from the bank bailouts and we will get at least half of it back, if not more. It is in the interests of the Irish people that their deposits in the banks are protected and it is in their interest that banks operate commercially in order that they can lend to people who need to borrow money, businesses and others. That is how we use our shareholding to make sure that the banks operate in the best interests of the Irish people.

I do not have any knowledge of the case the Deputy raised and, therefore, it would be wrong for me to comment on it, but suffice to say that before any repossession can occur of a home or a business, the case has to be heard in court and the judge has to be satisfied that the grounds for repossession are legitimate.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Page 41 of the programme for Government states: "The ultimate goal of the new Government will be to deliver sustainable full employment. This will mean an extra 200,000 jobs by 2020, of which 135,000 will be outside of Dublin..." There is serious concern and frustration among people in the midlands over the high unemployment rate, which currently stands at 9.3%. There is also great frustration over the failure of IDA Ireland to deliver jobs in the region. Last year, for example, there was a net job loss of 198 in County Longford while only 26 additional jobs were created in County Offaly and four in County Laois. How many of the 135,000 jobs to be created outside of Dublin have been created to date? How many of those jobs have been created in the midlands region and what does the Government plan to do to tackle the dismal and unacceptable record on job creation of the IDA in the midlands?

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In 2017, 45% of the jobs created in companies supported by the IDA were outside the Dublin region. I will arrange to have the specific figures sought by the Deputy supplied to her. The IDA

and Enterprise Ireland are very focused on the regions.

Deputy James Browne: I refer to page 67 of the programme for Government, which refers to “Ensuring Support in Crisis” in mental health care. Today, the psychiatric nurses in University Hospital Waterford are taking industrial action. Psychiatric nurses in St. Luke’s, Kilkenny are escalating their industrial action. The staff are demoralised, stressed and overstretched because of understaffing and the very poor facilities in the south east for those with acute mental health issues. County Wexford, with a population of 160,000, has no acute unit. When will the Government take this issue seriously and address both the staffing issue and the inefficient and insufficient numbers of beds in the south east for people suffering from mental health difficulties?

The Taoiseach: I am advised by the Department of Health that these are local disputes, which centre mainly on issues around staffing, the development of a bed management protocol and other measures to help staff dealing with pressures on the service. Phase 1 of this action commenced this morning with members of the Psychiatric Nurses Association, PNA, refusing to answer phones, send faxes, open doors or use their own transport for the redeployment of staff. Local Health Service Executive, HSE, management is committed to resolving the issues raised by the PNA members in Waterford and management and staff are scheduled to meet again this afternoon. Recruitment processes are under way to fill 12 vacant posts and a further 13 posts will be filled through agency conversion. Needless to say, if it is not possible to resolve the dispute at a local level, it will be possible to refer it to the Workplace Relations Commission at that point.

Deputy Brian Stanley: According to page 7 of the programme for Government, “We want Ireland’s image as the green island to inform all areas of policy so that the global image of our country is transformed and we are recognised as one of the cleanest and safest environments in the world.” A report by scientists from the National University of Ireland, Galway, showed that more than 70% of 233 fish caught in the north-west Atlantic had ingested plastic particles, one of the highest proportions of plastics found in fish worldwide, despite the remote location. Some of those will have originated in Ireland. Our supermarket shelves are lined with products containing microbeads, including toothpaste and other cosmetics. We need to ban them. We use plastic cups in the millions. According to a report issued on 27 January, 2.5 million plastic bottles go per day to landfill and to incineration in this State. We need to stop that.

To bring about a solution to the problem, I introduced the Waste Reduction (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2017. Will the Government, with the Opposition parties, work with us now to get such legislation through the House in order that we can ban these microbeads, wasteful cups and other waste plastic?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: My colleague talked about the Waste Reduction (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2017. This is one of 27 Bills in respect of which the Taoiseach is abusing his power and authority. These 27 Bills include the Banded Hours Contract Bill 2016, the Cannabis for Medicinal Use Regulation Bill 2016, the Consumer Insurance Contracts Bill 2017, the Coroners Bill 2015, the criminal justice Bill-----

Deputy Sean Fleming: This is not the same topic. This is a joke.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not the same matter.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----the education Bill, the electoral Bill and another 20 Bills.

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An Ceann Comhairle: That is not the same matter.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is because it is the Waste Reduction (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2017.

Deputy Sean Fleming: That is not the same topic.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Waste Reduction (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2017 is one of the 27 Bills-----

An Ceann Comhairle: There should be one question on one matter. The Deputy should resume his seat.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The question is when will the Government stop abusing its authority and allow 27 Bills-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should resume his seat.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: That is not the same topic.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----some of which were passed unanimously in this House, to proceed to Committee Stage?

An Ceann Comhairle: I invite Deputy Lawless to speak on the microbeads issue.

Deputy James Lawless: Actually, it is on the same matter, not a different matter.

A Deputy: Make up your mind now.

Deputy James Lawless: Essentially, it is very relevant. My issue is that the use of money messages as a device to frustrate the parliamentary business in this House-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No. It is not a money message.

Deputy James Lawless: We have 117 Bills-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry but-----

Deputy James Lawless: I am next up to speak anyway.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Every piece of legislation has been stalled by the Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not the way in which to address that particular issue. Deputy Stanley has raised an issue-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We have raised it. This is a democracy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty knows the procedure.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is the forum in which we are supposed to introduce legislation-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy knows very well what are the rules of the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is the whole point. The legislation has been purposely blocked.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Deputy for raising the question. I saw the figures from the same report that he has raised and it is very disturbing. We are moving to ban microbeads in the State and we would like to do this in conjunction with our EU partners because it is a Single Market issue. We trade across every market so we would like to see all products on our shelves with no microbeads in them. We will have draft legislation at the beginning of June at the very latest.

Public Health (Availability of Defibrillators) Bill 2018: First Stage

Deputy Noel Rock: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to require the management boards of schools to install and maintain defibrillators so that they are available for public use and to require such boards of management to erect signage and make information available online regarding the location of such defibrillators and to require the boards of management to provide training to persons on the premises; to require the maintenance of a register in each premises concerning defibrillators located therein; to provide appropriate exemptions from civil liability; to provide for offences; to empower the Health and Safety Authority to supervise and ensure compliance with this Act and for that purpose to amend the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005; and to provide for related matters.

The Bill is straightforward in its scope, ambitions and aims. It seeks to build on a similar Bill that was introduced in 2013 by a number of Senators, including Senator Feargal Quinn, but unfortunately was not enacted due to the prohibitive costs and scope of the Bill at that time. This Bill differs somewhat and instead of requiring the installation of defibrillators in all public buildings, it will require the installation of defibrillators in all schools, thus narrowing the focus and the scope. The Bill also improves the focus and the effectiveness of the legislation. Everybody knows where their nearest school is but, in an urgent situation, how quickly could somebody name their nearest public building? This, therefore, improves the focus and the effectiveness of the Bill.

Many people, in saying that this measure may not work, cite the costs. It is said that it would be €1,200 per defibrillator and 3,900 schools would be eligible. This would bring the total cost to some €4.7 million, presuming they were to be bought off the shelf. If, however, the defibrillators were to be purchased in bulk, the costs would come down significantly.

It is not just about costs. It is also about the benefits. If defibrillators were installed in every school and if a person was to get access to a defibrillator within five minutes, survival rates are around 50%. It is difficult to say what price can be put on the cost of losing a life. It is clear that the benefits are numerous and myriad. Some 5,000 people die of sudden cardiac arrest in Ireland each year. If this Bill was enacted and if defibrillators were installed in every school in the State, people would have certainty. They would have a map in their own heads - in the way

that we all know where our nearest school is in relation to where we live - so we would all know exactly where our nearest defibrillator is to where we live. We have incentivised sports clubs with grants to install defibrillators so we could also incentivise schools to install and maintain them.

This is very worthy legislation. I note the campaign being run by the *The Irish Sun* on the matter and the support it has garnered from across the political spectrum. Sinn Féin backs the Bill as does Deputy Micheál Martin, the leader of Fianna Fáil, or so his Deputies say. Deputy Martin may want to take it up with his members.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That means the party.

Deputy Noel Rock: Fianna Fáil backs the Bill. The Ministers, Deputies Katherine Zappone, Simon Harris, Michael Ring and Richard Bruton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, have all backed this Bill in some form or another through the *The Irish Sun* campaign on this matter. It is an issue of commonality throughout the House and among all Deputies. I am aware that 30 Deputies recently attended a briefing on the matter. I recommend the Bill to the House and I would like to see its urgent progression as soon as possible. I will take it up with the Minister in due course.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Rock. Given how excited Members get on occasions, it might not be any harm to start by having such a machine installed in this House. Is the Bill opposed?

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) (Amendment) Bill 2018: First Stage

Deputy Michael McGrath: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2015 to allow for the regulation of loan owners and sale of loans; and to provide for related matters.

The central provision of the Bill is the requirement that a credit agreement owner, in other words, a loan owner, must be fully regulated in the normal course by way of Central Bank supervision. This is the central plank of the Bill and what we are seeking to achieve. I welcome the Taoiseach's comments on the issue during Leaders' Questions, but this is about delivery and securing an important change in policy.

I will underline why this Bill is necessary. The Taoiseach said that the code of conduct ap-

plies in any event and that the lender must examine all possible alternative arrangements for the repayment of a loan. The nub of it, however, is that vulture funds do not offer the full suite of restructuring options. They will not, for example, offer arrears capitalisation, split mortgage options or term extensions because they simply do not wish to engage in any long-term restructuring of mortgages as they are not going to be here in 15 or 20 years to work out the mortgage book over that period.

I will give the House a real-life example. I am working with a group of Tanager mortgage owners. Tanager purchased the mortgages from Bank of Scotland Ireland. A number of those mortgage holders who are now with Tanager had been in difficulty during the economic crisis and had fallen behind in their repayments. They now have a level of arrears. For the past number of years, they have been repaying their mortgages in full, both interest and capital, but Tanager refuses to restructure their mortgages, to capitalise their arrears or extend the mortgage term. It is taking them to court. It has actually been thrown out of court by the registrar because any independent person looking at what has happened in that instance would see that Tanager is being entirely unreasonable. This is an example of why the vulture funds are different; they do not view loans in the same way as a regular financial institution.

It is a nonsense to suggest that it is acceptable that the credit servicing firm as the intermediary would be regulated. They make none of the decisions. All of the main decisions concerning the loan are made by the loan owner and in this instance, if they are an unregulated vulture fund, they are not accountable to anybody. The Central Bank cannot contact them, cannot knock on their door, cannot impose any sanctions and cannot carry out any intrusive inspections with regard to those entities. If one is trying to work with a borrower to restructure a loan, one goes through the credit servicing firm and it will pass on the contact and the communication to the ultimate loan owner. Vulture funds, however, are unregulated and unaccountable. As time goes on, we will find that these loans will be sold on again. This applies not just to mortgages, but also to small farming loans and SMEs. There is a gap in the legislation currently which will become even more prominent as time goes on and as the loans are sold on again.

I am not concerned as to how this change is brought about, be it a Fianna Fáil Bill or a Bill from another Member, but we really need Government support. The Taoiseach has the support of the Civil Service, the Attorney General, the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel and so on. The Taoiseach made positive soundings during Leaders' Questions that he is open to change and new protections and that we have made a strong case. I believe the case for change is compelling but it is now a matter for the Government to study this Bill. I will engage with the Minister for Finance in the days ahead and the Bill will be debated fully next week and voted upon, if necessary. It cannot end there. We are not going to accept the situation where the Government tries to kill the Bill with kindness. We want this measure to be enacted. We want all borrowers, from farmers to small business owners and mortgage holders, to be given equivalent protections as are given to all the other borrowers in the State. The best and most effective way of doing that is to ensure it is the actual loan owners that are fully regulated. This, after all, is what the regulator recommended back in 2015. We have it in writing from the Central Bank that its preferred option is the regulation of the loan owners. The Government chose to not go down that road at that time. There is absolutely no compelling reason whatsoever as to why these loan owners should not be regulated in the same way.

The other issue that concerns people is that if they have had their mortgage restructured and it is now being sold to a vulture fund, the restructuring agreement will come up for review after a number of years. The fact of the matter is, the chance of even a performing restructuring

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agreement being sanctioned and renewed by the vulture fund is far less than it would be in the case of a normal credit institution. The case is compelling. It must be acted upon. We cannot stand over a situation in which up to 20,000 mortgage holders are sold to unregulated funds. I hope the Minister will heed that message and that we can work together in the weeks ahead to avert that scenario.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed.

Sale of Tickets (Sporting and Cultural Events) Bill 2017: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: As this is a Private Members' Bill it must, under Standing Orders 84A(3)(a) and 141, be referred to a select committee. The relevant committee for this Bill is the Select Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: No, it is the Select Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation. I think there was a typo.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we take it that we will refer it to the relevant committee, be it the Select Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport or the Select Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation?

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: That is fine.

I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation pursuant to Standing Orders 84A(3)(a) and 141.

Question put and agreed to.

Seventeenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the Seventeenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 27F, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 15th February, 2018, and discharges a member, and appoints a member to a Committee

accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

Sectoral Employment Order (Mechanical Engineering Building Services Contracting Sector) 2018: Motion

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Sectoral Employment Order (Mechanical Engineering Building Services Contracting Sector) 2018,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 25th January, 2018.

Question put and agreed to.

Report Regarding Service by the Defence Forces with the United Nations in 2016: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move:

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the report by the Minister with responsibility for Defence, regarding service by the Defence Forces with the United Nations in 2016, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 5th October, 2017, in accordance with section 13 of the Defence (Amendment) Act 2006, be referred to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, in accordance with Standing Order 84A(3)(b), which, not later than 20th March, 2018, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 90, and Standing Order 89(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 12th December, 2017, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Defence, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

Minister for Finance

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Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 12th December, 2017, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Education and Skills.

Question put and agreed to.

Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 Regulations: Referral to Joint Committee

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move:

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

(i) Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 4(7)) (Membership of Council) Regulations 2017, and

(ii) Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 4(2)) (Designation of professions: counsellors and psychotherapists and establishment of registration board) Regulations 2017,

copies of which have been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 9th November, 2017, be referred to the Joint Committee on Health, in accordance with Standing Order 84A(4)(k), which, not later than 20th March, 2018, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 90, and Standing Order 89(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Departmental Staff Data

1. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach the number of staff within his Department who have decided to return to work after their official retirement date. [6005/18]

2. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach his plans in respect of staffing levels in his Department for 2018. [6900/18]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 and 2 together.

The role of my Department is to support my work as Taoiseach and to co-ordinate the work of the Government and Cabinet. My Department uses workforce planning and succession planning to ensure that there are sufficient staffing resources in place to deliver the Department's strategic goals. With the exception of politically appointed staff such as special advisers, staff assignments, appointments and recruitment in my Department are dealt with by the Secretary

General and the senior management of the Department. There are currently 206.1 whole-time equivalent staff employed in my Department. I am dying to know who the 0.1 is. Perhaps there is a 0.6 and a 0.5, together leaving a 0.1 over. I do not know. There are no staff currently employed by my Department who retired from it and returned to work in it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: In 2016 the then Taoiseach stated that a staffing audit was being carried out in the Department of the Taoiseach. This was in response to questions from me about how the Department was going to undertake a range of challenges, including dealing with Brexit, the ongoing instability in the Northern institutions and the capital plan, which was due to go before a Cabinet committee at that time. The current structures of the Department were put in place before the audit, with the exception of the new marketing unit which was the Taoiseach's idea, although apparently he has no idea what it does for him or for his party. Apparently there are Chinese walls between the two, as we saw at the weekend.

The Taoiseach accepted last week that Michel Barnier, Commissioner Hogan and others are right when they say that the current state of Brexit negotiations is potentially not good news for Ireland. The Taoiseach appears now to accept what we have been saying for nearly a year and a half, which is that a deal specific to Ireland is likely to be the only way to protect the interests of all parts of this island. The issue is now whether there are enough staff with the requisite expertise working on developing proposals for some form of Ireland-specific deal.

I know the Taoiseach wants the British to stay in the Single Market and the customs union but that is not happening. Every speech from every senior Tory Minister indicates that they want to be outside the customs union and the Single Market. Will the Taoiseach say whether he is confident that he has enough staff working on alternative proposals? Has he invited any expert submissions on this issue? Does the Taoiseach have any intention of holding substantive consultations on these alternatives? It is very worrying, for example, that so many small and medium enterprises have made no preparations for Brexit at all. That was the quite stunning outcome of a recent survey. I have met representatives of companies that have 60% of their market in Britain. They are not going to be able to turn that market share around quickly by diversifying. There is a real problem down the road with the type of Brexit that the British want. It will be a problem for Irish indigenous industry along the west coast and outside the Dublin region in particular.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Taoiseach as ucht a fhreagra. My question is about his staffing levels. Can I suggest that, as a first step, he round the 0.1 up to a full post? In a similar response given to a similar question which was tabled last month, the Taoiseach said that staff assigned to the international, EU and Northern division in his Department support the Government's efforts to develop strategic alliances. None of us would argue with the absolutely vital nature of this work, particularly in the context of Brexit and a post-Brexit scenario which, as Deputy Martin has described, could potentially be disastrous for Ireland, North and South, and which certainly will be if the Tories have their way.

It was announced last week that the Cabinet had given the Minister for Health approval to open negotiations with Austria and the Benelux countries to secure affordable access to new medicines for Irish patients. Last Tuesday the Taoiseach said that a letter of intent in this regard was sent or was to be sent. Can he confirm that letter has in fact been issued? When is he expecting a reply? Does he envisage a role for his Department in this process? The cost of drugs has been an ongoing issue and any and all steps to address the cost and accessibility of new drugs for patients are welcome, I am sure we all agree the sooner this matter can be advanced,

the better.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I thank the Taoiseach for his answer. Has he completed the staffing of the strategic communications unit? The last answer he provided for us said that there were 14 people working in it. Who in that unit, or elsewhere in the Department, is responsible for writing and placing the information advertisements in local papers this week following up on the national development plan? I see there were very colourful pages in the *Drogheda Independent*. Two full pages were brought to readers by the Government of Ireland. Is that part of the work of the Taoiseach's Department?

A friend of mine went to see "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri" over the weekend. Before he could watch the movie he had to endure another billboard - an advertisement for the new national development plan. Apparently this is only the start of it. We are all going to be encouraged, informed and invigorated by advertisements on social media and in our national and local press issued by the Government in respect of the plan. Who writes that content? Is there someone in the Department of the Taoiseach who specifically works on it? What level of input does the Taoiseach have in it? Is it the view of the Taoiseach that it is simply political advertising? Has he had any discussions with the Standards in Public Office Commission in this regard?

The Taoiseach: My Department is structured around seven main work areas. The breakdown of the staff currently assigned to each of these is as follows: 24.3 staff are assigned to the international, EU and Northern Ireland division. They are the staff who mainly deal with Brexit but obviously they are very much supported by and work very closely with the hundreds of staff who work for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, not just in Dublin but also in Brussels, London and other places. There are 25 staff assigned to the economic division. They deal in part with the economic response to Brexit and the different scenarios that may arise post-Brexit. Again, they do not work on their own but have the support of hundreds of staff in the Departments of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, which are located just next door. We work across Government. There are 24.2 staff assigned to the secretariat, protocol, general division and the parliamentary liaison unit. There are 13 staff assigned to social policy and the public service reform division. There are 15 staff assigned to the strategic communications unit.

Deputy Micheál Martin: How many?

The Taoiseach: There are 15. Staffing is complete. I cannot tell Deputies exactly who does what out of those various staff-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thought it was meant to be five initially.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It was supposed to be five, yes.

The Taoiseach: -----but the director, John Concannon, obviously directs the work of the unit.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Does the Taoiseach have any idea what goes on in there?

The Taoiseach: They do not engage in any political advertising. They have been very clear on that. The Deputy opposite may be particularly interested to know that the last time a national development plan was launched and communicated to the public - it is important that we do tell

the public what we as a Government are doing - was in 2007. At that time, the then Government made a decision to set aside a budget of €1 million in order to communicate to the public-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is now five times that amount.

The Taoiseach: -----the content of the 2007 plan, including for advertising. Interestingly enough, a body called the strategic communication group was established to monitor it all. It was certainly not my idea. I got it from-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Bertie.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The unit was the Taoiseach's idea. The Taoiseach appointed Mr. Concannon.

The Taoiseach: I learned from the masters of political communication. That is a strength, not a weakness.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The unit now has 15 permanent staff. That is interesting.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Some 15 permanent staff for branding.

The Taoiseach: In the area of corporate affairs, there are 27.4 staff. There are 8.1 staff assigned to information and records management. There is no marketing unit at present. The staff of my Department includes services staff and those who are assigned to the private offices, constituency offices, the press office and also internal audit. I think I have enough staff. The staff complement of the Department is approximately 200 but that is a matter for the Secretary General, not me.

I do not have an update on BeNeLuxA, save to say that, last week, the Cabinet gave the Minister for Health permission to issue a letter of intent to the countries involved setting out our intent to work with them and perhaps join that group and to ensure that we can share information and negotiate on the cost of medicines together in order to get a better price for medicines and obtain quicker access to new medicines for Irish patients, which are twin objectives. It may require an international agreement and it is only then that the matter will come back to my office. In the interim, the Minister for Health will be dealing with it.

I went to see "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri" at the Lighthouse cinema on Sunday night.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Was there an ad for Ireland 2040?

The Taoiseach: There was. There were ads for many things.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Who placed that ad?

The Taoiseach: I imagine that my Department did so. My Department is organising the strategic communications for the Government.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach imagines?

The Taoiseach: It did; I know it did. I must say there were ads for many other things and it is not unusual for Government agencies and Departments to take out advertising.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Come on.

The Taoiseach: I was not sure what to make of the film, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: It was very good.

The Taoiseach: It was good but it was hard to warm to the heroine at all.

An Ceann Comhairle: Perhaps we will do the criticism elsewhere.

The Taoiseach: I was not sure what to make of it. The ad was very good, though.

Deputy Micheál Martin: May I ask a brief supplementary question?

An Ceann Comhairle: There are a couple of minutes left.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Does the Taoiseach think it is acceptable that there is more staff in the strategic communications unit than in the social policy division? Does that not say it all? Social policy was a very strong part of the Department of the Taoiseach in terms of social partnership but also in the context of the RAPID programme areas and facilitating a cross-cutting role for Government with regard to areas of disadvantage, CLÁR programmes and so on.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Initiatives in the north inner city.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is quite striking that strategic communications, which is very new and which is now embedded within the Department, is the one initiative the Taoiseach has taken and that it trumps all others in terms of staffing and expertise recruited. Given the enormity of Brexit, it is striking that priority is being given to communications above and beyond anything else. I have seen some of the videos as well. In one, reference was made to approximately six projects that were announced years ago and people were shown claiming credit for the N28 project.

Deputy Joan Burton: That was a mistake. I also saw that one; it was the N17.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The matter went to an oral planning hearing in the region of six months ago. Site selection and other matters have all been taken care of. Likewise, a dental hospital was mentioned that has nothing to do with the Government. The relevant university hospital got money from the European Investment Bank. People will not be impressed by the idea that we use taxpayers' money to advertise projects that have been well and truly launched and announced, including those relating to schools, various buildings, public private partnerships and so on.

Deputy Joan Burton: In a recent reply, the Taoiseach said that among the tenders his strategic communications unit has put out is one relating to the development of a Government identity system for roll-out across Government. I thought that the Government had an identity and that this is a democratic republic governed by the Constitution. I do not actually understand the ethical framework relating to this sudden roll-out of a Government identity. I understand that it is "marketing speak", but I think it is unethical.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Branding.

Deputy Joan Burton: What our Constitution requires is that Ireland be a democratic republic. It is not really for a party that has the responsibility of being in power to roll out a Government identity system. Will there be people or places in our republic that will not meet the criteria relating to this system?

The other matter to which I wish to refer is the provision of marketing pitch specialist services. This would all be understandable in the context of party election campaigns where the aim is to get this or that party into office, either as part of a coalition or on its own. That is what politics is about. However, it is completely different to take the institutions of the State and seek to give them an identity system. What is the ethical framework behind the strategic communications unit and the ads that Deputy Howlin showed?

An Ceann Comhairle: If Deputy Burton goes on much longer, we will not have time for an answer.

Deputy Joan Burton: People who read magazines will be familiar with this type of ad. It is called paid information. It is a two-page spread; I am holding it up. The ad is all about Drogheda and it is two pages' worth of paid information. In other words, it is a paid editorial. Everybody in journalism knows what that means; it is one's message that is paid for.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Clearly, the concern is that the strategic communications unit is a propaganda arm-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Yes.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----not of the Government but of the Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, and, indeed, Fine Gael and in terms of their electoral ambitions. The next election will happen whenever those in Fine Gael or their partners in Fianna Fáil deem it most advantageous to go to the people.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach might dismiss that. He might say it is simply a part of modernising and professionalising communications. He might even believe that to be the case. There is an ethical consideration, a public interest consideration and a public purse consideration in the expending of public moneys for these advertising exercises. There are, of course, traditional tried and tested ways to roll out things such as large infrastructural development projects and regional plans. I had understood that the floor of the Dáil is the first port of call for doing that-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Only in law.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----in order to seek the input and the imprimatur of people who are elected to this House. The latter is also supposed to be sought from those in the Seanad. Clearly, the Taoiseach sees matters differently. I imagine that this will be a source of controversy and disquiet across the Dáil. The bottom line is that people believe the Taoiseach is being a bit chancy with all of this and that public moneys are being expended, not in the interests of professionalism but, rather, squarely in the interests of Deputy Varadkar and Fine Gael.

An Ceann Comhairle: I invite the Taoiseach to deal with those questions.

The Taoiseach: I deal with questions like this almost every week. I have said many times that I believe communication is important. It is important that people know what the Government is actually doing on their behalf and how taxpayers' money is being spent. I often hear that the Government does not get its message across. It is important that the Government gets its message across and I intend to make sure that happens.

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In terms of the framework and the operating principles, which I imagine cover ethics, I am advised that the operating principles as approved by Government are that the output is characterised by accuracy, truth and quality; that the priority is to simplify communications, with citizens at the centre; that the organisation structure will be built around actual work; that the focus will be on incremental delivery of work at speed; and that teams across Government will be empowered. The unit will carry out its work objectively and without bias and will operate in accordance with the Civil Service code of standards and behaviour, which is published by the Standards in Public Office Commission, SIPO-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: Does that mean that Deputy Ross gets a fair shot?

The Taoiseach: -----and will adhere to Civil Service values as delineated by the Civil Service renewal plan and therefore it cannot carry out any party-political work. I can assure Deputies that will be the case.

In terms of the dental hospital, as was the case with this national development plan, NDP, and previous NDPs, it includes Exchequer capital spend and also capital spend by semi-State bodies and other public bodies.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was announced by the previous president of University College Cork, UCC. This is extraordinary.

The Taoiseach: It includes the universities. It is not the case that the European Investment Bank has nothing to do with the Government.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There are six projects in that video that have been announced already.

The Taoiseach: A governor of the EIB is appointed by the Government, and EIB is also-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I might mention the Dunkettle interchange.

The Taoiseach: -----capitalised by the Government.

In terms of the identity piece, I do not know the details on that but I understand that it may relate to an attempt to pull together the different ways in which we market Ireland abroad. Tourism Ireland, the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and Bord Bia all have different messages.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is more domestic than foreign.

The Taoiseach: It might make sense, particularly in the run up to the St. Patrick's Day period and all of the business that Ministers and others will undertake during that period, that we try to have a common brand or picture of Ireland. Other countries have done it. New Zealand has done it very successfully, without having seven or eight different agencies telling a different story about the country but by having a common unified-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: In fairness it is the Minister in the centre, not the citizens.

The Taoiseach: -----message. I advise Deputies, if they want to move beyond point-scoring, to have a look at what New Zealand did in terms of creating a common identity.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Perhaps the Taoiseach could arrange a briefing for all of us.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy would like I can arrange that.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It might be the making of the unit.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies should give the Taoiseach a chance to respond to their questions.

Seanad Reform

3. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his address to Seanad Éireann and the new Seanad reform group. [6006/18]

4. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent address to Seanad Éireann; and his plans for Seanad reform. [6901/18]

5. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his address to Seanad Éireann and the proposals for Seanad reform. [7270/18]

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I propose to take Questions Nos. 3, 4 and 5 together.

As I outlined in my recent speech to Seanad Éireann, I have decided that an implementation group on Seanad reform should be established with an eight month mandate to consider the Manning report and develop specific proposals to legislate for Seanad reform.

I propose that the implementation group comprise Members of the Oireachtas with the assistance of outside experts, as appropriate, including the franchise section of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

I believe it is important that all groups in the Oireachtas are represented on the implementation group and also that it is representative, although this will make it quite large.

I will be writing shortly to party and group leaders inviting them to nominate members to the group.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach will accept that there is universal frustration in the House at how often promises of genuine consultations are not followed up on and it has taken some time to get this off the ground. I have consulted with the Taoiseach on this issue and I believe it is important that we get onto the implementation of the Manning report and ensure we have an outcome. I know the Taoiseach himself has not been a convert to the recommendations of the Manning report, but it is in the programme for Government, which makes it clear that it is to be implemented.

Can the Taoiseach outline why, in his speech to the Seanad, he did not outline the name of the potential chair of this group? I am of a view that it has to be someone substantive, with authority and with the commitment to implement the Manning report and who will get the job done. My understanding is that the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, has objections to a certain individual who was put forward for the role. I regret to have heard that. We should proceed with someone who is independent, is genuinely committed to Seanad reform and can see this through.

I noted the absence of a nominee for chair of the group in his Seanad speech and I would

appreciate if he could clarify the reasons for that this afternoon.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is a level of public and political cynicism around the whole area of Seanad reform. It must be one of the most talked-about political phenomena of our time, alongside the roll-out of broadband. It is endlessly rehearsed, yet it never happens. I note the Taoiseach's stated intention to the Seanad to establish this committee and for it to have an eight month mandate. The Taoiseach might consider narrowing that down to six months, simply in recognition of the tardiness in establishing this mechanism to consider the Manning report. Having said that, I believe that the committee is probably the way to proceed and we support that.

I would appreciate if the Taoiseach could confirm for us whether he was due to announce that Senator McDowell would act as chairperson of the committee and whether that in fact was vetoed by Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross. If that was the turn of events, who does the Taoiseach propose will chair this committee?

The Taoiseach also said that we should elect Senators from the North, from both nationalist and unionist communities, so that the Seanad has an all-island dimension. I very much support that statement. I believe the Seanad can be a really powerful vehicle for Northern participation in the Oireachtas. Let me emphasise that I mean a balanced participation from both nationalism and unionism. The Taoiseach did not elaborate much on this issue. I wonder if he might now discuss it further.

The Manning report recommends extending the franchise to all citizens resident in the North as well as the diaspora. The report further states that there is no constitutional impediment to doing so and that the Oireachtas can confer the right to register to vote in Seanad elections on Irish citizens living in the North and to Irish passport holders living overseas. The Taoiseach has said that he does not support all of the Manning report recommendations. Does he support the recommendation to extend the franchise to citizens in the North and to the diaspora and will he commit to legislating for this in the time ahead?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: There is an element of Groundhog Day when we talk about reforming the Seanad. It is the equivalent of restoring the Irish language and draining the Shan-non: an object that will always be with us. I know the Taoiseach had a jaundiced view about the Manning report. He previously told us to write to each of the party leaders to seek a nomination to serve on an implementation body. Is this panel to be established going to implement the Manning report faithfully or is it to investigate whether it is fit for purpose now? Will the Taoiseach be making his own submissions and having his own input into that? Will he have his own nominee on the panel?

On the issue of votes for all Irish citizens, either in the Irish diaspora or in Northern Ireland, would the Taoiseach consider a separate panel to look at that? I remember looking at this issue many years ago when I was Minister for the Environment, because at that stage there was talk of having a universal vote across the world for a panel of members elected to the Seanad. The issues are formidable, in terms of getting registration, so it might be more effective if there was a working group looking at that issue separately from the balance of the proposals in the Manning report. I am interested in hearing the Taoiseach's views.

The Taoiseach: On the issue of the chairmanship, the chair has not been nominated as yet. The matter is still under consideration. I am not entirely sure if it necessarily falls to me to ap-

point a chair. It is possible that the committee could elect its own chair, but-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: There was a view that Senator McDowell would be the chair.

The Taoiseach: I know he is the favourite candidate of the Fianna Fáil Party. I do not know what the view is of Labour or Sinn Féin-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We were not asked.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thought the Taoiseach had agreed it.

The Taoiseach: -----but I do agree that whoever it is should be independent of Government, genuinely committed to Seanad reform and capable of bringing it through, so I agree with Deputy Martin's sentiments.

It is true that I have reservations about the Manning report - I have not made a secret of that - regarding the cost and also the practicability of implementing it. If implemented, it would require everyone to re-register to vote not for the Dáil, but for the Seanad. It would also require people to register to vote on a particular panel, and they will have a choice of one of five panels plus universities. I believe that could cause a degree of confusion. As the Constitution requires it, the election, when held, will have to be a postal vote. It is a requirement in the Constitution that elections to the Seanad can only be held by postal vote. That is the reason we go through this very strange ritual where we fill in the ballot papers in here and then go to the post office to post them back to here. That would have to be done not just on that scale but potentially on an international scale, so the election potentially could cost €50 million, €60 million, €70 million or €80 million. Who knows? Frankly, I have reservations about some of these matters, but it is in the programme for Government. I am bound by the programme for Government and therefore we will press ahead with it in full.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: In the sure knowledge that it will never happen.

The Taoiseach: It is not another committee to examine the recommendations again.

Deputy Joan Burton: Where is the strategic communications unit now?

The Taoiseach: It is a working group to implement the many recommendations, not to reconsider them. I want to be very clear about that.

Deputy Joan Burton: We cannot understand the communication. I think we need the strategic communications unit to explain to us what the Taoiseach is saying-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, can we let the Taoiseach respond?

Deputy Joan Burton: -----because we do not understand it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: He is saying it is hogwash, but he has to do a bit of it.

The Taoiseach: I am saying exactly what I am saying. I am fairly clear and blunt in the contributions I make in this House. I have reservations about it. I have doubts. I told the Deputy what they are, but I know it is a commitment in the programme for Government. Therefore, I am bound by it, and we are going to go ahead with it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Who put it in the programme for Government?

The Taoiseach: That is what is going to happen.

Deputy Joan Burton: It is a hogwash-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is a contradictory message.

The Taoiseach: The group is being set up not to look at it again, but to implement it, and that is what will happen. If other people do not have reservations, that is fine, but I want to put mine on the record now. I assume that if others do not have reservations, they are happy that no problems will arise in implementation.

In terms of broadband, when we talk about broadband it is important to acknowledge that when this Government comprising Fine Gael, the Independent Alliance and Independents came into office in May 2011, only about 50% of the homes, businesses and farms in this country had access to high speed broadband.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach did not come into power in 2011.

The Taoiseach: My apologies, 2016.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I know he would like to airbrush that-----

The Taoiseach: I almost forgot about those five long years. My apologies.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is okay.

The Taoiseach: When the Fine Gael, Independent Alliance and Independents Government came into office in May 2016, just over 50% of homes, businesses and farms had high-speed broadband. We are now up to approximately 75% and we will be at 80% by the end of the year. Notwithstanding the delays in the national broadband plan-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It has nothing to do with Government; it is commercial entities.

The Taoiseach: -----going from 50% to 80% is not bad progress and is much more progress than is being made with Seanad reform, draining the Shannon and those other matters.

As Deputy McDonald pointed out, the Seanad can be used to allow those of us in the Oireachtas to hear more diverse voices, including those of the diaspora, and I am delighted that my forebear appointed Senator Lawless to represent the diaspora, and also more voices from Northern Ireland. The Free State Senate reserved seats, at least in its first term, for people from a southern unionist background like W.B. Yeats. I believe it would enhance the Oireachtas and the Seanad if we had more people from North of the Border in the Seanad. It would be important also that they would be from both communities.

Proposed Legislation

6. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach the legislation under preparation or planned in his Department. [6883/18]

7. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach the legislation under preparation by his Department. [7295/18]

8. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach the status of Bills under preparation in his Department. [8335/18]

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on legislation under preparation in his Department. [8432/18]

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

My Department has responsibility for the National Economic and Social Council, NESC. The NESC's statutory basis is as a body under the framework of the National Economic and Social Development Office Act 2006. That framework is no longer necessary and the Government has agreed that it should be dissolved and the NESC itself placed on a statutory footing. Work is under way to prepare the heads of this Bill, and it is the only legislation being prepared in my Department.

The absence of specific legislation does not impede the NESC as regards carrying out its mandate. NESC's role is to analyse and provide advice on strategic policy matters relevant to Ireland's economic, social, environmental and sustainable development.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I see on the legislative programme that the only Bill in the Taoiseach's Department is the national economic and social development office (amendment) Bill to dissolve, as the Taoiseach said, the National Economic and Social Development Office, NESCO, and place the National Economic and Social Council, NESC, on a statutory footing. In terms of strategic thinking on Brexit as matters become very serious indeed, is there any legislative response envisaged by the Department? Has the Taoiseach's Department done any preparatory work on any legislation in the event of a hard Brexit? Has any consideration been given to what might be required from his Department regarding that very major issue?

Deputy Joan Burton: First, as part of the announcements on the national planning framework and the national plan this week, the Taoiseach mentioned the development of a new quango, which I believe is to be called something like the planning and infrastructure agency. I understand that possibly will come under the remit of the Department of the Minister, Deputy Murphy. In the context of a whole-of-Government approach to issues, why would that not be associated with the Taoiseach's Department given that he has set so much store on strategic communications across Government and that it is a whole-of-Government issue?

Second, for a long time the NESC has been a social partnership organisation with views being elicited from employers, trade unions, academics and researchers. The Taoiseach may not be a fan of social partnership but at this stage in the country's development, does he agree that in developing legislation for NESC, in the context of the 2040 plan, it would make a good deal of sense to have a resourced social partnership structure which would draw in views? I have concerns that, as far as I can see, there is no reference in the plan to inner city and inner town areas which may see particular concentration of social disadvantage, for instance, many children from those areas not going on to college or apprenticeships. In the context of the ambitious plans for 2040, surely the NESC should be in a position to provide research and information about how we provide plans in our cities, towns and smaller villages where there are pockets of deep deprivation that would allow progress to be made in the context of the plan.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Gabhaim buíochas arís leis an Taoiseach as ucht a fhreagra. As he has confirmed, the legislative programme published in January lists just this one Bill sponsored by him and currently under preparation. As others have said, the purpose of the

now omnipresent national economic and social development office (amendment) Bill, which has been listed as part of the Government legislative programme since 2013 and has been talked about since then Deputy Brian Cowen served as Taoiseach, is to abolish the National Economic and Social Development Office and to place the NESC on a statutory footing. When will the Bill be finally introduced? I know the NESC was effectively moribund for a time but I am also aware that the Taoiseach opened up a process recently for independent appointments to the council and that a work programme is in place.

4 o'clock

Has there been interest in or progress on appointments? When does the Taoiseach expect the process to be completed?

As for the work programme, I agree that challenges relating to deprivation, disadvantage and poverty are of huge concern in inner city and urban, but also rural settings. We should not miss the last. I also believe the phenomenon of precarious work must be tackled and weighed. Finally, the work programme must address environmental protection and climate change which, to be frank, the Government, as with its predecessors, does not have a handle on and in respect of which it has failed to demonstrate any credible ambition. Those jump out as three key context issues and then there is, of course, Brexit and all that is unfolding around us.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am aware of the legislation under consideration by the Taoiseach's Department. In relation to previous correspondence, however, it may be important for the Taoiseach to consider legislating for the strategic communications unit, or SCU, and consider the statutory underpinning of it. He says it is important to communicate what the Government does and he talks about roads and so on, but thus far, all the communication has been party political with Ministers front and centre. One analyst in the news media described it as "Pyongyang on the Garavogue", which was an insightful observation. All of the videos I have seen thus far are of Ministers and it is not actually hard information for the public. It says we are going to do roads and schools in 2024 to 2030. However, the real information people want through TII on a major road project like the N28 is not glossy brochures, it is the number of CPOs along the route, as well as information about the alignment and direction of the route. It is the same with the Macroom bypass, any motorway project or the A5. The real public information, which is hard to get from time to time and which is not provided by the strategic communications unit, is how a project affects residential amenity and the community. That is hard information the Government should be providing to the public transparently and openly without any political context. It is about hard, objectively-sourced information.

I put it genuinely to the Taoiseach that there is a real danger in what is happening here and I do not think he gets it. There is a muddying of the waters and an overlap between strictly Government information and political communication and information. This is an ongoing thing with various programmes and it runs a real risk of corrupting the democratic process over time. We must look at that and set down very clear parameters. I ask the Taoiseach and the Secretary General of his Department to consider a legislative underpinning for this setting out clear parameters as to how Government, as distinct from party political, communications should work. Following the McKenna judgment on referenda, I recall the rigid demarcation early on in Lisbon 1 and 2 that had to be followed as to what Departments could spend money on and do and what political parties could do. We observed that very rigidly to ensure there was no crossover which could contaminate the outcome of a referendum campaign. We saw that in the children's referendum when the courts found that errors were made in the Government's

approach. It is a serious issue notwithstanding all the hilarity about billboards and the films. It merits consideration and I ask the Taoiseach to look at a legislative underpinning for the way in which the unit goes about its operations.

The Taoiseach: As a serious point, that is all covered by the Civil Service code of conduct. The Deputy can be assured that there will be no party political work and no involvement in any electoral matters or referendums which would bring us into conflict with the McKenna judgment.

As to legislation on NESC, the heads of a Bill will be brought forward but it is not a legislative priority for Government at present. The National Economic and Social Development Office, NESDO, was initially created under the National Economic and Social Development Act 2006 as a body corporate with three constituent parts, the NESC, the National Economic and Social Forum, NESF, and the National Centre for Partnership Performance, NCPP. The NESF and the NCPP were dissolved by order leaving the council as the only remaining body. Consequently, the framework of the 2006 Act is no longer necessary. As I stated in my reply, the absence of specific legislation does not impede the NESC in carrying out its mandate. Some time was taken to reflect on the role and working methods of the council following the end of the term of the previous council in 2016. This included consultation with outgoing members. There have been a number of changes aimed at making the council more effective. For example, the current council, which was appointed in May 2017, has fewer plenary meetings to allow more focused in-depth discussion of issues under consideration through working groups and committees. While council representation continues to include the various sectors, its overall membership has been reduced from 34 to 28 to ensure more efficient meetings while capturing a broad range of views. It is appropriate to allow these decisions to bed down in advance of finalising any legislative proposals.

Members are appointed under the Act and the National Economic and Social Council (Alteration of Composition) Order 2010. Each of the following sectors nominate representatives to the council in accordance with the legislation: business and employer interests, ICTU, farming and agricultural interests, community and voluntary sector and the environmental sector. The new council has three nominees per sector. The legislation also provides for six public servants to be appointed, which appointments have been made, and between seven and eight independent members, of whom three have been appointed. In October 2017, I made three appointments to the council on the basis of nominations received from farming representatives. The other members of the council were appointed by the previous Taoiseach in May 2017. I plan to make four further appointments to the council following the conclusion of an open process which is currently being conducted by the Public Appointments Service.

As to legislation which may be required from my Department in the event of a hard Brexit, we do not envisage any legislation being required of my office. However, it may be the case that legislation would be required of other Departments, most notably the Departments of Finance and Justice and Equality. The new agency which Deputy Burton asked about will be under the auspices of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. As the Department deals largely with housing, planning and development, that is the right home for the agency. It is intended that the body will acquire State land, bring it together and develop it, mainly for housing, but also, perhaps, for mixed use. We have seen similar models in the past with the redevelopment agencies in Limerick, Ballymun and the docklands, the last of which initially worked well and before it went very bad. Something based on that model would not sit appropriately in my Department and is best placed in the Department of Housing, Planning and

Local Government.

The modern iteration of social partnership involves consulting with and involving unions, employers and their representatives in major economic decisions and decisions which affect the labour market. That is very much alive and something which is done through a number of mechanisms. The Labour Employer Economic Forum, or LEEF, meets this week and I will chair the meeting. The meeting will be on Brexit and Project Ireland 2040 and will get input from unions and employers in respect of the latter. I am very heartened by the support of IBEC, Chambers Ireland and the IFA for Project Ireland 2040 and am very pleased that they came out so quickly in support of it. There was, I suppose, a mixed welcome from some of the trade union groups. For example, the INMO nursing union is very supportive of the health element of the plan. We are also able to engage with the social partners through the national economic dialogue, which occurs in the run up to the budgetary cycle. That has been very useful in helping us to frame the budget. There is also a social inclusion forum, which is a wider forum used to consult social partners.

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 James Browne - the need to discuss the shortage of respite places in County Wexford; (2) Deputy Michael McGrath - to discuss the recent surge in burglaries in the Togher district in Cork; (3) Deputy Mary Butler - to discuss the unique south-eastern model in residential care homes; (4) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss a code of practice for advertising food and beverages; (5) Deputy Ruth Coppinger - to discuss the recent decision to commercially develop lands used by Tyrrelstown GAA club; (6) Deputy Gino Kenny - to discuss access to the Sativex drug here; (7) Deputy Joan Burton - to discuss the cause of ongoing traffic congestion in the north-west area of Dublin city; (8) Deputies Pearse Doherty and Pat The Cope Gallagher - to discuss the long-term residential care facilities in St Joseph's Community Hospital, Stranorlar, as well as Ramelton and Lifford community hospitals, County Donegal; (9) Deputy James Lawless - to discuss the construction of the new school building for St. Joseph's national school, Kilcock, County Kildare; (10) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to ask the Minister for Justice and Equality to discuss the allocation of gardaí to Carrigaline subdistrict, Cork; (11) Deputy Frank O'Rourke - the need for the redeployment and rebalancing of Garda resources for Kildare, given the current ratio of gardaí per head of population, to ensure optimum use of those resources to assist the public and communities in Kildare; (12) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to ask the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the actions she is taking to protect jobs at Kerry Group, Carrickmacross, County Monaghan, in view of recent media reports; (13) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss rising rents in east Cork and the need to expand the rent pressure zones; (14) Deputy Martin Ferris - the continuing lack of respite provision in County Kerry; (15) Deputy Bríd Smith - the divestment programme for schools and the recent actions of the Edmund Rice Trust; (16) Deputy Clare Daly - to discuss the shortage of primary school places in the Swords area; (17) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the significant rise in the number of children on hospital waiting lists; (18) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss with the Minister for Health the need for a plan for the future of Abbeyleix hospital, County Laois; (19) Deputies Mick Wallace and Paul Murphy - the sale of loans from Permanent TSB to vulture funds; and (20) Deputy Peadar Kirby - whether Trim Educate Together school will be expanded.

The matters raised by Deputies James Browne, Pearse Doherty and Pat The Cope Gallagher, Ruth Coppinger and Michael McGrath have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Priority Questions

Income Inequality

36. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her views on a recent ESRI report (details supplied) and in particular the high rate of deprivation being experienced by lone-parent households and persons with a disability; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8465/18]

39. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the actions she plans to take as a result of the findings of a recent ESRI report detailing high levels of persistent deprivation for persons of a working age with a disability; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8578/18]

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I raise this question in view of a recent ESRI study of 11 European countries which found a significant gap in the rate of persistent deprivation experienced by lone parents and adults with a disability, as opposed to the rate suffered by other adults. The gap in regard to lone parents is 26% in Ireland, which is the worst of the 11 countries and compares with an average of 5% to 20% elsewhere. The gap in regard to adults with disability is 14% here compared to 5% to 11% elsewhere.

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 36 and 39 together.

The research report, Poverty Dynamics of Social Risk Groups in the EU, produced by the ESRI and funded by my Department, analyses the significance of different systems of welfare regimes and their effectiveness in protecting vulnerable groups in 11 EU countries, including Ireland, over the ten-year period from 2004 to 2014. It showed that, across the 11 countries, lone parents and their families and working-age adults with a disability and their families are more at risk of material deprivation and income poverty than other groups.

The most recent data from the CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions, SILC, for 2016 show that the consistent poverty rate for lone-parent households is 24.6%, slightly down from 26.2% in 2015. There was also a fall in the basic deprivation rate for lone-parent households to 50.1% in 2016, down from 57.9% in 2015. The figures for working age people with a disability are more mixed. The basic deprivation rate fell to 46.7% in 2016, from 53.2% in 2015. The consistent poverty rate, however, increased from 22.4% in 2015 to 26.3%, which is obviously disappointing. Given the economic recovery has not only continued but, thankfully, accelerated since 2014, with unemployment down from 11.3% in 2014 to 6.2% at present, I expect and hope the SILC data for 2017 will show further reductions in poverty for all sectors of society.

It is undeniable that lone-parent households and those of working people with a disability continue to experience deprivation and consistent poverty rates which are higher than those of the general population and I categorically state that we need to sustain our efforts to support those most in need. My Department, as well as providing income supports to people with disabilities, offers a range of employment support programmes, including the wage subsidy scheme and the EmployAbility service, as well as the partial capacity benefit scheme. The Intreo service is also available to provide employment support services for people with disabilities who wish to engage with the service on a voluntary basis. This year expenditure on these programmes will amount to some €50 million. Last September the Ability programme, supported by the European Social Fund, was launched. This is a new pre-activation programme which recognises the critical importance of engaging with young people with disabilities at a time when their disability threatens to keep them out of the workforce.

It is accepted that the best way to tackle poverty among lone parents is through employment. The recently published Indecon report echoed this view and found that the changes made to the one-parent family payment scheme over the last number of years increased employment and reduced welfare dependency. It also found that the changes increased the probability of employment and higher employment income for lone parents. The report concluded that assisting lone parents to enhance their skills also needs to be seen as a key objective as low paid employment will not on its own ensure a reduction in the risk of poverty. That is why we have a mantra within the Department that when we assist and encourage people through activation, we help them find a job, find a better job and find a career and the support systems do not just stop when they get their first job.

My Department's social impact assessments of the budgets introduced since 2015 reflect the Government's continued commitment to introducing improvements for lone parents in particular. These assessments show a cumulative increase of €36.75 in the average weekly household income of employed lone parents and €33.60 for unemployed lone parents. This will be further improved when the budget 2018 measures, that is, increases in the income disregard, the primary rate and the qualified child rate, come into effect next month. The effect of these measures will see a lone parent on the one-parent family payment or jobseeker's transitional payment who is working 15 hours a week on the national minimum wage being better off by nearly €1,000 per year.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I will come back to the issue of lone parents. The Minister mentioned various measures which are in place for adults with a disability. Those measures have been in place for some time and they were certainly in place in 2015, when consistent poverty among adults with a disability rose from 14% to 22%. As the Minister indicated in her reply, it has increased again in 2015 and 2016 to 26% or 27%. Obviously, the measures in place are not working and the gap is growing. I scrutinised the budget speech and there was no reference at all to disability and the poverty gap. Has the Government specific proposals and, while a number of Departments are involved, is the Minister considering any specific initiatives within her own Department to help stop this gap from widening further?

Deputy Regina Doherty: While I am loath to contradict the Deputy, I have no choice on this occasion. Of the two programmes I am specifically referring to, one was only launched in 2017 and the pilot programme for the second was only completed a number of weeks ago, having run for 12 months during 2017. Neither of those programmes are reflected in the data we have shown. One is the Ability programme, which is leveraging European funding with regard to providing timely supports for people with disabilities, particularly young people, at a time

when they are most removed from the labour market. At the moment there is an open competition for regional and local NGOs and agencies to work with us and we have had a very high uptake on that. I look forward to rolling out the Ability programme this year.

With regard to the second programme, which the Deputy might not be aware of, only last week I launched a report on this with the Mental Health Commission. This follows a pilot project between the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the HSE, Mental Health Reform and an organisation called Genio, along with the EmployAbility services around Ireland. We introduced recruitment-employment representatives into mental health teams in four different regions. Where there are people who have difficulties, particularly on the mental health spectrum, that are barriers to accessing the marketplace, we engaged locally with the HSE mental health teams as well as the EmployAbility services and the representatives to whom I refer in order to assist such individuals obtain employment. We had an exceptional response and 33% of the applicants were able to get work. I hope that the pilot comprehensive employment strategies we have in respect of people with disabilities will be extended to other regions this year and that the Ability programme will take off.

Deputy John Brady: In 2015, 132,000 people with disabilities across the State were living in consistent poverty. The ESRI report shows clearly that in the context of 11 of our European counterparts, the gap was far greater in Ireland, approximately 10%, than elsewhere. It is clear that not enough is being done. The schemes that have been in place are not working.

The Minister referred to the new Ability programme. It is welcome. The closing date for applications has only just passed and the Minister might give us some further information on how it is working. In reality, only €10 million is being allocated to that scheme over three years. It is anticipated that only 1,000 young people with disabilities will benefit from it. That will not tackle the serious problem we have here where one in three people with disabilities are unemployed and only 17% of people with disabilities are actually employed. There are serious problems. The Ability programme is good but, at €10 million over three years, it is tokenistic and will not cut it. What is the Minister doing to address the serious concerns that arise on foot of the ESRI report?

Deputy Regina Doherty: The Deputy is incorrect. The data in the report refers to the period 2004 to 2014. The Deputy cannot say that my programmes are not working when they bear no relation to the data referred to in the ESRI report. Let us be clear about that.

I thank the Deputy for his tokenistic compliment. The Ability programme is a pilot project. I am not sure how Sinn Féin does things but we do not spend taxpayers' money rolling out something nationally until we know that it works. That is why the EmployAbility services, with Genio, the HSE and Mental Health Reform, will, budgets permitting, will roll the programme out this year. On foot of the fact that we took a punt in respect of four different areas and ensured that it was resourced and well-funded, the pilot project has been successful. We did that before using taxpayers' money to roll the programme out nationwide.

Deputy John Brady: There are many good schemes in operation including WALK PEER, which I mentioned to the Minister's predecessor several times. Year after year, the organisation that runs the scheme has to fight to retain its funding. Thankfully, its funding is in place for this year. WALK PEER is a programme that works. The Minister should replicate it.

I referred to figures from 2015 which show that 132,000 people with disabilities in this State

live in consistent poverty. The Minister will excuse me for saying that the scheme of which she spoke is tokenistic but it targets only 1,000 people with disabilities over a three-year period. For the others living with disabilities who are willing, ready and able to get back into the workforce, it is tokenistic. They need assistance from the State, not further means to disable them. That is what this seems to be. I welcome the Ability programme but it needs to be rolled out. There is a need for more funding and to target it better in order to ensure that people with disabilities can get back into the workforce if they wish.

Deputy Regina Doherty: To correct the record, the 132,000 people who are registered as having disabilities this year do not live in consistent poverty. According to the ESRI report, the poverty rate increased from 22.4% to 26.3% but, thankfully, it is far from 100%. In order to assist people with disabilities, the Department manages a range of income supports. The two to which I referred earlier are pilot projects but others are well established, including the wage subsidy scheme, the EmployAbility services, the reasonable accommodation fund, the partial capacity benefit stream and the Intreo services that are available to anybody who has either a physical or an intellectual disability and who wants to work. We are here to assist.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Dea for a final supplementary question.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: When I referred to the certain measures in place to try to close the gap, I meant those that are in place. I acknowledge the two new pilot schemes but they are not, in my view, nearly radical enough to change the trend. It rose from 15% up to 22% in 2015. In 2016, there was another increase to 26% or 27% at a time when the economy was growing rapidly.

The Minister can correct me if I am wrong, but she was recently quoted as having said that her ambition is to unwind the cuts inflicted on lone parents. Will she elaborate on this? Is she saying that she will reverse the changes made in 2012?

Deputy Regina Doherty: Yes, I would like to do that. My intentions and what I can do depend on the budgets allocated to me for next year. It is something that I think would be worthwhile. It was one of the recommendations made in the Joint Committee on Social Protection's report on lone parents. It is only fair that we give back the full disregard and I will try to increase the qualified child increases as much as I can. There is a cost associated with a child over 12 years as opposed to a lesser cost for those under 12. That is my ambition. I will fight for money from the Department of Finance this year but it will depend on all the money allocated and the various other considerations we must meet, including all the working family payments and dealing with the pensions anomaly. The latter will cost in excess of €80 million this year and every year hereafter. There are also the other normal budgetary constraints and fuel poverty. Lone parent payments are very much at the top of my list of priorities in light of the fact that the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection was unanimous in its assertion that this should be the case.

Child Maintenance Payments

37. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to proposals (details supplied) regarding the establishment of a child maintenance service; her views on such a service; if her attention has been further drawn to the positive impact this would have on lone parents and their children; and if she will make

a statement on the matter. [8577/18]

Deputy John Brady: Earlier, we touched on the ESRI report. The Minister will be well aware of the difficulties faced by lone parents and the deprivation rates among them. Last month, I published a Sinn Féin proposal to establish a statutory child maintenance service. The setting up of such a service was one of the main recommendations from the joint committee, which produced a comprehensive study on lone parents. Will the Minister consider doing this in order to lift lone parents out of consistent poverty?

Deputy Regina Doherty: I can confirm that I have received the proposals in question regarding the establishment of a child maintenance service.

The establishment of a service to assist lone parents to seek child maintenance payments would be a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, because the Family Law Acts, which place a legal obligation on parents to maintain their children, are under the remit of his Department.

In cases where the family unit has broken down, obligations regarding child maintenance continue to apply and relevant maintenance payments can be arranged either directly between the parents themselves or through supports such as the family mediation service, the Legal Aid Board and the courts. The arrangement of maintenance is, therefore, a matter between both parents, regardless of whether either is in receipt of a social welfare payment.

My Department is reviewing this complex issue of maintenance as it relates to my Department and I expect to have a paper shortly. I agreed with the Chairman of the joint committee that I would send the paper to him on its completion. When I have completed my consideration of the issues, the best way forward can be decided in consultation with the Minister for Justice and Equality.

Deputy John Brady: I am aware that the responsibility lies with the Minister's colleague but it is an issue which Deputy Doherty, as Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, must have a concern when she reads the information on the deprivation levels among lone parents in the ESRI report. We are aware of both the evidence and the studies that have been carried out. The Millar and Crosse report, the Indecon report and the Survey on Income and Living Conditions, SILC, report for 2016 show clearly that consistent poverty levels are substantially higher in lone parent families. We know for a fact that child maintenance plays a critical role in helping to lift lone parent families out of consistent poverty.

In November, when I put the question about the establishment of a child maintenance service to the Minister, she asked, "Does Deputy Brady seriously think it is the State's responsibility to chase down maintenance?" The simple answer to that is "yes". There is a responsibility on the State to chase down maintenance to help lift lone parent families out of poverty and the establishment of a statutory child maintenance service would allow that to happen. I again ask the Minister for her view as to whether it is something that would be beneficial to lone parents and whether it is something that she, as Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, would consider.

Deputy Regina Doherty: I reiterate that the State helps parents with supports such as the Family Mediation Service, the Legal Aid Board and free legal aid in co-operation with the courts where people present themselves looking to obtain maintenance.

Regardless of whether I have a view, I have already explained that it is not within my remit to change the current family law. It comes under the remit of the Department of Justice and Equality. Therefore, if there is a maintenance agency ever to be established in this country, it will be done by the Department of Justice and Equality.

I have committed to reflect on those maintenance arrangements. When I have completed those considerations and deliberations, I will have a conversation with the Minister for Justice and Equality to see how we can move forward on this issue.

Deputy John Brady: What is the scope of the review the Minister has initiated within her Department? What are the terms of reference? Will the Minister be looking at maintenance payments and the difficulties that lone parents encounter, for example, having to go through the District Court? I have spoken to many lone parents who have had to go to the courts up to 14 times and still have not received any maintenance payments. With the establishment of a child maintenance service, the non-custodial parent would be forced to pay the child maintenance directly to the lone parent and there would be no need to go through the courts system, freeing up substantial court time. If it was to be viewed from a financial perspective solely, it would save a considerable amount, for example, for the Department of Justice and Equality, in court time but, more importantly, in not having to put lone parents through that horrendous ordeal of having to go through the courts.

Many lone parents to whom I have spoken feel intimidated. They feel threatened. They feel the courts are not a place where they can go. Removing it from that setting would be beneficial. It would ensure that the non-custodial parent would pay what he is supposed to pay.

Putting a child maintenance service on a statutory footing is not abnormal in other countries.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister to respond. The Deputy has exceeded his time.

Deputy John Brady: It is something on which we have been criticised by the UN for not having in place. It is something that many organisations would like to see.

Deputy Regina Doherty: I will not say I agree with Deputy Brady because there are parts of what he stated I agree with and parts that I do not. I am trying to be clear to the Deputy in stating that it does not fall under the remit of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

On what Deputy Brady proposes, the family law legislation takes away the control of the courts and there is an obligation under the law for every parent to be responsible to his or her child. We do not need to pass another law or to establish another agency for parents to have a legal obligation to their child; they have it today.

However, I recognise that lone parents' hearts are broken going back and forth. The courts have it within their remit to put a charge against somebody's wages. It is slightly different when it comes to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection because the payments that are made from the Department are based on a certain standard of living and to start taking money from those who are only taking money in from the Department might cause difficulties. However, the laws are already there. I acknowledge and appreciate how frustrating they are and how revolving doors are working with people, but it is not within my gift to establish a maintenance agency. It does not come under the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

Tax and Social Welfare Codes

38. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to deal with the issue of bogus self-employment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8466/18]

40. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the changes she plans to implement following the publication of the report into tax and social insurance implications of intermediary employment structures and self-employment arrangements; her further plans to conduct a study to determine the number of persons who are in these arrangements due to the reliance on data based on a self-described determination in the CSO Quarterly National Household Survey in which persons may not realise they are, in fact, self-employed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8464/18]

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The Minister understands the concept of bogus self-employment. I have been approached by groups of people on many occasions - one as late as last week - who are working as employees in the normal way who were suddenly told by their employers that from the following week they would be self-employed. That has certain devastating consequences, obviously, for the employees themselves and also for the Exchequer. I am trying to ascertain what is the Government's policy on this. Is the Government aware of the extent of the problem and what proposals, if any, does it have to deal with it?

Deputy Regina Doherty: I propose to take Questions Nos. 38 and 40 together.

Bogus self-employment arises where an employer wrongly treats a worker as an independent contractor in order to avoid tax and social insurance contributions. There are already robust arrangements in place for dealing with complaints of bogus self-employment. Social welfare inspectors inspect a wide range of businesses, as part of their ongoing compliance operations. Inspections are also undertaken jointly with other agencies, including the Revenue Commissioners and Workplace Relations Commission. Where evidence of non-compliance is detected, this will be pursued.

Officials also investigate specific cases referred to my Department's scope section. This section determines employment status and the correct class of pay-related social insurance, PRSI. Where misclassification of workers as self-employed is detected, the correct status and class is determined and social insurance arrears are collected as required under the law. Under the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, there are specific offences in relation to employment contributions. On conviction, fines and-or imprisonment can ultimately be imposed.

Any worker who has concerns about his or her employment and-or PRSI status should contact my Department and the matter will be investigated. This can only happen with the co-operation of the worker.

Data from the recent CSO Quarterly National Household Survey record 312,000 individuals as self-employed in 2017, or 15% of total employment. This is consistent with the average levels of self-employment within the EU. There is no evidence of a significant change in the level of self-employment over the past 16 years, since we started collecting the data.

The classification of a worker for PRSI purposes can be complicated by the use of intermediary employment structures referred to by Deputy O'Dea. Revenue estimates that there are some 15,000 people employed using structures such as personal service companies and man-

aged service companies. I consider these figures to be reliable and have no plans for additional studies of the numbers involved.

My Department has concerns that such mechanisms may be used to reduce the amount of PRSI and tax being paid, with a subsequent loss to the Exchequer and the Social Insurance Fund. A report on the issue, prepared by officials from my Department, the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners and informed by a public consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, was published at the end of January following Cabinet approval.

The report finds that the available data does not indicate that self-employment is accounting for any significant increased share of the labour force and accordingly the perception of the level of disguised employment may be overstated. While the report indicates that intermediary arrangements can be abused to the detriment of workers and can distort the transparent and efficient operation of the labour market, it also notes that contract for service arrangements can provide flexibility - I take on board comments made previously that such flexibility exists usually is at the higher end of the scale - in many instances, for both businesses and workers where they are free to choose. It is not always the case that such flexibility exists.

The recommendations, of which there were three, are being examined in the context of the overall Social Insurance Fund. This report and the Actuarial Review of the Social Insurance Fund provide a timely and evidence-led opportunity to undertake a full review of our social insurance system and, as I hope to do later this year, to consult with stakeholders.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The Minister states that robust measures are in place to deal with this. I am certainly not aware of those robust measures and they do not seem to apply in Limerick, whatever about the rest of the country. When I asked people what did they do, somebody who approached the Revenue Commissioners was told it was a matter for the employer. As for approaching the scope section, if the scope section is to deal with all of those thousands of people, it will be overwhelmed. In any case, the Minister will find that in most cases workers are compelled to sign a piece of paper to say that they are now self-employed. There is no point in going to the scope section if one has already signed a piece of paper. They do that on pain of losing their employment. In any case, if they do not do so, they will not get the jobs at all. I disagree with the conclusions reached by the report prepared by the Departments of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and Finance. A report with which we were circularised recently by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, pointed out that in the past ten years there has been a 23% increase in the number of the self-employed working without employees. The report to which the Minister referred involved an inspection which was carried out around the country and involved interviews of 11,699 people. One in ten, the report found, was bogus self-employed, and it very specifically stated that those who carried out the interviews were convinced they were not being told the full truth. This is a serious problem. The Minister says the figures are consistent with the EU's, which may or may not be the case, but the fact that something wrong is happening in the EU is no justification for it happening at the same rate here. It is a real problem. I deal with real people who are affected by this and I am sure other Deputies have the same experience. Many of them work for subcontractors employed by the State. The money is all coming from the State. When I raise the matter with the relevant Ministers - not Deputy Doherty, but other Ministers - they just do not want to know. They say it is none of their business, "nothing to see here, move along", but it is happening and is causing real hardship. Genuine employees are being-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sorry, I took my eye off the clock.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: -----deprived of employment rights gained over many years and at the same time the Exchequer is losing money.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister. I apologise to the House.

Deputy Regina Doherty: The Department's scope insurability section is responsible for making those statutory decisions on insurability employment under the Social Welfare Act. While the Deputy might be concerned about its capacity and workload, it certainly does not have a problem looking at the instances that are being brought to its attention. The insurability decisions are based on evidence that is provided, including the report from the social welfare inspector who goes out and sees the business where appropriate, and case law from previous court judgments. I will do a public awareness campaign this year because I am quite sure a very large number of self-employed people or people who think they are mismatched within the PRSI system do not even know about scope. We have a body of work to do to let them know what it is and what it can do for them. Any worker who has concerns about his or her employment or social insurance status should contact my Department and scope will kick in and take care of the matter. As I said, the Social Welfare Act is so robust it allows us to go back and recoup social insurance contributions that should have been made from the time the employment started, whether it was disguised or not disguised. The independent scope division will make that decision.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Penrose has the first supplementary question.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I hope I get a little latitude. Bogus self-employment contracts effectively deny workers the same level of protection and entitlement their employed colleagues enjoy. I note the report commissioned by my colleague, Deputy Joan Burton, has finally been published. Bogus self-employment is a scourge of many industries, hitting the construction industry, the gig economy and the IT sector particularly hard. The figures that were postulated and arrived at in the study to which the Minister refers are difficult to believe. There is very little real information on the number of people who might be in so-called false self-employment. The report relies on CSO figures, but the CSO quarterly national household survey relies on self-reporting. This means that if people tell the CSO they are employees, that is how they are recorded. For all we know, it might be false self-employment, but they think they are employed. As Deputy O'Dea said, they sign bits of paper without knowing the details of what they are signing. The spread of these arrangements results in a loss of PRSI and tax income to the State, leaves people without entitlements and makes it very difficult for workers to bargain collectively for better terms and conditions. Of course, it suits the employers. Employers force workers into disguised self-employment arrangements and those workers are to all intents and purposes direct employees in all but name. As I said, they lose their rights as workers and their social welfare entitlements. This behaviour cheats the State out of tens of millions of euro in lost PRSI income and tax revenue, which means less money for social welfare which the Minister needs and for hospitals and schools. It is time to bring an end to this because it is rampant.

Deputy O'Dea is right: many of us in our everyday activity meet people who lose out badly. I know a code of practice was introduced in 2007 that set out criteria designed to help determine whether a worker is an employee or a genuinely self-employed contractor, but given the alarming growth in false self-employment since the code was first introduced, it is clear this initiative has not served the workers well. My colleague, Senator Gerald Nash, who is the Labour Party spokesman on social protection, is bringing forward the Protection of Employment (Measures to Counter False Self-Employment) Bill 2018. It will be introduced in the Seanad next week

and I anticipate that it will receive widespread support. We must tackle this. It is a scourge for the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and SIPTU. All the unions are concerned about it.

I will ask the Minister only one question. Will she put on record the number of cases determined by the scope section for the most recent year for which the data are available? That would be interesting. How many people in the scope section are allocated to this task and how many inquiries has it had in this regard over the past year or so?

Deputy Regina Doherty: I do not have the data the Deputy is looking for so I commit that I will come back to him with the number of cases scope has managed in recent years and the staff complement involved. I do not disagree with either Deputy. There is an issue with disguised employment in the country, but I can only go on the basis of the data I have. The numbers involved are not as large as anecdotally I had heard they were before I became Minister. Before I saw the report, I probably would have thought the numbers were far larger than they actually are. This does not matter in essence because the people who are being forced into disguised employment, whether they number 500, 5,000 or 50,000, are being mistreated by employers, so for two reasons we will closely look at the three recommendations of the report. Two of the reasons fall under the remit of the Department of Finance and one under my Department. We will look very closely at the issue because I could certainly do with the €60 million, thank you very much, and I would not have trouble spending it.

Scope does work. If I do anything this year, it will be to ensure that people know about it and know there is no need to fear it from their employer's perspective. While I know what Deputy O'Dea is saying - that if these employees rock the boat they may lose their jobs - the balance of someone being secure in his or her employment prospects and being treated well and with dignity by an employer can only be fixed if someone brings the matter to our attention.

Another matter I wish very quickly to put on the record is that we moved last year, and we continue to do so this year, to ensure that the benefits under the Social Insurance Fund that are available to employed people are extended to self-employed people. We have done likewise in respect of treatment benefits. We introduced the invalidity pension last year and we will keep going in the coming years, economy willing, to ensure everyone has equal status in the Social Insurance Fund.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are two further supplementary questions. I will take the first from Deputy Penrose.

Deputy Willie Penrose: With our Protection of Employment (Measures to Counter False Self-Employment) Bill 2018 we certainly do not want to interfere with the status of genuinely employed self-employed people or bring them into an employee framework. No one is interested in that because those thousands of people provide jobs and work extremely hard. A common misconception is that parties are free to choose whether they provide services, whether employee or self-employed, and can sign their contracts accordingly. That is codswallop. The people who are in the superior position impose their view upon the people in the lesser position. The Minister should remember that, in reality, the test of employment status is a matter of law and not determined by the label attached to the relationship by the parties. This is why in our Bill we have a number of measures which will be of help in this regard and will get down to ensuring a way to identify the relationship. It is a very important Bill and I hope it gets full support. The Minister talks about getting the income disregard for lone parents sorted out, the pension anomalies and all the other anomalies that were created after the 2012 changes. These must be

tackled, and fair play to the Minister for going about tackling them. She could do with money and it is being lost as a result of bogus self-employment. I support these projects in every way and would like to be allocated them and gather the information from people. It is about time we deal with this, but there are rogue employers out there fooling decent employees into feeling that there is no choice. They are put on a certain contract and that is what they have to take: otherwise, it is “down the road with you” and there is someone else to take the person’s place.

Deputy Regina Doherty: Again, I do not disagree with what the Deputy has said. I have not seen Senator Nash’s Bill. I look forward to having a look at it, engaging with it-----

Deputy Willie Penrose: I know the Minister will support it next week.

Deputy Regina Doherty: -----and, I hope, if I can, supporting it. Ultimately, what we need to do, and I think what we all want to do, is to ensure that those who feel they are being marginalised or put in vulnerable positions by being made misread or misstate their employment status feel they have recourse to someone. Again, if I have to strengthen the scope division, we will do so, but I genuinely do not think I need to do so. What I need to do is tell people it is there and what it can do for them and allow people to come along with their inspectors to tackle these people who are taking advantage of others because of their strength and might. This will ensure that all employees are treated with dignity and respect.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O’Dea has the final supplementary question.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: I take the Minister’s point but, as Deputy Penrose said, most people have no choice. If one signs a piece of paper under duress stating that one is self-employed because one does not get the job otherwise, there is not much good going to the scope section afterwards. That is the problem. Something must be done on a broader scale to prevent employers from engaging in this abuse - and it is an abuse. In the latter part of the Minister’s reply she mentioned the extension of certain benefits to the self-employed. She will be aware of a fairly detailed survey of the self-employed which stated they would be prepared to increase their PRSI contributions in return for further benefits, such as jobseeker’s benefit, being extended to them. If employers are willing to pay more, it disincentivises the idea of self-employment because it narrows the gap between what they save and what they get, with 14.75% as opposed to 4.75%. If it were increased, the gap would be smaller. If the self-employed are willing to pay for this themselves, would that not be a better idea than putting it on the taxpayers?

Deputy Regina Doherty: The Deputy has raised two separate issues. Let me be very clear, in case anybody thinks I am soft on this, bogus self-employment or disguised employment involves the wilful evasion of income tax, PRSI and social insurance liabilities and it will not be tolerated. There are mechanisms in place. I hear what the Deputy is saying about people not being given a choice but they have a choice to report it thereafter. If we do not know about it, we cannot inspect; if we cannot inspect we cannot catch people and if we cannot catch people we cannot fine them and put them in prison. We want to send out a clear message that for us to tackle the small amount of people who are taking the Mick, we need to be told about it. When we do the advertising campaign on scope we will tell people loudly and clearly. I will make sure we will monitor the increase in the number of reports coming into scope because if there is not an increase, we are definitely doing something wrong.

While I do want to extend to self-employed people all the benefits that employed people currently have, I absolutely do not want to increase the money self-employed people pay. I

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want to make sure there is an equilibrium and balance between what an employee pays and what a self-employed person pays and that it is the same. If anybody is going to pay the extra it is the people who only have one contract with one person, and this is the responsibility of the Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Finance. Let us look at that as being a contract tax or a contract self-employment tax, as opposed to taking more money from self-employed people who have had the gumption to provide employment for themselves.

Question No. 39 answered with Question No. 36.

Question No. 40 answered with Question No. 38.

Other Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies Niamh Smyth and Bríd Smith have sent apologies in respect of Questions Nos. 41 and 42, respectively.

Questions Nos. 41 and 42 replied to with Written Answers.

Jobseeker's Payments

43. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of the report into the impact of the reduced jobseeker's payment rates for jobseekers aged 18 to 25 years, further to the commitment in the Pathways to Work 2016-2020 strategy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8344/18]

Deputy John Brady: I want to ask about the status of a report the Government committed to on the cuts to jobseeker's payments for young unemployed people. That report was committed to under the Pathways to Work 2016-2020 strategy. We have yet to see the report. Will the Minister give us an update on it?

Deputy Regina Doherty: The main social welfare schemes for people who are unemployed are jobseeker's allowance and benefit schemes which provide income support for people who have lost work and are unable to find alternative employment for a short time. The 2018 Estimates for the Department provide for expenditure this year on these jobseeker's schemes of €2.17 billion.

Lower weekly rates for younger jobseeker's allowance recipients were introduced to protect young people from welfare dependency by providing them with a very strong financial incentive to engage in education or training or to take up employment if they were lucky enough to be able to get a job. Where young jobseekers participate on an education or training programme, they receive the higher weekly payment of €193, which is the maximum personal rate for jobseeker's allowance. This will increase to €198 from 26 March 2018, having fully given the €5 increase to young people under 25.

The CSO's January 2018 monthly unemployment report shows that the seasonally adjusted youth unemployment rate, that is, the unemployment rate for people aged between 15 and 24 years, was 13.7%. This represents a significant decrease of four and half percentage points from the rate of over 18% we recorded in January last year, so we definitely are going in the

right direction.

The National University of Ireland, Maynooth is examining the effectiveness of the reduced rates in encouraging young jobseekers to avail of education, training, employment programmes or opportunities or both. While my Department did not commission this research, we have given the university access to the data from the jobseeker's longitudinal database. Under Pathways to Work 2016-2020, my Department committed to review and report on the impact of the reduced payment rates for jobseekers aged between 18 and 25. This review will be finalised shortly but we will take into account the recent results of the research from Maynooth.

I am keen to ensure the Department identifies effective measures to encourage and support young people in finding and securing sustainable jobs. The best way to do this is through engagement processes and by incentivising young people to avail of education and training, thereby enhancing their employment prospects.

Deputy John Brady: As the Minister is aware, the cuts to jobseeker's payments for young unemployed people were started in 2009 by the then Government comprising Fianna Fáil and the Green Party. It was eagerly pursued by the Minister's party, Fine Gael, and has continued until now. It is a discriminatory cut, and this has been echoed by many organisations, including the National Youth Council of Ireland, which has stated quite clearly it is discriminatory. Our young people aged between 18 and 24 are on what will be €107.70 on 26 March and our 25 year olds have to live on €152.80. This is not only discriminatory but completely unfair. It does not take into account the realities. It puts every young person in the same category, assuming everyone is living at home and relying on family support. The Minister's predecessor said quite clearly that he could not understand how our young people cannot find jobs when people can get off planes and find a job immediately. The reality is no young person wants to be unemployed. These cuts are discriminatory. We have been promised this report for a considerable time. Will the Minister give us a definitive timeframe as to when we will finally see it?

Deputy Regina Doherty: The only category we put all young people in is the fact they are all aged between 18 and 25. There is no basis for thinking they all live at home, that they all have green hair or that they all have four ears. The only category they are in is they are aged between 18 and 25. The targeted measure, aimed at protecting young people from welfare dependency, is to incentivise them to avail of the education and training opportunities that are there in order that they can improve their chances of getting a full-time and sustainable job. I do not see what is wrong with this. I cannot really understand why the Deputy thinks asking young people to train and re-skill themselves is a problem. To show the Deputy it is not prescriptive and that we genuinely do not think they are all the same, there are rates of payment that can be achieved and a full rate of payment for people aged under 26, such as anybody who has a qualified child or is transferring from jobseeker's allowance immediately after exhausting their benefits. There are a number of categories in which people between the ages of 18 and 25 can avail of a full payment, but the absolute easiest way for anybody in that category who is not lucky enough to have a job, that is, the 13% of our young people who are still looking for work, to avail of the €198 per week from 26 March is to go on a training course, go back to education or engage with the Intreo services so we can help them to find a full-time and sustainable job.

Deputy John Brady: The reality, and many organisations have said it, is the discriminatory cuts over which the Minister is presiding are having an impact on young people. Many homeless organisations state they are especially concerned about the effect the cuts may be having on young people. They state it is exacerbating the homeless situation for young people. It is

having many negative consequences across the board. Once the report is finally published - the Minister still has not answered the question on when this long-anticipated report will finally be published - we will see the impact it is having on our young people. We know how the discriminatory cuts impact on young people. No young person wants to be sitting at home unemployed. They want to be out there and upskilling. The reality is many young people have the skills, knowledge and enthusiasm to get back into the workforce but they are being precluded from doing so. When will the report be published and when will the Minister bring an end to the discriminatory cuts facing our young unemployed people?

Deputy Regina Doherty: Instead of looking at the glass half empty, as the Deputy seems to be able to do very well, why does he not look at the reality that this time last year, 18% of our young people were unemployed while today, only 13% are unemployed? This means 5% of the people who have engaged over the past year with JobPath, community employment, jobs clubs, local employment services and Tús have managed to get full-time work. We now have 26,000 people under the age of 26 on jobseeker's allowance and we will not stop until we have none.

5 o'clock

We will do that by interacting with them to make sure that they receive training, so that their skills will match the jobs that are there. We all know that there are jobs there. We all know that we are coming very close to full employment. The doors of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation are being beaten down at present with requests to get people in from foreign countries to come in and take up the jobs that are here. As such, I am not going to stop. We are not going to increase dependency on welfare for anybody under the age of 26. We are far more ambitious for young people in this country than Deputy Brady seems to be.

Social Welfare Benefits Data

44. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the uptake to date of treatment benefits which were recently extended to the self-employed; her plans to extend additional benefits to the self-employed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8402/18]

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I am delighted to get an opportunity to ask a question of the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty. Can she give me an update on the treatment benefits, which she recently extended to the self-employed? Can she indicate what additional benefits she plans to extend to the self-employed? As a former self-employed person, I believe the self-employed were neglected in recent years and am delighted to see a Minister who will do something at long last.

Deputy Regina Doherty: I thank the Deputy for his question. The treatment benefit scheme was made available to self-employed contributors for the first time from 27 March 2017. The benefits available at that time, which were free dental and optical exams and a contribution towards hearing aids, were extended to self-employed people. Between self-employed contributors and their dependent spouses, those changes have added 450,000 customers to the scheme, which I think is absolutely deadly.

The additional optical and dental treatments were introduced at the end of October 2017. We have seen a surge in uptake from the customers, with the new dental cleaning and supply or

repair of glasses being particularly popular. Consequently, more than 330,000 claims have been processed and paid in the three months from November 2017 to January 2018. This represents a fourfold increase on the same period a year ago.

It is not possible to identify treatment benefit claims from the self-employed without significant analysis and development work, as the Department does not record this information under separate pay-related social insurance, PRSI, classes. We do not ask when a service use appears whether he or she is employed or self-employed. However, the increase in claim numbers around the period of extending these benefits is a good indicator of the interest in them from the self-employed community and their spouses.

Entitlement to invalidity pension was also extended to the self-employed from December 2017.

The actuarial review of the Social Insurance Fund, which I published in October 2017, will play an important role in informing the overall debate on policy developments on the Social Insurance Fund, including its financial sustainability and the consideration of extending benefits for workers generally, including to the self-employed. The actuarial review concluded that self-employed PRSI contributors already get excellent value for money and provided costings for the extension of additional benefits to self-employed people.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister for her reply. I must agree with her that it is very important that these treatments are given to the self-employed, especially the optical and dental services. I also believe they have been extended to their spouses and partners. It is great that approximately 450,000 self-employed people will benefit from this. As has been said, this country was on its hands and knees from 2007 and onwards. The self-employed, owners of small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs, and entrepreneurs are the people who gave a big hand in getting the country back on its feet.

The self-employed should be entitled to similar, if not the same, benefits as full-time employees working to pay their PRSI. To me, it is a brave person who gets up in the morning, goes to the bank, gets a loan and starts his or her own business. These people must be looked after.

Deputy Regina Doherty: I agree with the Deputy. A working group was set up in my Department to examine and develop a benefits scheme for the self-employed who become unemployed. The group has now finished its work. I am specifically referring to jobseeker's allowance and jobseeker's benefit, which are probably the schemes that self-employed people tell us most often that they would love to access, from a security perspective. As the Deputy notes, they go to work every day, and they have had the gumption and initiative to set themselves up in work and to provide employment for other people. The least the State can do is provide them with the security blanket of knowing that if they are sick they have a minimum basic income for that period.

The group that we established has now finished its work. We are currently completing a report, which I hope will be available shortly, and then I will examine and consider the report's context. Again however, it must be in line with the growing economy. It depends on how much funding is available and on the review of the Social Insurance Fund. Ultimately the aim of this partnership Government is to make sure that we extend all of the employment benefits that are available to employees to self-employed people. We will not stop continuing to extend them.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister very much. As a self-employed person

myself, I started my own business in 1994. I remember sitting down with my wife at night-time and the decision to go into the bank to hand over the deeds of my house as a guarantee that, whatever money it gave me, at least it would be repaid. It is very important that we give the self-employed jobseeker's allowances and benefits. I refer again to the self-employed, SMEs and entrepreneurs. I know a lot of people who are afraid to give a commitment to start their own business. I remember going to night classes years ago, spending a lot of money to learn what it would take to set up my own business. Can the Minister give us any indication of when she thinks that the self-employed might get their jobseeker's allowances and jobseeker's benefits? A lot of people who would like to take a chance but if one is a family man, it is not only oneself one has to think about, it is also one's family.

Deputy Regina Doherty: This is a twofold system. All of the supports, encouragement and financial assistance to help people to establish their own businesses are available from the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. They are growing, and given that more people have started to establish their own businesses, we can see that confidence is returning. However, Deputy Fitzpatrick is right. In our Department, which is concerned with income support, we want to fill the gap so that a self-employed person who is ill can avail of the security blanket of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. I am not in a position to tell the Deputy when this gap will be closed. If I won the lotto tomorrow, we might do it much sooner than we will be able to. It is very much dependent on the growth in the economy. The economy is in a good place at the moment and if those trajectories keep going in the right direction, I anticipate that we will be able to do it within the lifetime of this Government, assuming that we have a full term. However, we are not going to stop until we extend to the self-employed community the full spectrum of supports that are available from my Department, whether they are treatment benefits or any of the schemes that are available to employees.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have received an apology from Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett.

Question No. 45 replied to with Written Answers.

Departmental Priorities

46. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the policy changes she plans to pursue in 2018; her priorities in view of the publication of the social impact assessment of budget 2018; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8346/18]

Deputy Willie Penrose: My question refers to a study which came out earlier in the month. It is similar to the equality budgeting strategy. I note that the social impact assessment of the welfare and tax measures in the 2018 budget was published utilising the simulating welfare and income tax changes, SWITCH, model developed by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, which I recall being introduced some weeks ago. The results indicate and encompass the impact of the budget changes. I would be grateful if the Minister could outline whether areas were identified in that study that would incline the Government to take alternative pathways in preparation for the 2019 budget or to use the study as a kind of floor to allow the incorporation of alternative views in the next budget.

Deputy Regina Doherty: Since my appointment as Minister for Employment Affairs and

Social Protection in June, I have been clear in outlining that my priorities include children living in consistent poverty, working families including lone parents and people on fixed incomes. I am very pleased about the positive policy developments impacting on all of these areas that are coming into effect this year, as outlined in this year's budget. From the end of March, the maximum weekly rates of social welfare payments for all social welfare recipients will increase by €5 per week, with proportionate increases for those on reduced rates and for qualified adults. This delivers on the programme for Government's commitment to increase the weekly rates of payment for pensioners, people with disabilities and our much-valued carers.

There are also specific measures benefitting low-income families with children. The qualified child increase will increase by €2 per week, which is the first increase in this payment since 2010. This targeted increase will assist families with the most financial need. In addition the income thresholds of the working family payment will increase by €10 per week for families with up to three children, benefitting low-income working families. The income disregard for the one-parent family and jobseeker's transitional payments will increase to €130 per week. This means that lone parents can keep more of their own earnings from employment without it impacting their income support from the State. These and the other budget measures and policy improvements work to ensure that everyone in Irish society can feel the benefits of our growing and recovering economy.

The social impact assessment carried out by my Department, using the ESRI's tax and benefits microsimulation model, SWITCH, confirms that budget 2018 succeeds in its goal for everyone to benefit from the recovery. The assessment confirms the importance of social welfare measures in ensuring that budget packages are progressive and benefit those who need the most support.

Deputy Willie Penrose: Indeed, the assessment supports the implementation of the national social target for poverty reduction and reducing consistent poverty from 4% to 2% or thereabouts in 2020. It will take significant funding to achieve that and to improve living standards. Social transfers and taxes have a significant role in that, which we support. I also support the Minister's priorities regarding lone parents and jobseeker's transitional payments, and I subscribe to the restoration of the income disregard for one-parent families, which facilitates a return to employment or the continuation of employment and opportunities in that regard.

I have always raised the issue of carers. I wrote a report on this issue, of which I am proud. The Minister has continued what various Ministers have done over the years. Carers are just about recognised, but they are poorly treated. I filled in forms for the son of an 89 year old blind woman the other day. He does a little farming. I would win the lottery or get a camel through the eye of a needle quicker. He is allowed to farm for 15 hours as a carer. The Department will come back with a multiplicity of questions about this and I will get angry. The man looks after his mother day and night and he does an hour or two a day with the cattle, giving them fodder and so on. Sometimes the questions the Minister's officials come back with regarding applications would stretch incredulity. I have a lot of knowledge about agriculture but some of them do not know much.

Deputy Regina Doherty: Given that our Department is involved in income support, all the measures and the means test criteria that we go through from one scheme to the next have to be adhered to, but I totally recognise and agree with what the Deputy said. If we were starting with a blank page again, we would value and recognise from a monetary perspective the care that is being given by all our carers who are probably, and not to be trite about it, unsung heroes.

I am half apologising but carer's allowance is treated as an income support by our Department and it has to be adjudicated on in the same way as any other payment that is given to support somebody's income. I wish that was not the way but I genuinely acknowledge that the country probably could not afford to pay for the care that is being given. We, therefore, need to find other ways to recognise the huge contribution that is made by our carers. Fully restoring the respite care grant was a start and I hope that will be increased and extended. The introduction of the 20-year credit towards a pension for those caring for a child or an adult with intellectual or physical disabilities might go some way to recognising the valuable contribution they make. We cannot ever fully repay the carers of our society for what they do.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I acknowledge the improvements that have been made and those to which the Minister is committed. I have always acknowledged her efforts in that regard. I look forward to being pleasantly surprised if this application goes straight through the system. I know there has to be an assessment and an adjudication but if this 89 year old woman was in a nursing home, it would cost €950 a week. The few peanuts her son will get will amount to €220 a week. If that is divided by the number of hours he does, he will earn €2.20 an hour. He has to work hard and, for example, he reads the newspaper to his mother every night. I get animated about this issue. The Minister is correct that carers are unsung heroes. There are hundreds of thousands throughout the country and they are worth €6 billion to the economy. If we did not have them, how many hospital and nursing home places would we have to find? Without the people of Ireland, we would be on our face. The Minister recognises that; I know her family background and I know she is committed to this issue. She should try to find a few shillings. That is why the Labour Party is going after rogue self-employment. If we get that €60 million and give it straight to carers, the Minister will have done a great job.

Deputy Regina Doherty: I cannot follow that. I agree with everything the Deputy said.

Public Services Card Authentication

47. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of persons who have been refused access to social protection payments for not having a public services card, PSC; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8407/18]

Deputy John Curran: Last Thursday week, the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection began to examine issues relating to the public services card, PSC. During the meeting, we were told about a specific case of a lady whose pension had been refused for non-production of a card. How common is that practice? How many people have been refused access to social protection entitlements for not producing this card and how were those issues resolved?

Deputy Regina Doherty: Nobody has been refused a payment for failure to produce a PSC. There is no legal basis for the card. People are asked to come in to identify themselves under the SAFE 2 authentication process to a standard that is acceptable to the Minister under the law. In the case to which the Deputy referred, the client had not gone through the SAFE process; it had nothing do with the PSC.

The Deputy will appreciate that my Department needs to verify the identity of our customers to a substantial level of assurance to ensure that they are who they claim to be, that they are not being impersonated, that they are not claiming services or payment in another identity,

to minimise the need for them to prove their identity over and over again, and to provide them with access to an increasing range of online public services, thus making interaction with the State easier. The SAFE 2 identity verification standard agreed by the then Government in 2005 provides that substantial level of assurance and the requirement for it is provided for under section 247C of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, as amended, in respect of customers of my Department. Once customers complete a SAFE 2 identity verification process successfully, they may be issued with a PSC as a physical token of having gone through that process. Nobody will make them take the card. If they do not want it, they do not have to take it. The Department does not collect data on the number of individuals who currently, or who, at any point in time, have had a payment stopped by reason of failing to complete the SAFE 2 registration process because the data is fluid in nature.

For example, a considerable number of customers who have a payment or entitlement suspended or stopped subsequently decide to complete the SAFE 2 process and have their payment or entitlement reinstated. The decision to stop a payment is never made lightly or quickly. However, where a customer does not “satisfy the Minister in relation to identity” as per the legal requirement, a payment can be disqualified. In advance of any such disqualification, the Department makes every effort to engage with the customer to explain the legal basis for the SAFE 2 identity verification process and the consequences of potential disqualification. Where a payment has been disqualified and customers subsequently successfully completes the SAFE 2 registration process, their payment will be reinstated by the Department, assuming they meet all the relevant qualifying criteria for that payment. I hope that clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Deputy John Curran: It clarifies the Department’s point of view but it does not provide clarity from our point of view because of the number of people who have the card. The pensioner to whom I referred was not refused. She had her payments withdrawn. While the Minister rightly said this was done to satisfy SAFE 2 rather than a requirement to produce the card, there is not much difference because the information provided under SAFE 2 leads to the creation of the card. The Irish Council for Civil Liberties said that there were a number of cases of people who had been refused payment. Subsequently, they may have come back into payment but the purpose of tabling the question was to establish how many have been refused by the Department for failing to meet the SAFE 2 requirement. The Minister said this is done “to satisfy the Minister as to their identity”. Is she saying a driver’s licence or a valid passport, which is internationally recognised, will not satisfy her and SAFE 2 is the only requirement that will?

Deputy Regina Doherty: It is not me personally.

Deputy John Curran: She is the Minister.

Deputy Regina Doherty: On the basis that we spend billions of euros of taxpayers’ money, the Minister and Government decided in 2005 that we needed to have a process to ensure the money went to the people entitled to it. That SAFE 2 process was ratified in 2005 by the then Government and became law in 2011.

I hate talking about particular people but the person the Deputy refers to was not refused and their payment was not ceased because they did not have a PSC. The payment was ceased because despite numerous attempts to ask that particular person to come in and identify themselves, they did not want to. The law requires that people prove themselves to a level of SAFE 2 identity authentication. That person, for whatever reason, did not feel comfortable doing so. I am happy to say that was resolved and the money was reinstated, and indeed backdated.

There is no conspiracy here. I know some people would like to see a conspiracy. What we need to ensure is that taxpayers' money, generated off the back of everybody's taxes, is sent and directly given to the people entitled to receive it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister must conclude. I call Deputy John Brady.

Deputy Regina Doherty: The only way we can do that is to make sure people are who they say they are.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am trying to get in as many Members as possible. Deputy Brady may ask a final supplementary.

Deputy John Curran: I am Deputy Curran.

Deputy John Brady: You would not find me over on those benches.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: One never knows.

Deputy John Curran: I am not suggesting a conspiracy and I very much appreciate that it is crucial that a person's identity be established to the satisfaction of everyone to ensure there is not fraudulent misappropriation of payments. I understand that fully.

The Minister spoke in detail about this case. We were trying to get a sense of how many other people were like this and I asked another question which the Minister did not answer very directly. The Minister spoke about the 2005 Act. That Act has been amended 35 times. It is quite a complex issue for someone to follow because of all the amendments. Is it possible within the Department to identify those people who have either been refused or had payments stopped pending SAFE 2, although I understand they produced other documents such as passports? The Minister did not say whether passports would satisfy the identity issue for the Minister or the Department.

Deputy Regina Doherty: The passport was probably produced under SAFE 1, which was a different level of identity authentication. We have moved to SAFE 2 and a product given under SAFE 1 is not suitable for something that is required to produce an identity reassurance under SAFE 2. I did not make the law. It just is the law and it makes perfect sense given the number of people we have uncovered who are using numerous identities. We have found out since the introduction of this process that there are people claiming for things under different names.

The simple premise behind what we are trying to do is to ensure that taxpayers' money goes to the people entitled to receive it, that they are not getting more than one payment, and that they are getting only the payment to which they are entitled. Nobody has had a payment taken away because they did not have a PSC. People are invited to identify themselves under the SAFE 2 process and if they refuse for a prolonged period, we have to assume either they have left the country or have passed away. There can be a variety of reasons. There have not been very many cases. I do not have the data today. We do not keep it because it is fluid. Normally, as soon as the payment is stopped, the person rings to ask what has happened, is invited in and the payment is reinstated and backdated.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister needs to watch the clock.

Deputy Regina Doherty: We need to make sure taxpayers' money is going to the people who are entitled to get it.

Fuel Allowance Payments

49. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to review the rates of payment and the periods of time for which the fuel allowance is paid by her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8342/18]

Deputy John Brady: What are the Minister's intentions to review the payments of the fuel allowance and their duration? When we debated the Social Welfare Act 2017 I tabled an amendment to ensure she would carry out a review and use the information with a view to potentially extending or increasing the payment.

Deputy Regina Doherty: The fuel allowance is a targeted payment of €22.50 per week, paid for the duration of the fuel season from October to April, and over 338,000 low income households benefit from this allowance, at an estimated cost of €227 million in 2018. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs, not to pay their full energy costs. One allowance is paid per household representing a contribution towards the energy costs of a household; it is not intended to meet those costs in full. In October 2017, I introduced the option for qualified households to receive their fuel allowance payment in two lump sums, as opposed to weekly, in October and in January. This allows people to buy fuel in bulk and potentially avail of special offers or discounts on the purchase of the particular fuel that meets their specific needs. In budget 2018, I increased the duration of the fuel allowance season by only one week - I would like to have done more - to 27 weeks. This is longer than the winter period in Ireland, and provides assistance during what are largely colder weeks when heating costs are expected to be at their highest.

Any changes to the scheme, in terms of the rate of payment or the duration of the fuel allowance season, would have to be considered in the overall policy and budgetary context for 2019.

Deputy John Brady: There are strong links between low income unemployed people and fuel poverty. Single person households, lone parents and older people are more susceptible to fuel poverty. It is estimated that a colossal 28% of homes across the State are experiencing fuel poverty of one degree or another. This is the responsibility of several Departments but specifically the Minister's Department. She touched on the fact that it administers the fuel allowance. It was unfortunately cut from 32 weeks to 26 weeks in 2012. It is back up now, thankfully, to 27 weeks. The payment rate, €22.50 per week, does not go far enough because of the increase in fuel costs. Last year, electricity and gas costs went up by 5%. The cost of bottled gas has gone up colossally. Home heating oil has also gone up by 13%. The fuel allowance payment would go a considerable way to lift people out of fuel poverty so that they are not afraid to turn on their home heating, be it oil or gas. The Minister indicated that there would be a review. Will she outline what that review will entail?

Deputy Regina Doherty: The Deputy is almost asking me what I will have for my dinner next Tuesday and I do not know what I will have for my dinner tonight. I cannot tell him what will happen in the context of budget conversations because they have not started. I know he is as keen as I am to get this sorted and have a substantial effect on the households he is talking about, but he also knows I want to do that too. He will have to be patient. It is only February and the next budget negotiations will not start until next September. Other payments are

available, such as a special heating supplement to assist those who in certain circumstances have special heating needs. There is also the exceptional needs payment where a person with exceptional needs can go weekly to the local social welfare or Intreo office and be looked after.

Income is only part of the answer to fuel poverty. The best way to tackle it in the long term is to make sure we have energy efficient homes with proper household insulation. We will make sure that schemes such as the warmer homes scheme, operated by Sustainable Energy Ireland, SEI, are rolled out to the entire country and that we provide grants and supports to make sure it costs people less to heat their homes, and that they are not daily portioning out their bags of coal, as described to us all. We need to make sure in the round that we give enough money to buy it and to make it less expensive to heat homes.

Deputy John Brady: I am not asking the Minister to get into the specifics of budget 2019 but we need to be realistic. The payment does not go far enough. In 2010, a 40 kg bag of coal cost in the region of €13.50 and that now stands at €20 or thereabouts. A bale of briquettes was approximately €2.99 and now it costs approximately €4.80. Energy costs have gone up considerably. I agree that retrofitting homes needs to happen but it is not happening quickly enough for many of the families we are talking about. The fuel allowance payment is a very targeted measure that can be used. The Minister indicated previously that there would be a conversation within the Department to have a look at the payments and the length of time involved. Will she clarify what it is she is looking at in that regard? I am not looking for information on what kind of internal conversations are going on about budget 2019. I am trying to discover what analysis is being carried out now.

Deputy Regina Doherty: At the risk of repeating myself, I must reiterate that it is an allowance and that it is not supposed to pay for people's entire energy costs. I do not want to be smart but I am only working on the project at the moment. When I am finished working on it and examining the effects of fuel poverty on certain families in Ireland, I will then be better armed to know how I can alleviate that. I am not sure exactly what Deputy Brady wants me to say. Does he want to know exactly the meetings I am having next Tuesday? I am sorry. I am being facetious. I should not be so disrespectful. I am examining the issue and conducting my own research. We will input that research into policy decision-making when we come to negotiate the budget for next year. That may result in changes. However, changes may not be necessary because other Departments may be taking measures.

As I have already said, it is not our responsibility to provide money to pay for people's entire energy costs. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection provides income supports. I have just listed a range of those supports. The Department also increased the living alone allowance and the telephone allowance. We are acknowledging that people who live on their own find it more difficult with only a fixed income coming into the house. We acknowledge and respect the fact that they have the same outgoings. It may not be 100% but they have a lot of the same outlays as households with two or three people.

Questions Nos. 50 and 51 replied to with Written Answers.

Public Services Card

52. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the public services card is mandatory or compulsory; and her views on whether elderly

persons and other persons depending on social welfare payments should have their payments terminated for not agreeing to accept the card. [8306/18]

Deputy Joan Collins: My question is a follow up to that posed by Deputy Curran. I do not know why the questions were not grouped. I met a lady last week who said she had asked for legal direction as to why she had to go through the process of getting a public services card. She had proof of identity, she was able to produce her passport and her marriage certificate and she did not get her payment. There has to be some clarity regarding this process. People do not understand exactly what it is they are required to do.

Deputy Regina Doherty: It is not mandatory or compulsory for anybody in the State to have a public services card. It is not mandatory or compulsory for one person to have a card.

It has, however, always been necessary for people using high-value or personalised public services, which are now considered to be online public services, to be able to prove their identity. In order to ensure that services are provided to the right person and to support efficient service delivery, a growing number of public service providers, including my Department, require that proof of identity is underpinned by the SAFE 2 identity verification standard. This standard verifies identity to a substantial level of assurance and is the most robust identity verification in Ireland today. The requirement for this level of identity verification is provided for at section 247C of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, as amended, in respect of customers of my Department.

The Department needs to verify the identity of customers to a substantial level of assurance to ensure that they are who they claim to be, to ensure that they are not being impersonated by anybody else, to ensure that they are not claiming services or payment in another identity and to minimise the need for them to prove their identity over and over again when they interact with other parts of government or service providers. This verification also provides the customer with access to an increasing range of online public services without he or she having to physically go and provide paperwork to show his or her proof of identity.

For the most part, the SAFE 2 registration process is very easy and straightforward and simply verifies the identity information the public service already has for a person. It is a different level of identity verification than SAFE 1, the level at which some of the documents referred to by Deputy Joan Collins were administered and issued. At the end of the process, if a person wants a public services card, we will print it and send it in the post. If, however, he or she does not want a card, nobody will make him or her have it.

Deputy Joan Collins: There is a contradiction here. If a person does not provide the necessary SAFE 2 level identification - not the SAFE 1 level - then that person does not have a public services card. Is the SAFE 2 level saying that a person has to have a public services card? Will the Minister clarify if a person could use his or her passport or driver's licence? I shall give an example. The number of services for which a person must have the public services card is growing. These services include social welfare payments, child benefit, school transport, treatment benefits, driving licence applications, age verification, school grant appeals and online health and Revenue portals. The next phase of development is coming in March. I do not have a public services card and I do not want one. I have my passport, which has always been a valid document for identification purposes to access these services. Is the Minister saying that the next phase, which is SAFE 2 level, will deprive people such as me, or an old age pensioner who does not want the card, access to those services?

Deputy Regina Doherty: I have a habit of making things more confusing than they were in the first place, so I apologise. There is no requirement to have a public services card. It is only a by-product and people are only given cards to prove that they have undergone the SAFE 2 process and passed. If a person does not want a card, nobody will make him or her get it. Nobody can ever ask him or her for the card and there is no legal basis for a person being asked for the card. If a person wants the card, brings it home and puts it in a drawer and it never sees the light of day again, then this is game ball. If a person does not want the card, then we will not print or make a card for that individual. It is, however, underpinned by law that a person has to undergo the SAFE 2 process. SAFE 2 is a more robust method of proving a person's identity than SAFE 1. When the Deputy obtained her passport, she would have been adjudicated under the SAFE 1 process, but we now have a more robust mechanism to ensure that Joan Collins is Joan Collins. This is called SAFE 2. It means that a person comes in with the required documentation and it allows us to take his or her photograph and run it through the system to make sure that nobody else is using the same identity. It is a different and more secure level of verifying a person's identity. When a person is invited to go through the SAFE 2 process, he or she is obliged, under the law, to do so. The letter to come in is sent out and the person will not be cut off after 20 minutes. We will send another letter and another. We will try repeatedly to encourage people. There are many people who get the letters and just put them in the bin. The identity verification is about the process, not the card.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can I make a suggestion? If Deputy Joan Collins will forfeit her second supplementary question on this matter, I can take her next question with one supplementary question. That is if she so wishes. She has been here all day.

Deputy Joan Collins: Yes, I will. It follows on from this question.

Questions Nos. 53 and 54 replied to with Written Answers.

Public Services Card Data

55. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if it is a legal requirement to accept a public services card if a card is needed to legally access some services; if the single customer view can be legally used for data sharing; if so, the legislation in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8338/18]

Deputy Regina Doherty: The public services card is simply the token that proves that a person, Joan Collins for example, has completed the SAFE 2 level process and that she is Joan Collins. The card is only a by-product or a token of having gone through that standard. There are 50 public bodies - or their agents - detailed and listed in the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, as amended, that can ask a person for the public services card. This is mostly so they can do business with the public over the phone or online. If Deputy Joan Collins has public services card No. 123456 and if she quotes her number to SUSI, for example, during a telephone conversation, SUSI will know who she is because it has access to the dataset which shows that Joan Collins has undergone the SAFE 2 process and that there is no need to ask her for any further identification, such as a driving licence, a public services card, a passport or an ESB bill. None of that will be required because we will already know that Joan Collins is who she says she is and then the SUSI application can be processed. When we are assured of a person's identity by means of SAFE 2, it allows access to a whole range of services offered by the 50 public bodies and their agents. This makes dealing with Government easier than it used to be.

Deputy Joan Collins: With respect to the Minister, she is saying that the public services card, PSC, is going to become the predominant identification for accessing public services and beyond. I was talking to a young lad recently who wanted to apply for a driver's licence. He was told that he had to have a PSC. That means that there is a requirement for a PSC in that contradictory sense which the Minister has used, that is, that it is compulsory but not mandatory.

Deputy Regina Doherty: It is a requirement.

Deputy Joan Collins: It confuses the issue. There is huge concern that this is a sneaky way around introducing a national identification card. A similar process happened in Britain. They had a card called the entitlements card, which sounds very much like the PSC which was introduced here in 2005. The point was raised that additions have been made to that 2005 legislation 35 times, so many people do not know where they stand under it. If we are going to bring in a national identity card we should have that debate. If I go to get a driver's licence in two years' time and am told that I have to have a PSC to prove my identity, then the card is mandatory.

Deputy Regina Doherty: I have defended the PSC, I have said that it is not an identity card and I have listed all the reasons as to why it is not, including that nobody can ask a person for it. One can never be walking down the road and be stopped by someone demanding that one show one's PSC. Nobody has the authority to ask a person for their PSC. The only thing that bodies have the authority to do is to allow one to offer it in order to be able to access public services, particularly online public services. I minced some words - compulsory, mandatory, requirement. A person cannot access valuable public services unless we know that person is who he or she claims to be. That service could be the provision of a passport or a driving licence. These are very valuable documents. In order for us to issue a licence or passport to Joan Collins, Joan Collins has to have gone through the SAFE 2 process so that the State knows that she is Joan Collins.

For the record, although it would not be my remit anyway but that of another Department, neither I nor the Government has any interest in having a debate about introducing a national identification card. I do not think we should have a national identification card in this country for all the same reasons the Deputy thinks we should not. This card is a by-product of a system that was introduced in 2005 and which was underpinned by legislation in 2011 whereby, when Joan Collins is invited in to prove she is who she claims to be, she reaches a level or standard that is so robust that we can ensure that there are no other Joan Collins's in the world or in Ireland claiming to be her and that she is not claiming to be anybody else. We are just trying to ensure that the taxpayer's money is being given and directed, through the services, to people who are who they say they are.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Topical Issue Debate

Respite Care Services Provision

Deputy James Browne: As we know, respite provides alternative family or institutional care for persons with disabilities in order to give their carers a break, but it also provides a

break to the people suffering from disabilities. It allows carers in particular to continue looking after their loved ones in the long run. Carers benefit from the opportunity to take a break and recharge their batteries. Those receiving care enjoy an opportunity for comfort and care in new and different surroundings. Respite is an integral part of our community health care system, however in reality many carers meet difficulties when trying to engage or access the necessary respite.

In Wexford there is currently a shortage of supply of respite services. Carers are people who give vital care to their children, siblings and parents and do so in a selfless manner. It is also done in the case of foster parents. And yet these carers find themselves deeply frustrated and exacerbated. The lack of HSE response very often leaves families distraught. Frequent HSE staffing changes mean that calls for support from families are often not heard. Some families find themselves waiting more than a year for just one night's break. In one recent example in Wexford, a couple with three adult siblings had to wait for almost a year and a half to get respite care. Thankfully they got it just before Christmas, but they had to wait almost a year and a half for it. They had to contact their Deputies and councillors and even take to the national airwaves to get some sort of help and support.

Many of these parents are now becoming older. Some are even in their 80s. They are trying to take care of their children and foster children and they are getting tired. If their carers were not in a position to look after the cared for, the responsibility would fall back onto the State. Residential care for these people would cost an absolute fortune. Yet if the carers are not given the support that they need and that break to recharge their batteries, that is exactly what will happen. These carers want to look after the cared for. They fought tenaciously to get the care they need in order to look after their children, and their foster children in particular. However, the State is not stepping up. I will give one particular example. Two years ago Ard Aoibhinn in Wexford town opened up. It was supposed to provide additional respite care for these families in Wexford. It is now two years since it opened and there is still no respite there because the HSE, having provided substantial capital supports for it to be built, will not provide the necessary current funding to staff it in order to provide the necessary care. Other units are very often closed at weekends. Adults and children have to negotiate to get minimal access to these supports.

The programme for Government commits to help and support people with disabilities but unless carers get the necessary respite, and I am speaking about carers in my county in particular, the responsibility will fall back on the State. We have seen some examples recently in Wexford where people needed respite care but it was not received. Children were then getting into situations whereby they required long-term care and they were being put into the short-term respite beds which led to the amount of respite available decreasing even further. I am looking for further support for respite care in County Wexford.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): I thank Deputy Browne for raising this issue. Unfortunately the Minister of State is not here to relay his reply to the Deputy but I will read his briefing notes and then the Deputy may like to come back in. I wish to thank the Deputy for raising this important issue which I am taking on behalf of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath. On his behalf I am pleased to outline the position on respite places in County Wexford.

This Government's ongoing priority is the safeguarding of vulnerable people in the care of the health service. We are committed to providing services and supports for people with dis-

abilities which will empower them to live independent lives. As part of its ongoing service provision, this year the HSE will provide more than 182,000 respite nights and 42,500 day respite sessions to families in need right across the country. The Minister of State acknowledges that there is an urgent need for increased respite care throughout the country. That is why an additional €10 million has been secured specifically to enhance respite care in the disability sector.

Some €8 million will be used to provide 12 new dedicated respite houses which will come on stream this year. There will be one in each HSE community health care organisation area and three in the greater Dublin area. This will add 19,000 extra respite nights in a full year. In addition, a further €2 million in extra funding will be used for innovative respite solutions, such as home sharing and extended day services, to provide assistance where people and families need it most. In the context of respite services in County Wexford, discussions are ongoing regarding the emerging need for additional respite services and the options to be developed to meet those needs.

The Minister has been informed by the HSE that each client is assessed by either a social worker or a liaison nurse using a prioritisation tool. Respite meetings are held quarterly between the HSE and service providers to provide a forum whereby those seeking respite are prioritised, discussed and an allocation is provided. This is in order to meet their needs as far as possible, taking into account the prioritisation tool and any other information from the members of the respite forum. A respite cancellation list is also in operation. Emergency placements for instance, where a care situation at home has become critically unsafe or has broken down altogether, must take precedence over any planned respite service provision, which can be difficult for service users and their families.

The provision of respite services in County Wexford has come under further pressure in recent years. There is an increase in the number of children and adults seeking access to these services. There are also increasing levels of changing needs due to the aging client population. The need for increased respite facilities is acknowledged and the HSE continues to work with agencies to provide various ways of responding to this growing need in line with the budget available.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Minister of State. The difficulty is that there is no concrete solution for the situation in Wexford. There is a unit in Ard Aoibhinn that is not being used for respite care because the HSE will not provide the necessary current funding for it to be staffed. The HSE accepts it cannot meet the increasing demand in Wexford, yet there is a unit there that can be used to help meet some of that need.

Carers have a very difficult job to do. It is an exhausting job but it is one they do with pride and care. They are also exhausted from being obliged to fight tooth and nail to get some respite so they can recover themselves. They are becoming ill and their own mental and physical health is deteriorating when they cannot get the respite they need. The carers are being let down and their adult children are being let down also. They need to be able to get a break for themselves as well.

A particular situation arises where there are two or three adult children in a family and maybe only one gets taken in for care. That is not respite for the parents at all. There was a well reported situation, recently flagged by the Ombudsman, where there were foster parents in that situation. Foster parents are saving the State an absolute fortune when they take on, support and give love and care to foster children. They need the support they should be given as well.

It is deeply frustrating.

The Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, stated recently that the HSE needs to immediately devise a respite action plan for all children. It seems that some parents are finding it almost impossible to get any supports. For whatever reason, they are slipping through the cracks. The broader picture of more hours and nights being provided is all well and good. In my own county of Wexford, however, there is a desperate need for additional respite nights and care. The unit is there. We just need the funding to be provided in order that people can be given the support they need and deserve.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I think the Deputy hit it on the head; respite is an integral part of this. When people are dealing with people with difficulties, they have to have time out for their loved ones to go into respite. I believe that is a clear indication from all of us. I am very familiar with what it is to be a carer. My own mother had unconditional love from my two brothers, who cared for her until she passed away. I am familiar with the challenges they had living in a house with their elderly mother and most of all, the challenges when they themselves needed some kind of a break. Consequently, I understand the point.

Perhaps the Deputy can forward to me the details of the unit to which he refers. I am not familiar with it. I certainly will speak to the Minister of State on his behalf. If he is saying there is a place there that can take that, I certainly will raise it with the Minister of State as well. I am dealing with a case myself at present involving adult twins who need respite care and I have seen the difficulties that have been faced trying to have them at respite at the same time. I perfectly understand.

I will read the conclusion of my response. The national task force chaired by the head of HSE social care is identifying how best to deliver respite services in the areas of most pressing need. Community health organisation area 5, CHO 5, has submitted proposals for additional funding and they are currently being reviewed by this group. The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, has asked me to assure the Deputy and the House that the commissioning of respite houses will come on stream as early as possible this year, subject to a procurement process, HIQA approval and staff recruitment. The Department of Health is working closely with HIQA and the HSE to ensure that the 12 respite houses can be opened without undue delay. However, there are commercial sensitivities with regard to the procurement of houses and respite services until contracts are finalised, and therefore the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath is unable to provide location data until contracts are signed.

Were the Deputy to forward to me an email about the particular service he is talking about, I certainly will raise it with the Minister of State.

Long Stay Residential Units

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Táim buíoch go bhfuil deis labhartha ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo agam agus ag an Teachta Ó Gallchóir.

The Minister of State will recall that about two years ago, there was much hype when the then Minister of State, Kathleen Lynch, announced the Government's five-year programme of investment in nursing home facilities. Despite all the Government's efforts to sell this package as a good news story, it was met with justifiable shock, confusion and anger right across com-

munities in Donegal. This was followed by confirmation that nursing beds in three existing community hospitals in the county, namely, Lifford, Ramelton and St. Joseph's in Stranorlar, were to be replaced by a new 130-bed central nursing unit to be constructed in Letterkenny. It has been that word "replaced" that has been the root cause of this public outrage and it is hardly surprising. In a single press statement, it was announced that the Government was planning to effectively downgrade not just one public community hospital but three, and all in the same county.

Since then, the communities affected have not stood idly by. They have organised and stood up for themselves. Over two years now and more, campaigners, members of the public, hospital staff, residents and families have literally taken to the streets in opposition to these plans. While their determination, passion and fight-back must be commended, the future of the services, in particular the long-term residential care in these hospitals, remains as uncertain as ever.

What was the cause of this cold, callous stroke? A ministerial pen two years ago. That is what caused all of this. It has been allowed to fester for the last two years. Far from providing certainty, the Minister of State and her Government have continuously given conflicting reports to communities concerned about the future of these services. Will the Minister of State give these communities the certainty and straight talking they deserve and that has been so shamefully denied for over two years? Will she now, before this House, clarify the future of long-term residential care in Lifford, Ramelton and St. Joseph's Community Hospital, Stranorlar? Will she give a commitment that these services at these hospitals will not be downgraded in the future?

Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher: Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a chur in iúl as ucht deis labhartha ar an gceist thábhachtach seo a fháil in éineacht le mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Pearse Doherty.

I am not surprised to hear the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, cannot be here today. I know exactly where he is; he is on his way to Donegal at the invitation of the Minister of State, Deputy Joe McHugh - on a Tuesday evening when we have a minority Government. They decided to do this when neither myself, Deputy Pearse Doherty nor any other Deputy could attend the event. I think this is very cynical and the Minister must answer to it. We would have been there if it was any other day. Had they travelled from Sligo on Friday last to meet 550 irate people, we could have discussed this in person.

As Deputy Pearse Doherty has suggested, the decision of January 2016 has to be overturned. The only consistency in all of this is that every single reply to our parliamentary questions has indicated that the long-stay beds in those hospitals of St. Joseph's, Ramelton and Lifford do not have a future.

6 o'clock

I received that reply in early July this year, before the recess. Of course, when the political temperature became too hot for the Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy McHugh, the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Jim Daly, went on local radio and suggested that the information given to me by way of parliamentary reply was wrong. I was very pleased because I thought there had been a mistake and that this would be reversed. The Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, has yet to confirm to the Dáil that that was not true. The answer to the parliamentary question was correct, and I give

full credit to those who prepare them. It is not good enough. Further to that, the Minister of State, Deputy McHugh, announced there would be €3 million available. That was fake news; it is a tissue of you-know-what. Those 550 irate people will be back there tonight again and they want answers. The answer cannot be that it is in the national development plan, because that plan is underwriting the plan of 2016. I hope the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Byrne, who is always available to answer questions, will be able to tell us, on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, that he has decided to rescind the decision of 2016.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I thank Deputies Pearse Doherty and Gallagher for raising this Topical Issue. Unfortunately the relevant Minister of State is not here, as the Deputies have noted themselves, but I will read the statement. I cannot provide any commitment on anything being turned around. I want to make that clear to both Deputies before I begin.

I am taking this matter on behalf of my colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for mental health and older people, Deputy Jim Daly. Unfortunately, the Minister of State is unable to be here this evening. I am sure the Deputies will appreciate he is attending a public meeting in Ballybofey this evening with the Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy McHugh. He will also meet representatives of the Friends of Lifford Hospital and will visit St Joseph's Community Hospital, Stranorlar.

The Health Service Executive, HSE, is responsible for the delivery of health and personal social services, including those at facilities such as at St Joseph's Community Hospital, Stranorlar, Ramelton Community Hospital and Lifford Community Hospital. Public residential care units are an essential part of our health care infrastructure. They provide about 5,000 long-stay beds, amounting to approximately 20% of the total stock of nursing home beds nationally. There are also approximately 2,000 short-stay community public beds. While the care delivered to residents in community hospitals is generally of a very high standard, many of these services are delivered in buildings that are less than ideal in the modern context. It is important therefore that we upgrade our public bed stock. This is the aim of the five-year capital investment programme for community nursing units that was announced in 2016. This provides the framework to allow for an enhanced programme to replace, upgrade and refurbish these care facilities, as appropriate.

Significant work was undertaken to determine the most optimal scheduling of projects within the phased provision of funding to achieve compliance and registration with the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA. This investment programme will see the provision of two new centres in Donegal, one in Ballyshannon and one in Letterkenny. It is proposed under this programme that the new community nursing unit in Letterkenny will be delivered by the end of 2021, through a public private partnership or alternative funding model to provide long-term residential care services in the area. This decision is related to long-term residential services and is separate to and independent of any consideration of the other services currently provided in the three community hospitals. The decision reflects a view that these hospitals were not considered to be appropriate for use as residential care homes in the medium term. No decision has been made in relation to the other services provided by the hospitals.

Both Deputies will be aware that since the announcement of the five-year capital investment programme for community nursing units and following discussions with public representatives, health forum members and local community groups and local HSE management agreed to review overall requirements for the area. The review also included an assessment of the

adequacy of the existing facilities. I understand that a report has been submitted to the HSE national social care division and the HSE national capital property steering group. This report will be considered by the HSE national capital property steering group in March. Any proposals for changes to the approved capital investment programme will be considered in the context of capital funding available to health, potential revenue implications and compliance with the agreed capital approval process.

On Deputy Gallagher's question, I do not have the remit to give a commitment as to what the Minister of State is going to say at the meeting this evening, as I really do not know. I take on board that both Deputies have made their concerns known and that they are not at the public meeting this evening. I will take that on board and relay their annoyance and concerns about that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I have no bloody idea what the Minister of State will say at tonight's public meeting, which was organised by Fine Gael. The meeting that was organised by the group concerned about this issue and to which all Deputies were invited happened last Friday. If the Minister of State has something to say we should be informed about it here.

I spoke about the confusion which has annoyed people on the ground, particularly those who have loved ones in these community hospitals. This just adds to the confusion. The Minister of State's statement indicates the decision concerning the Letterkenny unit is related to the long-term residential services and is separate to and independent of any consideration of other services currently provided in the three community hospitals. However, Kathleen Lynch's statement was to the effect that this is going ahead because it is replacing the beds in the other hospitals. The Minister of State's statement then goes on to say that the decision reflects the view that the hospitals were not considered to be appropriate for use as residential care homes in the medium term. It says that these premises are no good for use as long-term residential homes at this point in time.

I am really disappointed, not in the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, but that in his absence, the Minister of State with direct responsibility for this area did not provide this House with a clear, concise message. The message we want to hear is that Kathleen Lynch's statement of January 2016 - which is two years and one month ago now - is redundant, and that the HSE, through the Government, will invest in these hospitals to ensure the long-term beds will be secure into the future.

Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher: What stands out in the prepared reply on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, is the statement that the services are delivered in buildings that are less than ideal in the modern context. The Minister of State will see this evening, when he visits St. Joseph's, that the facilities there are adequate. I believe that, as do those who have their loved ones there. The Minister of State decided a number of months ago that those facilities would have a derogation so that the HIQA standards would not apply there. I believe the facilities there are as good as those in any other part of the country.

There is also a question mark here over the future of other hospital services, apart from long-term services. This adds to the confusion. In short, we want clarity on this issue. The political decision of 2016 must be reversed, and we must have a plan which is acceptable to all. It needs to be drawn up and put in place to guarantee the future of long-stay accommodation units in the three hospitals. They need to focus on the future-proofing of the long-stay accommodation beds, restoring the bed numbers to what they were a number of years ago and restoring

the services for all three hospitals. The facilities in Letterkenny and Ballyshannon which were mentioned are red herrings, because in addition to those, the beds in these three hospitals are required to meet the demographic trends and the aging population in Donegal.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I do not have much more to add. I have listened to both Deputies. After the meeting in Donegal this evening there might be more clarity about the hospitals but I do not have that in writing and I cannot offer the commitment the Deputies are looking for. I apologise to both Deputies if they feel that the written statement I have read out is not appropriate at this moment in time. Perhaps the Minister of State will clarify things this evening when he visits Donegal. I will bring the concerns of the Deputies back to the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, as well as to the Minister of State, Deputy McHugh. I will probably be shot for saying this but it would have helped if the Deputies were at tonight's meeting in Donegal.

Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher: We are not there because the Ministers of State chose a day when we could not be there. It is political spin.

NAMA Portfolio

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is a really important issue in the Dublin West and Dublin 15 community. NAMA seems to be allowing whoever owns the land under its jurisdiction to ask the local GAA club to move off that land.

To give the Minister of State a brief background on this particular area, it is one of the most diverse areas in the entire country. It was also one of the worst planned areas in the entire country, thanks to the failure of Fingal County Council and, ultimately, the State, which took the unprecedented decision in the late 1990s to accept money from a developer in lieu of providing open space. When prices of land subsequently crept up during the Celtic tiger years, it was impossible for the local authority to source any land for the local community, leaving a community of more than 2,000 housing units without a blade of grass on which the children could play. It will definitely be an area that will be the subject of a tribunal of some kind in years to come.

Meanwhile, the local community and the GAA club used all their efforts and goodwill to try to create pitches themselves and persuaded the developer, Twinlite Developments, which is also responsible for seeking to evict tenants from its land having sold the houses to a vulture fund, to allow them to use them. They got the council to back it and they raised the money through fundraising events, etc. There is a pitch in front of the local schools and if that pitch is lost to the community, there will be no GAA club in that area; it will be gone. An area cannot have a club if it does not have pitches. They have now been told that they will have an extension for a year. They have a stay of execution for a year, but what will happen next year?

Political decisions have left this community bereft of facilities. I was on the council when a decision was taken by political parties, which are now jumping up and demanding action on this issue, to rezone that piece of land to a local centre, making development of a commercial nature possible on it. That decision should never have been taken, and it should be changed. In terms of what we need now, NAMA needs to be told not to allow any club to be evicted from any land in which it has an interest. It is very clear to people that NAMA only exists to help developers get cleaned up. It is certainly not there to help communities. While we are glad that we have an extension, we also need to make sure that pitches and facilities are provided for the local community.

Twinlite Developments has had its pound of flesh from this area. It sold thousands of houses during the boom and has maintained those homes with people renting them at very generous rents. It is hardly too much to ask it to pass over this piece of land to the local community, which has been left bereft of facilities. The club and the entire community need the support of this House to make sure they get the facilities they so desperately need.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Michael D'Arcy): When I was given this issue, I contacted the Taoiseach and I have been made aware of some of the background to it. It is important to note that NAMA has a commercial remit and a statutory objective to obtain the best achievable return for the taxpayer. However, in the context of its commercial remit and consistent with section 2 of the National Asset Management Act 2009, NAMA is at all times open to considering proposals aimed at contributing to broader social and economic objectives.

I am informed by NAMA that the property in question is controlled by a receiver, Mr. Tom O'Brien of Mazars, with NAMA having a secured interest in the property. As the Deputy will appreciate, receivers are obliged to optimise the value of property and other assets under their control and under section 10 of the NAMA Act 2009, NAMA is required to obtain the best achievable financial return for the State from its acquired loans and the properties that secure those loans so that, to the greatest extent possible, the debt outstanding against the assets can be repaid.

Prior to the receiver's appointment over these lands, the property owner entered into an informal arrangement with Tyrrelstown GAA Club, which granted the club the use of the lands on a temporary basis, free of charge. The agreement with the GAA club was accepted as being no more than a temporary arrangement until such time as the owner of the land, now the receiver, determined the ultimate strategy for the land concerned. It is important to highlight that the site currently occupied by Tyrrelstown GAA Club is zoned for mixed use development under the Fingal development plan. As a result, the long-term use of the site as a sports amenity is not currently possible, unless the plan changes.

As part of the zoning process for the Tyrrelstown area, the property owner ceded 60 acres of lands to Fingal County Council for use for educational sites and amenity space, including playing fields. It is my understanding that Fingal County Council is currently developing the fields on this land, which are due to be completed in 2019.

I am advised that, following discussions, the receiver has agreed to grant Tyrrelstown GAA Club a licence to continue to use the property for another 15 months to the end of May 2019, at which point alternative facilities should be available, and that this arrangement has been accepted in principle by the GAA club. The receiver has been reasonable in his dealings with the club and it is now a matter for the club to engage with Fingal County Council as regards the alternative facilities now being put in place that I mentioned earlier.

While this is a positive development, it is important to reiterate that as NAMA does not own these properties, it is not in a position to compel debtors or receivers to sell their assets at less than market value. While it is clear that NAMA is not in a position to gift land or property, should a community group have an interest in a particular piece of land or property or wish to extend a sports pitch, it should speak, in the first instance, with the debtor or receiver who controls the land.

While working to obtain the best achievable financial return for the taxpayer, the NAMA board is open to proposals that achieve desirable social objectives in a manner that complements the objectives of other public bodies, including Departments, State agencies and local authorities. In line with this, NAMA has facilitated the sale of land and property for a range of public uses including schools, parks and health care facilities.

NAMA also works with local authorities and other public bodies in the planning system to support the achievement of key policy objectives including, for example, the provision of social housing and the resolution of unfinished housing estates. To date, NAMA has facilitated the provision of almost 2,500 properties for social housing.

I believe the approach determined by NAMA's board is contributing in terms of its primary commercial objective, while at the same time contributing to the achievement of wider public policy objectives.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am thrilled to think the Minister of State thinks a receiver is being very reasonable in allowing this club to stay on the land for another year. Is he aware that it is the same receiver and the same owners of the land who are trying to evict dozens of families in Tyrrelstown from their homes? Does he believe that is reasonable as well? There is nothing reasonable about the way Tyrrelstown has been mis-planned and mis-developed.

This club has been very successful in providing a vital social service, despite all of the odds. I mentioned that Tyrrelstown was a very diverse community. It also has needs and to provide cohesion in a community, it needs sporting and youth facilities. There is nothing for young people in this area. As a result, there are social problems where young people are becoming waylaid and misdirected because they do not have viable and proper outlets and amenities in the area, and the local community has paid the price for that. There has been massive under-investment in this area and in Dublin 15 and while the Taoiseach is boasting about all the great resources that will be brought to Dublin West, there are huge chunks of Dublin West, such as Tyrrelstown, Mulhuddart and many other areas, that are bereft of transport, sporting and social facilities.

The Minister of State mentioned other pitches. There are many Indian, Pakistani and other nationalities who want cricket facilities, and Ireland does quite well at cricket, but the cricket club in Tyrrelstown has not been developed. There is huge competition and demand for the pitches the Minister of State mentioned.

I agree with the Minister of State that it is very unfortunate that parties like his, Fine Gael, and Labour decided to rezone that land and make it commercial. A strip of green in front of two schools should not be used for a commercial and local centre. The place is full of empty shops and buildings. The pub has closed down. The kitchen shop and a furniture shop recently closed down. The pharmacy may close down. The idea that a sports club has to be evicted to provide for commercial use is outrageous. It is not the case. Rather than support for the receiver, it is a poor show of support for the local community to get what it was let down about in the first instance.

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: I do not want to get into a bashing session on the zoning, which is really a matter for Fingal County Council.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is the Minister of State's party also.

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: Changing the zoning is a matter for the local authority not the House. I speak as the chairman of my local GAA club and I am well aware of the super facilities, sporting opportunities and everything else that clubs bring forward. I am not aware of Tyrellstown GAA directly but if the local authority has organised 60 acres for community and amenity space, it is a lot of ground and there should be space within that for pitches. That is the information I have. The 60 acres that has been made available to Fingal County Council should be sufficient to meet the requirements of any GAA, cricket or other club. Something I support fully and that is happening in local authority areas nationally is the convergence of facilities in one complex or space under the auspices of the local authority. It has happened a great deal in Dublin but not as much in other local authority areas. One cannot ignore the fact where a deal has been done and there is 60 acres available for amenity-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There are two large schools included in the 60 acres. That is the Department of Education and Skills.

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

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is totally disingenuous of him to use that figure. There are schools on those sites.

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: It is not. The Deputy is talking about what has not been done but she has chosen to ignore what I have read out and what has been done also.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There are schools on the 60 acres so the Minister of State should stop saying that is available.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): Please, Deputy.

Crime Levels

Deputy Michael McGrath: I am glad the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, is here and I thank him for taking this Topical Issue himself. I am sure the spike in the number of burglaries is not unique to my area or Cork in general. However, it is a huge problem and people are very concerned and fearful. To place the matter in context, Cork city and county saw 324 burglaries in the last three months of 2017, which represents an increase of 40% year on year. That is to say burglaries were up 40% compared to the last quarter of 2016. Thefts from vehicles were up from 144 to 202, which is also a significant increase. The particular area I am highlighting this evening is the Togher Garda district which includes some of the most rapidly expanding communities in Cork, namely Douglas, Carrigaline, Passage West, Crosshaven and Togher itself. There has been a dramatic surge in the number of burglaries in that area. If one takes the example of the town I live in, Carrigaline, there have been more than 20 burglaries in the last three months alone. There have been burglaries right across the Togher Garda district and beyond, including in Glanmire, Blarney and so on. It seems to be a problem gardaí do not have the resources to respond to adequately. When I sought statistics on Garda resources in my area, the reply I received showed that Cork city got just 38 of the 1,600 new gardaí who have qualified since 2014. The second largest city in the country got just over 2% of the newly qualified gardaí since 2014. We are not getting our fair share. The Minister might hear that from representatives all over the country, but the statistics bear it out in this case.

The Garda stations in my area are very poorly equipped. They are meant to be open for a certain number of hours, but they make it clear that they may not be open during those hours at all in circumstances in which the gardaí on duty may be called away. In Carrigaline and Douglas, which are very large commuter towns, there are no set guaranteed hours during which the Garda stations will be open. People who have very straightforward requirements like having a passport form stamped must go to the district headquarters in Togher as that is the only 24-7 station in the district. My own observation is that there are not enough civilians working there. The Minister has spoken about increased civilianisation but I went there a number of weeks ago myself to get passport forms stamped and I felt sorry for the garda on duty. He was on his own, the phone was hopping and he was trying to answer it and deal with my issue at the same time.

Carrigaline has a population of approximately 17,000 and Douglas has a population of approximately 40,000 but the Garda numbers there are far too low. It is very evident that gardaí do not have the resources they need. We are not seeing enough foot or vehicle patrols by gardaí and there must be more support from the overall Garda division. We need to see Operation Thor in our area and more checkpoints. Visibility is vital, not only as a deterrent but as a way to build confidence among residents in the local community. I am liaising and working with gardaí locally, including the chief superintendent. I have raised these issues directly with the acting Garda Commissioner and I await a detailed response. I hope the Minister will take up these issues and ensure we get greater Garda resources which are appropriate to the scale and growth of the areas I represent.

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I assure Deputy Michael McGrath that An Garda Síochána continues carefully to monitor the activities of criminal groups affecting all areas of the country, including Cork city and the surrounding areas as raised by the Deputy. I also assure him that we are ensuring the implementation of strong policing measures to disrupt and dismantle the networks of criminal gangs. The Deputy will appreciate that it is the acting Garda Commissioner and his management team who are responsible for the deployment of Garda resources. However, in terms of specific actions being taken by An Garda Síochána in the district, I am advised by the Garda authorities that as a result of information derived from intelligence sources and investigations, a number of mobile organised criminal gangs have come into focus in Cork. I am further advised that a strong crime prevention element has been put in place in the Cork city division consisting of a number of measures including uniformed Operation Thor patrols, a dedicated detective unit assigned to patrol the off-ramps to Cork city and improved communication between Cork north and Cork west divisions and other regions with motorway access to Cork. These measures are further supported by the armed support unit.

As the Deputy will be aware, very significant resources have been provided to An Garda Síochána, including the overtime allocation of almost €100 million announced in budget 2018, to support large-scale policing operations, including Operation Thor, to which the Deputy referred. It is also worth noting that Operation Thor has now entered its winter phase, which runs from October to April. Indeed, provisional operational material released by the Garda in January of this year indicated a significant drop in burglary rates for the two-month period of November and December 2017. This success has been attributed to the winter phase of Operation Thor. Of course, these figures should be viewed with caution until such time as the publication of the official crime statistics has recommenced.

The scale of Garda activity against burglary and property-related crime under Operation Thor nationally has led to concentrated Garda activity. As of 18 January 2018, 105,790 targeted

checkpoints and 99,210 crime prevention patrols have been conducted nationwide. To give the House an idea of the impact of the operation, I note that this concentrated policing activity has produced approximately 6,600 arrests and 7,420 charges covering a range of offences which, in addition to burglary, include handling stolen property, the possession of firearms and many drug offences.

As part of the concerted strategy to combat burglary, the Government has made it a priority to secure the enactment of specific legislation targeting prolific burglars, namely, the Criminal Justice (Burglary of Dwellings) Act 2015. The provisions of the Act are available to gardaí to support prosecutions arising from Operation Thor. Furthermore, the Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database System) Act, which has been commenced, introduced the DNA database that provides gardaí with investigative links, or “hits”, between people and unsolved crimes, including burglaries. It is anticipated that this will assist in improving detection rates for burglary in the coming years in the Cork city district, referred to by the Deputy, as well as throughout the country.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Minister. I have to make the case again that the expanding communities I represent need more gardaí. When we look at the overall number of new gardaí and the proportion that has come to my area, it is clear we are not getting a fair share. The communities I represent are growing. Unfortunately, despite the national figure quoted by the Minister, which shows a significant drop in burglary rates in November and December of 2017, we had the opposite experience, with a lot of thefts from cars and many burglaries. These mobile gangs to which the Minister refers have their homework done and they have clearly been surveying properties for God knows how long. The trend has been early evening burglaries when the home is empty and the gangs focus, in particular, on the older housing estates in my area.

This is a significant problem. What people want above all else is to see more gardaí. They want greater visibility, they want a local Garda station that works and that is open as much as it possibly can be to service their area. They want more Garda patrols and more checkpoints, and they want to see gardaí on the beat in the local community. The Minister hears this from all over the country but surely areas that are growing in population, where the demand is expanding, deserve to get extra resources. The fact is that we are not currently getting this and, in overall terms, despite massive population growth, my Garda district is still well below 2010-2011 Garda strength levels.

That is the key issue. I want to plant that seed. I ask the Minister to raise this with the acting Garda Commissioner and to try to get some practical progress, so people can see there is a change and that their area does matter for An Garda Síochána and the Minister.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I assure Deputy Michael McGrath that I have taken careful note of the points he has raised and I would be happy to engage further with him. We must all remain vigilant in the fight against all forms of criminality across communities, urban and rural. I assure the Deputy that the acting Garda Commissioner and I remain in ongoing contact in the context of the deployment of Garda resources in line with new and emerging trends. Operation Thor is proving most successful to date and the Government remains committed to ensuring that An Garda Síochána has an appropriate level of resources to tackle crime in our communities. Indeed, the recent budget will support the continuation of this high-level investment in the Garda workforce and ensure that the vision of an overall workforce of 21,000 by 2021 remains on track.

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I agree that availability and visibility are all-important, and that is now what we are seeing across communities in terms of an increased presence of gardaí since the reopening of the Garda College in Templemore under this Government. A further 800 new recruits will enter the college and an additional 500 civilians will also be recruited to fill critical skills gaps across the organisation and to facilitate the redeployment of gardaí from administrative and technical duties to front-line operational duties. I agree with the Deputy on the matter of form-filling and passport applications. In addition, we have plans to strengthen the Garda Reserve, with new reserves expected to commence training in early 2018.

I assure the House and Deputy Michael McGrath that all Garda activities, including community policing, will undoubtedly benefit from the resources now coming on stream through the Garda recruitment programme and, in particular, the commitment on the part of the Government to increase Garda numbers so that the force will have the capacity to address the needs of communities throughout the country, including in Cork and other areas, well into the future.

Project Ireland 2040: Statements

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank O'Rourke): I understand the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, is sharing time with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Last Friday, the Government launched Project Ireland 2040 in Sligo. This includes two core elements: a national planning framework, led by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy; and a €116 billion national development plan which sets out an ambitious and strategic vision for Ireland's investment in public infrastructure over the next decade. With this plan, investment levels in Ireland will continue to increase at a sustainable rate and, very importantly, our infrastructure investment will be strictly guided by the national planning framework to create a single vision for our country as a whole, both rural and urban. This will deliver modern public infrastructure over the coming years to improve the lives of people throughout Ireland and allow our companies and economy to continue to compete with the best in the world.

This kind of investment will play a critical role in ensuring a whole-of-Government approach and implementation of the national planning framework. It will change how we invest in public infrastructure from the way we did this in the past. It moves beyond the approach which saw public investment spread too thinly and, crucially, it moves away from investment decisions which did not align with planning strategy. These practices contributed to some of the major issues that we face today, particularly the predominance of Dublin in terms of economic growth, alongside the challenges facing rural communities. This development plan is, therefore, strictly aligned to the vision set out in the national planning framework and its ten strategic outcomes, which were developed following extensive consultation over the course of 2017.

The capital plan detailed in the national development plan is underpinned by sensible and moderate projections of the economy's potential growth, which are assumed at 2% over the period 2022 to 2027. This aligns with the most recent projection on growth from the European Commission for Ireland for the 2020s, while being lower than the OECD long-term projection of almost 3% for the same period. This plan will see public investment in Ireland increase from relatively low levels following the recession to being among the highest in the EU by 2021, and this will be sustained over the entire remaining period of the plan. The plan sets out a total

public investment programme of €116 billion for the period 2018 to 2027, including both Exchequer and commercial State-owned enterprise investment.

The average capital investment in the EU over the past 20 years was in the region of 3% of national income. Under the national development plan, it is projected that public capital investment will reach 3.8% of national income, or GNI*, in 2021 and 4% by 2024, with sustained investment averaging 4% on an annual basis over the period 2022 to 2027. This reflects the bottom-up demand for increased public capital investment identified in the evidence base produced for the review of the capital plan last September. This approach will ensure that public investment underpins the sustainability of economic growth and avoids contributing to economic instability and exacerbating any risks of unbalanced and inflationary growth.

The plan includes many new projects and programmes that were not listed in the previous plan published in 2015. I refer, for example, to the M20 Cork to Limerick road, the new hospital for Cork, the BusConnects programmes for Cork, Dublin and Galway, and a major investment programme across the cultural institutions, to name but a few. While some projects may have been announced previously, those announcements were outside of a long-term funding framework and reflect the commitments that we now have to communities and citizens throughout the country. The existence of plans that were not joined up on a cross-sectoral basis, or with the resources to implement them, was highlighted by the International Monetary Fund as a weakness in our public management investment system. In the past, various strategies were announced but the resources needed to implement them were not available.

Before the launch of the national development plan, the Government was committed to investing €29 billion of Exchequer resources over the next four years. Under this new plan, the Government is now making a commitment to provide €90 billion in Exchequer resources over the next decade to deliver identified strategic investment priorities explicitly knitted into the objectives of the national planning framework. Identifying and funding long-term investment priorities was just one of a number of innovations included in the national development plan that are designed to improve capital expenditure policy in Ireland. The funding reform was introduced to encourage Departments to develop investment proposals directly targeted at delivering planning priorities and which contribute to the clear articulation of a strategic ten-year vision for Ireland's public capital infrastructure.

I will highlight the four new funds established under the new plan. These funds will have a combined allocation of €4 billion and will be allocated on a competitive basis for projects which meet the criteria of the funds. These funds will help us to meet challenges in the areas of rural development, urban development, climate change and disruptive technology. The rural regeneration and development fund will amount to €1 billion over the next ten years. This fund will be under the control of the Department of Rural and Community Development and will promote rural renewal in order to enable towns, villages and outlying rural areas to grow sustainably and support delivery of the strategic objectives of the national planning framework. The urban regeneration and development fund will amount to €2 billion over the next ten years. This fund will be under the control of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and will support the co-development of the framework's growth enablers for the five cities and other large urban centres. Examples of projects that have the potential to receive support from the fund would include the development of the Cork docklands, the Limerick 2030 initiative, the Waterford north quays strategic development zone regeneration project, the plans for the regeneration of Galway city centre and the Portlaoise urban design and renewal initiative. Each of the funds will be operational from January 2019, but work on preparing applications

can start immediately for submission this year. Further details on the application process and selection criteria will be published in coming weeks.

There are a number of existing models that we will draw on in designing the funds, including the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, operated by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. The intention is that the funds will play an important role in moving away from providing funding resources to individual organisations - essentially on the basis of current investment patterns - in favour of supporting collaborative bids for funding important projects on a competitive basis. The plan also commits to the establishment of a new national regeneration and development agency that will maximise the potential use of under-utilised landbanks in cities and towns across Ireland. This agency will work closely with the local government sector, central government, a range of existing agencies and public bodies and the semi-State sector in order to identify how specific land holdings, mostly already in public ownership, can and will be used to better potential to deliver on the objectives of the national planning framework and national development plan. The body will also identify a clear and practical sequence of steps to be taken by the relevant stakeholders in achieving the tasks set for it and all relevant public bodies by the Government. This will make a significant difference when it comes to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of our public infrastructure investments over the coming period.

The national development plan will also facilitate the implementation of the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund's public investment management assessment, which was carried out in 2017. This will lead to a greater focus by the Government on achieving value for taxpayers' money when it comes to public capital investment in Ireland over the period of the plan. In particular, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform will establish an infrastructure projects steering group, IPSG, on which senior representatives from all of the infrastructure and investment Departments will serve and which will lead in developing cross-sectoral dialogue on infrastructure, including identification of national priorities and actions and standardisation of data presentation. This reform agenda began with the publication in September of a major capital projects tracker on the website of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Its purpose is to inform citizens of the variety of projects currently in the planning and construction phase and to also give a greater oversight to construction and infrastructure sectors of the Government's investment commitments and opportunities. It will provide the public, businesses and other stakeholders with reliable information about current and future infrastructure delivery. It will be updated to reflect the further projects now included in the national development plan and will be further developed with technical assistance from the International Monetary Fund to become the primary tool for public transparency on infrastructure project priorities, timelines and performance targets.

Potential overheating risks and supply side constraints in the construction sector were addressed as part of the review of the capital plan published last year. This plan highlights the importance of carefully increasing capital spending to ensure that the national development plan is delivered with good value to taxpayers. The measured but ambitious increase in capital expenditure and long-term planning included in the national development plan, and detailed in the major capital projects tracker, will provide greater certainty to the construction industry as to what infrastructure requirements are coming down the tracks and enable them to plan accordingly and increase their capacity and productivity in order to deliver the projects which are now in the pipeline.

In order to ensure regular and open dialogue between the Government and the construction

sector, a construction sector working group will be established. A healthy and well-functioning construction industry that offers good, long-term and quality employment and construction output is essential to the achievement of the goals underlying the national planning framework and the delivery of the projects outlined in the national development plan. The approach we have outlined, and the processes by means of which we hope to facilitate it, have been broadly welcomed by the sectors of the economy that we will rely on to make the plan happen. This is because the experience of the past 15 years highlights the dangers for society and the economy when the construction sector expands too greatly and contracts too steeply.

The national development plan sets out a detailed and positive vision for Ireland's infrastructure over the next decade. It includes a number of major new projects and, very importantly, sets out the funding which is being made available to deliver those projects. This reflects a number of innovations in capital expenditure policy which are included in the national development plan and which will improve how we invest in public infrastructure in Ireland. Now that this plan has been published, following extensive consultation, our focus will turn to ensuring its timely delivery in a manner that guarantees value for money for the Irish citizen. This plan will ensure the implementation of the national planning framework through investment levels that will be among the highest in the EU, thereby delivering the kind of state-of-the-art public infrastructure which is vital for our economy and society to thrive in the ever-evolving modern world.

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): At the outset, I thank my officials in the Department for the huge amount of work that they have done over the past number of years in preparing the national planning framework. They did that work over more than a three-year period and under Ministers who held this portfolio prior to me - the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, who worked at the time with the Minister of State, Deputy English, on the plan and the then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly, before that. When we look at the national planning framework as part of Project Ireland 2040, it is a huge credit to the civil servants in the Department and the work they have done over that time.

We face serious challenges today in Irish society. In my own Department, in particular, in housing, planning and local government, we have a challenge and a crisis in housing and homelessness and to face that challenge today, of course, we put in plans for the immediate term. Rebuilding Ireland is one such plan, for a five-year period, involving more than €6 billion worth of investment to deal with the crisis we have in homelessness and the challenge we face in the shortage of housing. When I came into my role as Minister in this Department, I said that if we did not plan for the longer term, in facing these immediate challenges we risked building in crises and problems into the future. We have a responsibility as a Government to plan long term, to take a long-term time horizon into the work that we do.

However, it is also a great opportunity for us as a Government. Ten years on from when the banking crisis first began with the guarantee of the banks, with the national accounts balanced we can look to the future, and not only imagine a future Ireland for our people, but implement it. That, in essence, is what Project Ireland 2040 is all about.

We know the world is changing. We know we face significant risks from issues, such as Brexit. We are not quite sure yet how they will manifest themselves. We know that when it comes to climate change, we have to implement a number of new measures over the course of the coming years, in terms of climate mitigation and works that need to go on up and down the

country. The national planning framework, in and of itself, in terms of managing our growth and managing where people will live, is one such climate mitigation measure. We know when we look at technology, and the disruption it can bring to Irish life in both positive and negative ways, that these will be challenges that we will face, as a Government and as a society, into the future.

Regardless of those challenges we face today and those risks that are coming down the line for good or for ill, we know that from the point of view of demographics, we have to plan for the future. At the very least, 1 million extra people will live in our country by 2040. That will require at least half a million new homes to be built in the State. Where will we build them? It will also require additional jobs - at least 660,000 net new jobs - in the economy because over that period of the next 20 years, many jobs of course also will be destroyed through technology and innovation. Consequently, we will have to create 660,000 net new jobs in the economy over that period. By 2040, one in four of us will be over the age of 65, one in six of us will be under the age of 15 and many of the jobs in which those born today in Ireland will work when they graduate from college, 20 or 25 years from now, have not yet been invented. That pressure of 6 million people in this country, on our existing communities and on the environment, both built and natural, demands that we plan for the future as a Government. It demands that we not only meet that responsibility but also take that opportunity.

At a high level, the country is doing very well. We are in the top ten countries in the world when we look at such matters as foreign investment, human development and democracy but we fall into only the top 20 countries in the world when we look at such matters as the environment or quality of life. When we take metrics such as liveable cities, we then fall into the top 30. Of course, we know that many people in our country today are facing significant difficulties in their lives because of the long tail from the banking crisis that began ten years ago, particularly when we look at issues in the housing sector for which I am responsible and the crisis that people face in homelessness but also the affordability difficulties that people have in Ireland today. When we look at other ways of measuring quality of life issues, we look at such matters as commuting times. In 2016, based on the census results, 230,000 people travelled an hour each day each way in and out of work - two hours a day over five days. That puts significant strains on people's lives in terms of their quality of life, it costs them additional money and, of course, it is not good for the environment.

Therefore, we need a paradigm shift when it comes to Government planning, Government thinking and implementation. That is what Project Ireland 2040 is about. It is joined up across every Department and thus every aspect of our lives. It is protected in law as a plan and there is a hierarchy of other plans that must follow from it so that there is consistency in our planning framework for the next 20 years. As the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, has said, it is aligned with our public investment for the next ten years and more to make sure that our money follows the plan in terms of how we are investing in terms of the strategic decisions that we make in that plan. Of course, as a part of that plan as well, we set up an office of independent regulator to make sure that we do what we say we will do and to be an independent arbiter on the Government in so far as it is implementing the national planning framework and the national development plan as part of Project Ireland 2040.

A huge amount of consultation has been undertaken in developing the national planning framework. Three years of work went into it by the Department, being led by an expert advisory group and I thank them for the input they have given over the course of that period. There were more than 40 road shows across the country to talk to people about our ideas but also to

get feedback on those ideas. We had two significant periods of public consultation. In the most recent period of public consultation, we received more than 1,000 submissions from the public, including over 150 submissions from elected representatives up and down the country. We had somewhere between seven and nine hours of debate in the Dáil where one third of Members spoke. We then had a motion in both the Dáil and Seanad that tasked the Oireachtas joint committee with considering the national planning framework and reporting to us on the contents of the draft document, and then we reflected on that in the final document that has been decided on by Government. The plan is better for that period of public consultation that we did. Each of the phases of consultation that we did, each of the road shows that were attended and each of the submissions that we got helped improve the plan and made it a better plan for that consultation and feedback.

It is, of course, by its nature a framework document. We cannot be alive to every single thing that might happen, economically, socially or politically, over the next 20 years and we put in place a framework to act as a guide for investment for different parts of the country as to how they might grow into the future. It sets in train that process. We now have the national planning framework and the national development plan.

In the course of this year, each of our three regions will develop regional, spatial and economic strategies to act as the next level in that hierarchical or tiered approach that we have to planning and from that, each county and city plan will then align over the course of the reviews of their own plans in line with the regional, spatial and economic strategies and in line with the national planning framework and the national development plan.

Because it is a framework document and because it looks to a 20-year time horizon, it is, of course, open to review. In 2021, we will have an informal review of the document based on the population changes that have been evidenced in the census review in 2021 and a more formal review will then follow following the census in 2026 to make sure that our targets are aligned with how the population is growing over that period.

The ambition, from the framework and the work that we have done in aligning it with our investment decisions, is to have a shared vision for every community up and down the country. They are expressed in the document as our national strategic outcomes - these ten shared goals around our quality of life, be it access to health care, access to education, connectivity, improving every village, town and city, and our rural fabric, and everything in between in our country in that period. Therefore, the national strategic outcomes are the key linkage between the national planning framework and the national development plan. That is our measure of shared success when we look to 2040, namely, achieving those ten national strategic outcomes.

When we look at the structure of the national planning framework, we structured it based on the 2014 reforms that were made for the administration and planning of local government in the country in the three regions that were established in 2014 and how we looked to manage the additional 1 million people who will live in our country by 2040. We are talking about managing 75% outside of Dublin. As to what that means for Dublin, in itself, 25% growth in that period would still be quite significant for Dublin, based on growth patterns in the previous number of years. We looked at what we want to do with that 25%, say, roughly 250,000 people. Half of those, we believe, need to live, work and study within the M50 and that will mean significant strategy decisions being made in Dublin to grow inwards and upwards and to increase density in the city. Another way of looking at how we want manage the population growth over the next 20 years is that 50:50 split: 50% of growth in our cities, that is, in Dublin, Cork, Galway,

Waterford and Limerick; and 50% everywhere else. What that means for Cork, Waterford, Galway and Limerick is those cities growing at a rate of 50% to 60% - twice the national average and twice as fast as Dublin. That has never been achieved before and if we can do that, it will be of great significance for those cities. Of course, when we look to the rest of the country, we are talking about 30% of growth being in our existing larger villages and towns and 20% in our smaller villages and rural fabric.

Another way of looking at the population changes that we might see between now and 2040 is the split between the regions. With 50% cent of the growth being in the eastern and midlands region, crucially, between the northern and western region and the southern region, in the northern and western region an increase in population of 160,000 and 180,000 will bring its population to over 1 million, and the southern region an increase in population of between 340,000 and 380,000 will bring its population to almost 2 million.

We recognised in the consultation period and received much feedback around certain key regional centres in the northern and western region, for example, Sligo and Letterkenny. We also recognised the need to strengthen reference to the Atlantic economic corridor and the huge role that will play for the development and investment that we plan between now and 2040. In the midlands, we saw the strategic role that Athlone plays in terms of the three regions.

7 o'clock

We also looked to the important cross-Border linkages that are there: Drogheda and Dundalk into Newry, and Letterkenny into Derry. They have been reflected in the plan. Regarding the structure of the plan, I have mentioned the ten national strategic objectives in the plan. In terms of the meat and the planning detail, there are 75 national policy objectives from which the regional spatial economic strategies and the local authorities will now develop their own planning based on the guidance that is provided in those 75 objectives.

A key principle in the national planning framework and in our vision for our country between now and 2040 is compact growth, taking advantage of our villages, towns and city centres, where there is already significant built infrastructure, and of those economies, be it a matter of reduction of our carbon footprint, the public transport that is already there, brownfield infill sites or the revitalisation of villages and towns for business and people living there. We want to achieve that 40% for compact growth. One of the key mechanisms we have to achieve this is the use of the development funds to which the Minister for Finance already referred, one for urban Ireland and one for rural Ireland. This funding is separate to the investment we have in roads, hospitals and schools. We wish to use this funding to invest in and regenerate village centres, town centres and parts of our cities in line with those objectives regarding the growth we have, in particular compact growth, to improve the livability of our villages, towns and centres.

Another key policy tool is the establishment of the new regeneration and development agency. We recognise as a Government that there are certain strategic landbanks that are not in the hands of local authorities but in the hands of other State bodies, State agencies or the semi-State sector. We will need an overarching body to work with the local authorities, my Department, the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Minister for Finance to ensure we are using those strategic landbanks in the best interests of our citizens to arrive at some of the strategic outcomes we have for our population to improve its quality of life. Using these two tools, we hope to achieve these national strategic outcomes, in particular around the

aspect of compact growth. We also recognise the great vibrancy and the huge importance of rural Ireland and its fabric, our smaller villages and ensuring we have - and we do in this plan - a proper vision for those communities that can be shared across every community in this country.

Members in this House have raised concerns about some elements of the plan. Some of these concerns are legitimate questions but some are perhaps not so legitimate. I will speak to a number of these concerns. The first thing it is important to say is that this is not a naming document. It is a high-level strategy. We have principles in respect of compact growth, tools such as the funds and the agency I mentioned, the protections in putting the national planning framework on a statutory basis and having an independent office of a planning regulator, and the investment in line with the national strategic outcomes. We should see Project Ireland 2040 as a tool for the three regions we have in our country, for every community, not to dictate from central government but to empower them and guide them in respect of investment, development and regeneration. I have also heard some Members of the Opposition talk about how this plan will place caps on towns and villages. That is not the case. We have in the document targets for each region of the country. They are very ambitious targets and they have never been achieved before. If we can achieve 160,000 to 180,000 new people living in the northern and western region, bringing the population to over 1 million people, it will be a significant success for our country if we can balance our growth between now and 2040 in that way. Every part of this country can grow under Ireland 2040. Another concern that has been raised has concerned the process that we have undertaken to date. It was never the intention that there would be a final vote on the final document. If that were the intention, the draft legislation would say that. That draft legislation has not changed since I came into the Department-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: It will not be statutory then.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: -----or since the Minister, Deputy Coveney, came into the Department. When the planning legislation that is currently going through the Seanad is enacted, the national planning framework will then be on a statutory basis. It was always expected that the Government would consult on the draft document, would then make changes to the plan based on that consultation period that we had and would not need to go back to the Dáil for a vote on those changes made following the consultation. Again, if that was the intention of the legislation, it would say as much in the legislation, and it does not. We have followed the process faithfully. There was a motion before both Houses last year, the motion at the Oireachtas joint committee to submit a report, and we reflected on that report as part of the draft consultation and on those concerns raised. We tried to incorporate them into the final document as best we could. When the planning legislation passes in the Seanad, it will put the national planning framework on a statutory basis. If we were to wait for the planning legislation to pass in the Seanad before the Government finalised the national planning framework and the national development plan, it would not have changed in any way the process that we undertook and would not give any greater power to the Oireachtas than those powers that have already been exercised in the process that we followed. However, if the planning legislation were delayed, many of the recommendations of the Mahon tribunal would not be implemented, we would not be able to set up the independent office of the planning regulator, which I am already in the process of trying to do and which I want to do as quickly as possible, and we would not be able to do other important things such as designating data centres as national strategic infrastructure.

I very much welcome the housing commitments in the national development plan beyond those in Rebuilding Ireland. In 2021, under Rebuilding Ireland, we will bring approximately 12,000 new homes into the social housing stock. This ambition is maintained for every year

of the national development plan to 2027. This means that roughly one third of all houses produced in the State from 2021 onwards will be social housing homes brought into that social housing stock by the State for citizens who need our help the most. I also welcome the commitment on water in the national development plan. More than €5 billion in additional funding is now being provided to Irish Water and to our strategic water ambitions beyond that which is already committed in the existing plan for Irish Water to 2021. Project Ireland 2040 is a very ambitious plan for our country. This is a great opportunity for us as a Government but also as an Oireachtas to put in place a strategic plan for every citizen in every community in our country.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The process to initiate a national planning framework began three years ago, we are told, and culminated last Friday. It was wrong of the Government to combine its publication with that of the national development plan and doubly wrong to term the combination Ireland 2040. Such a decision seeks to create, and to some extent has succeeded in creating, some confusion among the electorate and does not do justice to either document. Furthermore, the Dáil should be dealing with the two documents separately. The Government undoubtedly will say that the process in which we are engaged was agreed by the Business Committee but I am sure neither the Business Committee nor any member thereof was to know or be privy to what unfolded last Friday. I will make a statement on the national planning framework. I would rather it were not a statement; I would rather it were a debate. I would rather if the Government were answerable to the Dáil on the issue and the various questions that arise following its publication but again, I contend the Business Committee was taken for a ride.

The national planning framework replaces, or should be an improvement upon, the delivery of a concept first initiated and recorded in the form of the national spatial strategy in 2002. Its potential within that was driven in the main by the prioritisation of the national primary road network and its motorways together with the expansion of Dublin Airport, which, among other capital infrastructure and projects, served Ireland well and meant we were in a strong position to take advantage of the upturn following the crash. Unfortunately, Phil Hogan scrapped the national spatial strategy in 2012. I say “unfortunately” because it has not been strengthened or replaced since. This decision showed a disregard for national planning processes and has created regional and local uncertainty ever since. Fine Gael has had six years to replace it, and despite that length of time, that space, its replacement was binned a few short months ago and a SWAT team put in place to produce Friday’s publication. As I said, Friday’s publication was then intertwined with a national development plan. This reduced its impact and the ability of this House to debate it separately, which I think is necessary.

A national planning framework is a major planning blueprint for the future development of the country. Its concept, we were told, would take politics out of the planning process and out of any plan that might emanate from it. It was a major initiative, not necessarily to stifle Dublin’s growth but to counterbalance its development and to bring the cities into play. We acknowledge, accept, and agree with this concept. To achieve this, the plan sought to direct and improve the capacity of other cities and build on their critical mass in order for them to extend or exaggerate the natural pull on their regions, which they should drive. Anyone would expect that when one seeks to achieve this, it would not be at the expense or neglect of rural Ireland or other regions which do not have that natural critical mass in a city within its region. However, this is exactly what was done, and this was plainly evident in the draft document that was produced. That is what Fine Gael does: Fine Gael tells people what is best for them. We remember the last election when Fine Gael told the regions they were in the midst of a recovery. It does not do leg ups, it does leave behinds. In this instance, thankfully, it was not let do so.

The meaningless preparation and the fruitless consultation yielded a worthless document, support for which did not go beyond the politburo of the Fine Gael Cabinet members. The backlash from Opposition parties, stakeholders and the public was palpable and real. Despite being six years in the making and despite, one would have thought, having learned and improved upon the national spatial strategy, the Government was wholly inadequate in what it produced and it failed to meet the response necessary to tap into the mood of the regions. That was proved beyond doubt by the vehemence of the backlash.

I made a submission on behalf of Fianna Fáil in response to representations from my parliamentary colleagues, councillors, members of our party and many constituents. It specifically and plainly laid out the deficiencies and failings we saw in the plan. To be fair, some of them have been responded to adequately but more of them have not, hence the need, I would have thought and hoped, for a more honest and open debate on this issue rather than the statements that have been made.

With regard to fostering economic growth, we sought more broadly based regional and rural economic growth, and this has been addressed in some shape. The Minister mentioned the independent planning regulator. This is not necessarily a child of this process, but rather the planning tribunals, but we are glad to see legislation is forthcoming and it is mentioned in the planning and development Bill going through the Houses.

We mentioned the fact there did not appear to be an all-island approach, and very little mention, if any, of Brexit. We are glad to see this has been addressed and there is cognisance of it. We did not think the Minister went far enough on climate change and we see now in the planning framework there have been improvements in this area. The Minister mentioned the specific targeting of brownfield development in towns and cities, and I welcome the commitment in this regard. The implementation, monitoring and reviewing of plans over the course of its lifetime was not strong enough. This has been strengthened and I welcome it.

With regard to rural housing, the Minister specifically stated in the initial plan that the economic need for rural housing had to be the realisation of those who wish to pursue it. There is now mention of a social need, but in future there has to be autonomy for local authorities, whereby they can set their policy to meet and set the targets under which social and economic need can be met, because all counties are different. In my county, for example, priority is given to landowners or family members of landowners, those who can prove a tie to an area, and the provision of clusters of houses in areas where people congregate in villages and towns. This should also form part of it.

With regard to balanced regional development, any development would seek to weigh against the dominance we have seen in Dublin, which will be likely to continue in the future. As I stated earlier, the original plan had no vision, sight or recognition of balanced regional development, so much so that it had no provision, let alone a vision, for the north west or the midlands. It was unashamedly at the expense of those regions and neglected them. Has this been addressed? It has definitely sought to do so, but I contend it has not succeeded. It has taken away all together the population cap that seemed to be specific to various tier 2 towns in the region. I assume the emphasis will move to the regional plan and the spotlight will be taken off it in the context of a national perspective. The Minister will hope to get the caps through that process but I hope we will be able to withstand it.

The plan retains tier 1 growth. Taking my region in the midlands as an example, I will show

how it has failed in this regard. Far from talking down my region, I will briefly quote some facts available in the January 2018 ESRI report on the prospects for Irish regions and counties. The plan takes the midlands region as an encompassment of Dublin and the east, which is a mistake. I do not know how much of the report the Minister referred to with regard to the provisions made in the plan, but when the midlands region of Laois, Offaly, Westmeath and Longford without the inclusion of eastern counties is compared with the Border, Dublin, mid-east, south-east, west and south-west regions, it is the lowest with regard to jobs growth prospects and jobs growth history. It is also the lowest with regard to share of population growth in the past five to ten years. It is the same with regard to start-ups and IDA Ireland investment and visits. In almost every such analysis we will see these statistics. The national spatial strategy in its concept recognised the fabric and psyche of the midlands as I do, and as do Deputies from Mullingar and Portlaoise and as Deputies from Athlone did.

In developing economic scale outside Dublin, and given the absence of a significant city in areas such as the midlands, an integrated approach had the best potential to succeed. The ESRI projections show the greater Dublin area will continue to grow disproportionately unless there is an effective planning framework to address it. It shows that traffic delays, rising house prices, capacity constraints and infrastructure in Dublin will get worse. This is unnecessary as there is underused capacity in key midlands towns such as Mullingar, Tullamore and Portlaoise. Downplaying these towns as the plan seeks to do only accelerates continued overdevelopment in Dublin. Last week's Copenhagen Economics report on Brexit published by the Government suggests regional areas are likely to suffer most from job losses. This will be reinforced by downplaying resources in the towns I have mentioned and will affect the region on a greater scale.

There is a case in the midlands for an integrated plan which involves adequate resources for land use, transport and housing as well as the development of industrial tourism and agri-services. The potential to develop towns in the midlands that received only tier 2 status will be greatly limited by this. In this revised plan, there is an overemphasis on the definition of a city or town as the focus for development. In Ireland, particularly in the region I am using as an example, a city region-type approach has merit, and by this I mean a cluster of towns in a region. The midlands does not have one town that is large enough, has a critical mass or is vastly superior to others. It has four or five towns which have little distance between them. These towns are downplayed in the plan, and their potential for development and growth in a wide range of areas is greatly damaged.

I am sure now, having studied this, the final decision was not based on any scientific analysis or reputable independent report, such as the Indecon report commissioned by local authorities in the midlands in years past. It was based on the "yahoo" factor. Tier 1 status for Athlone means the region is included in the Dublin figures and the statistics will stack up. As I said to somebody last week, if it was that easy and we wanted the "yahoo" factor, we would have made Clara the capital of the midlands ten years ago. When we study what emanates from the website, which goes about studying each town and what benefits will accrue to it, it speaks about a water pipe running through - "yahoo" for that. It speaks about 3,500 houses in the four counties of the region, but in one of those counties only 12 were built in the past six years. There is nothing specific to relate it to this great status it has associated with it, but everything to lose for the others that are moved to tier 2 status. It reminds me of something I read recently where Will Ferrell stated ignorance is a key component of comedy.

Although not exclusively the remit of this process, but rather on foot of the planning tribunal

recommendation, we welcome the establishment of the regulator, which is part of the planning and development Bill going through the Houses. This leads me to several other points I want to mention. In my submission on behalf of Fianna Fáil, I recommended the establishment of a national infrastructural committee, which could realistically recommend and implement capital infrastructure to follow the national planning framework, which would follow the statutory placement of the national planning framework as devised and approved by Dáil Éireann. That would take the politics out of it. For Fine Gael and for the Minister to say again tonight that the national planning framework is on a statutory basis is a lie, I am afraid.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I said that it will be, following the legislation.

Deputy Barry Cowen: For Fine Gael to say that any objection to the national planning framework or to what is contained in it in some way deflects or stands in the way of the development plan is a lie. That lie has been repeated by An Taoiseach, and by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, on “Morning Ireland” the other day. It was repeated by the Minister himself on the “Today with Sean O’Rourke” programme, and it was repeated by the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, on “The Week in Politics” on Sunday. It needs to be corrected. The Minister must come into this House and be straight with the Irish people. Amendments to the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2016 that is currently going through the Oireachtas were tabled last week, and the Minister talked them down. He must give a commitment. If those amendments are accepted, will he adhere to the spirit of that legislation and put the planning framework before the House, to be adjudicated and passed here? That is the commitment the Minister must make to put an end to the lies I have heard in recent days.

The Government rushed the production of the national planning framework to get it published quickly, so that it could be called Government policy and it would not be subject to the Oireachtas. Last Wednesday, an amendment on this question was before the Seanad. The Government talked it down. The Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy English, was in the Seanad representing the Government on that issue. The Government does not want to adhere to the spirit of the Dáil. It does not want to adhere to the spirit of the amended legislation. It will adhere to the spirit of the legislation if it is not amended, all right-----

Deputy Damien English: We will debate it here, too.

Deputy Barry Cowen: -----because the Government could get away with it if that was the case.

The Dáil has been disregarded again, and it is not the first time, I am afraid. The only regard the Government is showing for the public in this area is through the prism of the special communications unit.

Last Thursday, sectoral interests, including the Construction Industry Federation, CIF, the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, and IBEC were briefed about this document before any elected Member had it. Later that day, selected members of the press were briefed before an elected Member got the detail of it here. The next day saw the razzmatazz in Sligo. We have seen the block-booking of half-page and full-page advertisements in national and local media. We have seen space taken in cinemas across the country. Short of putting in a freedom of information request to find out how much all of this is costing, I want to remind the Government of something.

This is not Fine Gael's money. This is taxpayers' money, and Ministers had better remember that. The taxpayers need to know where their money is being spent and what money is being used to address the here and now in 2018, let alone what is being spent to tell us about what is on the never-never for 2040. It does not pull the wool over our eyes and I do not think it will pull the wool over the eyes of the majority in this House.

For our part, we in Fianna Fáil will seek to dissect each aspect of the framework on one hand, and expose the duplicity in the development plan on the other. We will expose the double counting that has taken place in the development plan and allow the public to cast their eye on the fact that much of this is predicated on 4% growth, despite the impact Brexit may have during next few years.

We want to expose the lack of cost-benefit analysis, which was exposed by "Morning Ireland" in the presence of the Minister for Finance the other day. The Dáil will seek to expose it even further, as this shortcoming relates to many of the promises contained in this plan. We will expose the failure to provide timelines and schedules. It is our job and that of everybody else in this side of the House to get the truth, to cut through the spin, jargon and yahooing in order to allow the public to ascertain how much of the €116 billion has been announced before. How far can the commitments in this programme go and can they realistically be met? In 2015, Fine Gael launched a plan which supposedly cost €42 billion. Some 25 roads were contained in that plan. Only five have been started to date.

They are the kind of facts that will be in statements coming from this side of the House in the coming weeks. I again implore members of the Business Committee to meet with the Government Whip to investigate ways and means by which this would be debated and by which Members would ask questions to make the Government answerable. Before tonight's debate is over, I want a commitment from the Government's side of the House to acknowledge that the spirit of the legislation should be the spirit of the legislation amended by the Oireachtas - not the spirit of the legislation that Fine Gael introduced to the House and behind which it is hiding.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Deputy Cowen has dealt with the planning framework. I intend to focus my remarks on the so-called national development plan, NDP. It is ironic that the Ireland 2040 promotional campaign includes cinema advertisements at a time when the film awards season is at its height. Based on the actual content of the plan, in contrast to the hype surrounding its launch, various Ministers could be in line for best actor and best actress awards-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I would say best supporting actor.

Deputy Dara Calleary: -----and the plan itself would most definitely would win an award for screenplays. The hype of the launch was designed to distract from the many flaws in the plan. It was intended to distract from the Government's overall incompetence in delivering on big infrastructure projects to date.

On housing, this Fine Gael-led government and its Fine Gael-led predecessor have launched four housing plans, with at least a dozen PR events, accompanied by an endless supply of ministerial hard hats and high-visibility jackets. Yet more than 8,000 people, including 3,000 children, are homeless this evening. If the Government cannot deliver homes for children, how will it deliver on Ireland 2040?

On broadband, the Fine Gael-led government and its Fine Gael-led predecessor have made three separate announcements on rolling out a national broadband plan. The Government has

missed all of its own deadlines, leaving tens of thousands of homes without broadband. If the Government cannot deliver on basic broadband, how will it deliver on Ireland 2040?

Then there is public transport. Where is he again, the Scarlet Pimpernel of transport, Lord Ross? Before Christmas, Ministers queued up to be on the cross-city Luas with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, and the Taoiseach. However, they are all missing in action since the delays that have occurred because of the chaotic roll-out of this new service, which my colleagues will highlight this evening. If the Minister, Deputy Ross, cannot deliver a basic train service, how will he deliver on Ireland 2040? I could continue in this vein, but time is against me. However, when it comes to major infrastructure plans, the Government has a record of selling pups to the Irish people. This time they are not going to buy it.

I welcome the ambition. The Minister will know that I wanted to see capital expenditure increase to above EU levels. I have been calling for this for some time. However, the Government has sought to overwhelm us with the figure of almost €116 billion. If we divide €116 billion by ten years and consider that nearly €49 billion of that has already been committed to projects between 2016 and 2021, the increase in the proposed annual spend is relatively small.

Moreover, in what may become the biggest flaw in a plan of flaws, this plan and its promises are prepared on the basis that there will be no major economic shocks to the country during its ten-year implementation period, despite the potential impact of Brexit on our economic growth prospects. There is an irony in the fact that this plan was published in the same week as the Copenhagen Economics report on the impact of Brexit, as Deputy Cowen has mentioned. Published by a Department without any spin, this report showed that in a worst-case Brexit scenario, Ireland's output could be reduced by between €3 billion and €7 billion per year. Nobody wants to see that happen but if it does, what will become of Ireland 2040 then?

In his opening remarks, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, referred to the International Monetary Fund, IMF, public investment management assessment report of 2017, but as with so much within the NDP, there is very little action towards it. Last December, I published a Bill on behalf of Fianna Fáil that would implement that report's recommendations to ensure that taxpayers would get value for money and that best practice would be followed in each project. The Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Bill 2017 would mandate the Comptroller and Auditor General to formally review the performance of key projects that reach certain spending levels to ensure taxpayers get value for money. This Bill would bring Ireland into line with international best practice standards. In South Korea, for example, a fundamental review is triggered if the costs of a project rise by more than 20% in real terms, or if forecast demand falls by more than 30%.

Infrastructure has to be about more than ribbon-cutting opportunities for Ministers. This Bill will ensure that projects deliver on what they promised, that there is accountability around the spending of public money and that there is follow-up on poor performance. We have also proposed, as Deputy Cowen said, a national infrastructure commission.

Once again, dozens of organisations and Departments will be tasked with delivering this plan. This will lead to inevitable duplication and delay. In fact, many Government organisations will object to some of the provisions within this plan. In Fianna Fáil we have proposed a new national infrastructure commission should be established, tasked with planning ahead over a 25-year period. The commission should be tasked with a series of targets including achieving 4% of GDP infrastructure investment; decarbonising Ireland; developing a strong transport

network that balances regional development; making Ireland an IT nation with telecommunications connectivity that is relevant to the day; and a secure, balanced energy mix. The commission's reports should be laid before the Oireachtas and subject to scrutiny, unlike this plan. Departments will be required to draw up plans based on the commission's recommendations as passed by the Oireachtas. What is wrong with setting up a body to deliver the plan and having the ambition to make the plan accountable?

Both Ministers referred to the new funds for urban and rural regeneration, around which there has been the greatest hype. There is no doubt that the concept of both these funds is excellent. However, an initial analysis shows flaws. The urban regeneration and development fund seems to pit projects in the chosen cities of Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Limerick and Galway against projects in the 41 towns with a population in excess of 10,000. A sum of €2 billion over ten years equates to €200 million a year. Ambitious and worthy projects were previously identified within the five cities, which will reduce the fund further, leaving crumbs for the 41 towns. So much for regional balance. In the case of both funds, local authorities are mentioned as potential partners for co-financing. These are the same local authorities under the charge of the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government that do not have the money to fix regional and local roads after such a bad winter, yet he expects them to be partners in a multi-billion euro fund. He should get real about the financial condition of our local authority. We will engage with him in the roll-out of the terms and conditions of the funds but he should not hype them to the extent that he has.

How many of the announced projects, whether they were announced previously or are new announcements, have planning permission? In recent years, our planning system has become clogged with large projects, objections and further delays caused by a lack of resources in An Bord Pleanála. If the Government is serious about implementing the plan, as opposed to launching it, the Minister needs to power up An Bord Pleanála to give it the intellectual, financial and IT capacity to deal with what emerges from the plan. A fully resourced board will ensure Ireland 2040 does not become Ireland 2080.

During these statements - this is not a debate - my colleagues will deal with the specific areas of the plan that relate to their various portfolios. I refer to my county. I welcome the commitments in respect of Ireland West Airport Knock and the specific recognition given to it in both the NDP and the NPF. The consultation with the European Commission was referred to by the Taoiseach last Friday evening as something "that was about to begin" regarding state aid but that has been under way for some years. The Minister for Finance initiated it when he was Minister for Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport years ago. That is still going on and needs to be brought to a conclusion as soon as possible in order that this investment can proceed. A strategic development zone, SDZ, is being developed at the airport. Mayo County Council needs to given the proper resources to bring this SDZ to market as soon as possible

I welcome to the commitment to a review of the potential of the western rail line extension from Athenry to Tuam and from Tuam to Claremorris. The western rail corridor offers a major opportunity to improve the industrial and manufacturing offering of the west and could make a significant contribution to decarbonising our economy. However, this review needs to be open to the communities and organisations involved and not become a box ticking exercise in some Department with a predetermined outcome. I welcome also the proposed upgrades to the N5 between Scramogue and Ballaghderreen, but my earlier warnings on planning apply. The N5 Turlough to Westport upgrade was reannounced in this plan. However, when this was previously announced, all we got was a row of glorified garden fences and, therefore, I will withhold

judgment until I see a road. I am angry at the virtual deletion of the N26, which connects Ballina to the N5, from the national roads programme to 2027. It receives a mere nod in this plan with no indication of follow up in terms of budget or timelines. This road is necessary and long overdue, as it is an essential social and industrial artery. The notion that it has been delayed because of planning challenges represents a failure of commitment and imagination that is in evidence in respect of other roads in similar condition and that must be reversed. Similarly, in the long list of regional roads featuring in the plan, which funnily align with the constituencies of Ministers, the R312 between Erris and Castlebar is not deemed worthy of Government support. Connectivity is the buzz word of this plan but the meat within it suggests that connectivity will be weak. There are many other flaws but I will deal with them on another occasion.

Last Friday, the emperor and his foot soldiers gathered under the shadow of Ben Bulbin and offered a new dawn for Ireland. We had Yeats and every other kind of poetry going. The Minister for Finance used doctored quotes from Ted Kennedy. However, in offering that new dawn, it was the same dawn the Government has offered on two or three occasions previously except this time the dawn was brighter because it was painted brighter and the spinning, packaging and pizzazz was better. The Ministers must be proud but I do not know if they will feature in the advertisements, “Coming to a cinema near you”. This dawn will turn out like all those promised by the Government previously - it will never turn into day.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Is it on Netflix?

Deputy Dara Calleary: One never knows but I do not think they will get a second series.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I wish to share time with Deputies Pearse Doherty and Martin Kenny.

I welcome the Ministers back from Sligo. As I watched the launch of the plan on the Sligo IT website last Friday, it struck me that it was probably the most expensive press conference in the history of the State. Not only was there a fancy website that people were busy uploading nicely produced documents to all morning, but there were radio, television and cinema advertisements, as previous speakers said. Is that the first time advertisements promoting something like this have been shown in a cinema? It had the feel of the launch of an election campaign rather than a strategic document but people can make up their own minds on that. The speeches were incredibly poetic, particularly those of the Ministers for Finance and Housing, Planning and Local Government. However, there was a lack of detail and I hope we will get clarity on some issues during the debate over the next number of days.

Sinn Féin supports the principle of a national planning framework and we support the idea of a high level strategic document. We tried to focus on high level strategic issues in our contributions and submissions. We also support the NPF being placed on a statutory footing and I will come back to that crucial issue later. I acknowledge the work of departmental officials not only in the preparation of the documentation, but particularly in their willingness to make themselves available to the housing committee and to committee members to assist us in properly understanding the complexities of the issues at hand. We have benefited from that.

Sinn Féin was critical of the final draft of the document and some of those criticisms are worth mentioning. The population targets were too concentrated on Dublin and its commuter belt and we were concerned at the weakness of the all-Ireland dimension. We were absolutely concerned at the silence on the north west, a crucial part of our island. We commented in sub-

missions on the weakness on issues such as public transport and climate change mitigation and, most important, on an issue I raised from the outset, which is the spatial dimension of socio-economic disadvantage and the way in which generation after generation in particular parts of our country and our cities have continually been left behind because of bad decisions or lack of decisions by successive Governments and the need for that to be explicitly dealt with the framework if that is to be reversed.

I acknowledge that there are significant changes in the final document which relate to issues we raised in our submissions, but many of us continue to have genuine concerns about the content. I do not accept it represents a paradigmatic shift, as the Ministers suggested. More work is needed but I would like to focus on the policy objectives. If the NPF is ever put on a statutory footing, it will have legal force and strength *vis-à-vis* county development plans and regional development plans. Chapter 2, “A New Way Forward”, deals with population. The Minister is correct that 75% of population growth will take place outside Dublin but 50% will be in the east and midlands regions and I am genuinely concerned that without proper action by central and local government, that 50% growth will be concentrated in Dublin city and the commuter belt and, therefore, even though 75% of growth is projected to take place outside Dublin, 50% will be in Dublin and its commuter belt with negative impacts. I know that is not the intention of the plan but it is a real concern which needs to be addressed not just in the regional and local plans but in the direction of the central plan. It is not clear from reading the document how that will be avoided. I would like the Minister to respond to that question.

I welcome the inclusion of the north-western region, which was not there earlier, in this section. I also welcome the setting of targets for the north west and mention of interconnections between Letterkenny, Dundalk, Drogheda and Newry. While it is valuable that they are now included in the policy objectives, the outworkings of the investment decisions and the benefits for the people along those crucial corridors have to be further spelt out.

Employment targets need to be more than regional because within the regions certain areas are already lagging behind. While there is job growth in the south east it is not as fast as, for example, in the south west or other parts of the State. Therefore, if we are to ensure that the job growth at regional level adequately spills down to the sub-regional level, further attention needs to be paid to that.

Inner city communities in all the large urban areas, or working class suburban areas that have suffered historic State neglect, also need to be adequately focused on. It is not clear from the document how it is intended to address those. While this is a high level strategic document that does not detail its implementation, there needs to be a little more direction to the regional assemblies and local authorities to ensure that while they develop local detail they are mindful of regions or urban areas that suffer more acute levels of socio-economic disadvantage and are not experiencing the job growth of other areas.

I welcome Chapter 3, “Effective Regional Development”, which is the big addition to the plan. It is not clear why the primary focus is on building up the larger cities, how that development will filter down in meaningful and structured ways to those broader regions. I am not asking for all the detail to be provided but for some direction to be given to the regional and local authorities so that they can do that. I also note in this section that there are no policy objectives. There are priorities in terms of development and so-called growth enablers but I presume they do not have the same legal standing as core policy objectives, as would be the case for a county or city development plan, an important distinction if this plan is ever put on a statutory footing.

The north west remains the weakest served area in this section of the document. That needs more attention, particularly the area north of Sligo. The all-Ireland dimension is still too weak. While there are improvements more can be done.

I fully support the focus in Chapter 4, “Making Stronger Urban Places”, on rebuilding and repopulating our urban cores. That is an eminently sensible policy objective and we all need to get behind it. I also support the focus on brownfield development and density although not at the expense of standards in respect of the quality or size of the accommodation. Residential development in urban centres must be accompanied by adequate transport and public services and that is why the national development plan, which Deputy Pearse Doherty will address, is so crucial. Affordability is also central. One of the reasons our inner city cores are depopulated is the high price of land. It is all very well to say we will develop those inner city cores but if there is not a real, concerted effort to ensure that the residential development there is genuinely affordable for average working families it will not succeed. The Minister knows I am very critical of his approach to affordability. Something on that front will have to change if that area is to be tackled seriously.

The regeneration and development agency has real potential if it is given significant powers not only to co-operate and collaborate with other public agencies and local authorities but to take hold of that land to ensure it is used in the most effective way. An example is the recent TV coverage of RTÉ looking to sell prime residential land for profit rather than the land being mobilised in the most effective way to meet affordable housing need in that area. Just across the road is the CIÉ bus station in Donnybrook, a place where there should be no bus garage. If there was a strong land management agency it could work with those relevant authorities and in some cases force them, if it had the powers, to swap those landholdings for lands held by local authorities on the edges of the city, near the M50, to ensure the best possible use of that land. If that is the Government’s intention, and if it is in the legislation that it brings forward, it will have our support because that could be the most valuable element of the additional changes to this plan. The agency needs to be in the business of land swaps and acquisitions, including streamlined compulsory purchase orders of strategically significant pieces of land that could be used for residential or mixed residential and commercial development.

In respect of Chapter 5, “Planning for Diverse Rural Places”, the idea in the public debate in recent weeks that this plan is rural versus urban was frustrating. Those of us who were critical of the over-concentration on Dublin at an earlier stage made the point that it was as bad for Dublin as for rural Ireland. We need to ensure the plan assures those social and economic spill-over effects into the less populated parts of the island just as it does for the regions.

We also need to have a grown up and honest debate about one-off rural housing. Some of the changes in the document are welcome but one-off housing cannot be allowed to proliferate at huge cost to the taxpayer because of the expense of delivering those homes. At the same time we cannot say to people living on rural farmland that they cannot develop if there is no affordable housing on the edges of towns or in the inner cities. The debate needs to be about how we square that circle of ensuring that people have affordable homes close to their places of work or where they come from in a way that does not impose too heavy a cost on the environment or on the taxpayer through the provision of public services. I am not sure we have had that debate yet, although it is not just a matter for Government, it is for all of us.

I do not have time to go into detail about chapters 6, 7 and 8 but unless there is adequate investment in the areas these chapters cover, the aspirations and policy objectives in the document

will not be very meaningful. The target of 550,000 new homes is meaningless unless there is a clear mechanism for delivering them. For example, it is disappointing that there is nothing on vacant housing stock or better management of the vacant housing stock alongside the introduction of new units. Unless there is a realisation that direct investment by the State in the delivery of affordable homes to rent and buy on public lands becomes a major policy objective and spending commitment those areas will not see significant progress.

The new statutory guidelines in section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 are potentially very interesting but we need to see more detail. That is not in the document. I like the idea of the housing need demand assessment by local authorities but I would like to see it done on a five-year cycle to govern long-term planning for local authorities rather than the present two to three year housing plans. I could say more about public transport and rural Ireland and the sustainable future sections but I will leave them to my colleagues. These are weak sections, given the kind of ambition in the rhetoric in Sligo on Friday versus their detail.

The Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2016 before the Seanad states that the draft of the planning framework would come to both Houses of the Oireachtas for approval and then be published. No draft has been approved by either House. The Minister is right to say a motion was passed by the Houses on 3 October to refer it to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government for comment. No vote on the approval of the draft has taken place. Therefore, I do not understand how the national planning framework can be on a statutory footing and nothing the Minister has said has clarified that. I have written to the Chairman of the committee asking that it seek independent legal advice, as is our right, to clarify that matter. I hope I get the support of other colleagues on this. The Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, should want this to be clarified and, clearly, on a statutory footing. I do not accept the version of events he has given today. I do not accept the Government's assurance that what has happened to date will mean this is on a statutory footing when the Bill becomes law, which we expect it to do. Perhaps the best way to do it is to allow the housing committee to seek that legal advice to get the clarity we all need.

This is a better draft than the earlier version. If I had more time I would go into more details. It would have been much better, however, if the Minister had brought the draft that was published on Friday into a committee process in the House. This would have allowed a real detailed scrutiny rather than the Second Stage speeches we are left with here today. It would have given Members the option of making amendments to the document, as happens in county and city plans. If the Minister had done this, Members would have taken the responsibility seriously and we would have engaged with the Minister constructively. The plan would have been all the better for it. The Minister chose not to do that. As a consequence the plan is weaker. We will continue to work constructively with the Government on it because we want to ensure the plan is right. There will have to be a vote in the Oireachtas on a plan if it is to be on a statutory footing. When we get the legal advice to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government it will be confirmed and we will be back debating this issue at some point in the near future.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I now invite Deputy Pearse Doherty, and as the Member in possession I ask that he adjourns the debate at 8 p.m.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Now that we have regained our balance after all the spin of the weekend we are left with a document called the national development plan representing the new capital plan. I say "new" but when one actually reads through it there is a real taste of reheated

dinner here. It is a plan that is meant to catch up for the last decade that was lost to austerity as Government after Government made the wrong choices, despite being told by Sinn Féin and others that this was exactly what they were doing.

Capital spending was always the low hanging fruit and unfortunately we had a Fianna Fáil Government and a Fine Gael Government that picked at it until the tree was bare. Now we have a massive housing crisis, hospital wards are overcrowded with trolleys and there is creaking infrastructure. Mar a thuilleann tú a gheobhaidh tú. Tá muidne fós ag fulaingt de bharr easpa infheistíochta agus polasaí an rualoiscthe a bhí curtha i bhfeidhm ag na páirtithe coimeádacha. Aithním go molann an plean seo tuilleadh infheistíochta a dhéanamh, ach ní théann sé fada go leor agus muidne chomh fada sin ar chúl. It is a cynical plan in promising nice things in the far future but little in the here and now. This really sums up the plan. It also represents a recommitment to the flawed, wasteful and expensive public private partnership model. It is a plan dripping with partitionism. It is not a fit plan for a modern or united Ireland. It is not even a real plan for a partitioned Ireland lagging behind on public services and infrastructure.

If there is an issue with the fiscal rules then a full campaign to achieve flexibility, especially in light of Brexit, must be waged. Sinn Féin would support the Government in doing this. There is more money on the table here for investment over the next few years. That is always to be welcomed. It is important to say that. The return on investment and the cost to be paid for underinvesting are well established.

No country can ever stand still. Roads will crack, buildings will grow too small as populations grow, water pipes will rust and bust, and hospital wards will become outdated and in some cases they will become dangerous. For far too long short-term spending and unsustainable tax cuts have poisoned political discourse in the State. There is a whole part of the picture missing in the plan with no comment on the need for engineering skills and reforms of procurement policies. This is a major gap in the plan. It is impossible to balance the spin in this plan about investment and future proofing while in the same building the Department of Finance officials plan on how to cut more and more taxes.

Is this plan good enough? Is it good enough for the next generation? Is it good enough for the children who will start school in September? Is it good enough for those people who are on waiting lists today? The answer to all of these questions is that it is far from good enough. This is a plan for standing still. It is a plan to build a State that is not far from falling part but far from excelling in public infrastructure. When we cut through the spin it is a lot of headlines covering an attempt to build a country on the cheap. The scale of investment that is needed is not reflected in this plan. This is at the core of the capital plan. Brexit is looming and Ireland is a decade behind others, as the Taoiseach likes to point out, but over the next four years only an extra 10% in capital spending is planned above what has already been announced and with only 9% more next year. This is hardly visionary. It is the bare minimum. The immediate up-front spend is lacking in the plan. The fiscal rules allow for money to be front-loaded this way but it seems a political calculation has been made that people will not notice the smog if they are looking at the clouds. The more detailed the proposals the more distant they are. Cé gur cuid riachtanach dár infreastruchtúr é an leathanbhanda, mar shampla, tá na mílte teaghlach is comhlacht fós ag fanacht air. Gheall Rialtas Fhianna Fáil go soláthrófar seirbhísí leathanbhanda deich mbliana ó shin. Cén uair a chuirfear na seirbhísí seo ar fáil? Níl am ar bith leagtha síos sa phlean. Níl gealltanais ar bith tugtha. Níl a fhios againn cén uair a bheidh leathanbhanda ar fáil. Níl aon bharúil againn faoin mhéad a chosnóidh sé faoin bplean. Níl cliú againn cé a chuirfidh ar fáil é mar níl sé sin sa phlean ach oiread.

Let us consider the promises made in health. A ward block was announced for University Hospital Limerick even though it was needed years ago. Without a doubt it is welcome but let us consider the reality. University Hospital Limerick consistently has some 40 to 50 patients on trolleys each day. Last year in University Hospital Limerick there were 8,869 patients left on trolleys. I could say the same for Donegal but that does not appear in the plan. Two of the headline announcements in the health section of the plan are the national children's hospital and the national maternity hospital but these projects were announced years ago. A new endoscopy suite was announced for Naas General Hospital. While this proposal is welcome I hope it fares better than the surgery theatre there that has not been used once in 15 years because they do not have the staff to run it. This is despite the fact that nearly 7,000 people are on waiting lists there. I hope the proposed endoscopy suite for Naas General Hospital fares better than the maternity theatre that was built in Letterkenny General Hospital in 2000 and which has never once been used because this Government, like the previous Governments, was unwilling to put in the resources to staff the theatre. While thousands and thousands of people linger on the waiting lists consultants fight for theatre space and theatre time.

The Government wonders why people are cynical about this plan. The long-term planning is still lacking in vision once we chip away the frills. Important roads like the Letterkenny bypass are to be looked at and hopefully progressed. The high-speed Dublin-Belfast rail link is to get a feasibility study. This is a plan up to 2040. The Government was free to let its imagination run riot and to put out an ambitious plan for the future of Ireland up to 2040. However, no one in the whole Government dared to try to imagine a rail link to the north west. When we cut through the spin we have a political wish list that will fool nobody.

It is disheartening to see that after the collapse of Carillion and the overwhelming evidence now that public private partnerships, PPPs, are the wrong choice, this plan recommits to their use. We have, apparently, had a review of PPPs and we are told that everything is grand. The criticism from the IMF has been brushed away and the Government is to commit to decades more of public money being wasted on these inefficient schemes. Whatever case could be made in the bad times for PPPs as an emergency measure is long gone. After the collapse of Carillion a Member of the British House of Lords said:

PPPs enabled you, at least in the short term, to dress up considerable amounts of public expenditure and put them off the public sector balance sheet. That is not a good reason for adopting something which, in my judgment, does not give good value for money for the taxpayer, and it introduces a degree of moral hazard, which we see very much in the Carillion affair.

This was not a mad leftie. This speaker was Nigel Lawson, who was Maggie Thatcher's Chancellor. PPPs are a bad idea and including them in this plan as a key element is a costly mistake. This plan is a lie in its very name. This is not a national development plan. It is a plan for a partitioned country. It is a partitionist development plan. It speaks of the development of Ireland's three regions while ignoring the north of our country. The plan speaks of Ireland's main cities but does not mention Derry or the industrial city of Belfast.

8 o'clock

It also speaks of roads to some place called the Border. Unfortunately, this does not cut it. We will deal with it further on Committee Stage.

Dublin Traffic: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy John Lahart: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

- the increased investment in the Luas;
- the introduction of Luas Cross City;
- the extra carriages to meet demands on the Luas;
- the large number of suburbs, towns and villages in the Dublin region that do not have Luas, Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART), or dedicated public transport corridors;
- the recent National Planning Framework and National Development Plan which contains very long-term measures in public transport infrastructure;
- that Dublin is the fifteenth most congested city in the world;
- the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport's analysis of the cost of congestion is now about €350 million per annum in terms of lost productivity and time;
- that, by 2033, this could reach €2 billion; and
- that cyclists, pedestrians, commercial traffic, private motorists and public transport users are all suffering as a consequence of city and suburban congestion;

condemns:

- the lack of forward planning to allow for the introduction of Luas Cross City;
- the latest traffic chaos in Dublin city centre and surrounding routes as a result of the above;
- the delays on the M50 at peak times, which is impacting negatively on commuters' quality of life;
- the backlogs of traffic on College Green and overall traffic in Dublin city centre, in particular the impact of the extra carriages;
- the lack of bus connections and adequate public transport corridors in large suburban areas in Dublin;
- the unnecessary bottlenecks caused on the quays due to lack of proper planning for the Luas extension;
- the negative impact on people's lives this traffic chaos is causing;
- the delays it is having on buses bringing thousands to work on a daily basis;
- the lack of investment in extra buses to meet public demands;

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- the lack of park and ride facilities on DART and Luas lines; and
 - the complete lack of investment in park and rides for buses; and
- calls for:
- short to medium-term policy changes to get routes into and in Dublin moving again;
 - the improvement of all public service routes into and in Dublin to increase usage;
 - an increase to the number of feeder buses to the Luas and DART;
 - an increase to the number of buses at peak times;
 - quality bus corridors and bicycle routes to be increased;
 - more buses to be supplied to access Dublin city centre and decrease the use of cars;
 - more investment to supply more park and rides earlier on bus routes on the N11, N3, N7 and N4;
 - the electrification of the Maynooth and M3 Parkway commuter service line;
 - proper demographic planning to deliver efficient and independent public transport infrastructure into and in Dublin city centre;
 - immediate investment to increase carpark facilities at train stations;
 - the introduction of incentives for utilising park and rides further out on bus and rail routes; and
 - the usage of the River Liffey to assist with inner city bottlenecks as is done in other European cities.

I am sharing time with colleagues. I will be taking five minutes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is a matter of party discipline. The Deputies decide for how long they will speak.

Deputy John Lahart: Yes. Could the clock be started again from now?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As it was only 20 seconds, we will give that to the Deputy.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. The Minister cuts a lonely, isolated, abandoned figure tonight. There are no Fine Gael Deputies to back him up on a pretty serious debate in Private Members' time about traffic congestion in Dublin. There is a memorable line in the movie "Lincoln", in which Daniel Day-Lewis portrayed the character of Abraham Lincoln. In his struggle to achieve the requisite critical votes required to outlaw slavery, he exhorts his colleagues to greater efforts on his behalf. He says, "I am the President of the United States, clothed with immense power." The Minister has considerable powers and authority vested in him, although they may not be akin to those of the President of the United States. However, instead of using these powers to bring about change and to get things moving

in our capital after an historic investment in its transport infrastructure, and instead of acting like the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, he has become the Minister for standstill.

We should not target the Minister exclusively however. This is a Government of standstill when it comes to traffic congestion and chaos. I warned the Minister about this the last time this topic was raised during a Topical Issues debate two months ago. The Minister ridiculed my prediction that the longer carriages would create traffic chaos on the quays. In retrospect the Minister was right and I was wrong because the longer trams have not just caused chaos on the quays, but have created traffic challenges across the city. It has created challenges for pedestrians, motorists, commercial vehicles and other modes of public transport.

In retrospect responsibility for the chaos being experienced in the city reflects on a number of Ministers and their Departments, not just on Deputy Ross. The Taoiseach and Minister for Finance were very eager to elbow Deputy Ross out of the picture and to ensure that the Taoiseach's media communications showed footage of the two of them which was copied onto the Fine Gael website and Twitter feed. Where are they now? Where have they been for the last few months? It also reflects on the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government who has authority over the four Dublin local authorities that have a role in this matter. It reflects on the Minister for Justice and Equality who has responsibility for An Garda Síochána including the traffic corps, which has been overlooked in the present debacle and for which no role has been found. It is not just about the city, it is about the suburbs, the M50 and the commuter belt routes into the capital. Most of all it reflects on the entire Government collectively, which signed off on a national development plan that offers absolutely no solutions to the traffic congestion facing Dubliners in the here and now.

We on this side of the House are proud of the role we played in developing infrastructure in this city, from the port tunnel to the incredible roads infrastructure including the M50 and its extensions. The recovery has been based on this infrastructure. That is acknowledged in the introduction to the national development plan. The Government has set out some grand plans, many of which are rehashed, but none of them addresses the congestion that is growing in the city in the here and now. It is like being stranded on a desert island and the Government sending a supertanker for the rescue. Such a tanker gets stranded way out on the horizon, far from reach, when what is needed are some speed boats, sail boats or even canoes to help get us off the island. The national development plan offers nothing to commuters, cyclists, walkers, drivers or public transport users today, tomorrow or in the immediate future. A child born today will not use any of the proposed transport infrastructure until he or she is ready for post-primary school. They may be going to college before some of the projects are completed, if they ever are.

Congestion is costing €350 million annually. What plans does the Minister have to relieve congestion in Dublin in the short term? What plans does he have to relieve congestion on the M50? How does he propose to address the fact that Dublin Bus journey times have increased by 110% in the last three months? What steps has he and the Government taken to co-ordinate the work of the more than 40 traffic agencies which serve the city? What measures does he have in mind to fill the gap while we wait for the infrastructure on the horizon? The Luas account has tweeted 70 times since 1 February to apologise for various faults. Trams are overcrowded, sometimes dangerously so. People in my constituency are able to see the M50 but getting onto it is a completely different matter. What tangible proposals does the Minister have to address the fact that the majority of our quality bus corridors account for only 30% of their routes? Why has the Fine Gael-led Government abandoned large swathes of Dublin in its national development plan proposals?

Last year the Dáil unanimously approved my Private Members' motion for a traffic advisory council made up of all stakeholders. Why has nothing been done about that? Whose decision was it to allow 27 bus routes to be changed in a series of reactive measures and whose decision is it to emasculate Dublin Bus in the midst of the Luas cross city debacle? If the Minister is to avoid the title of "standstill" we need to hear how he and his Government colleagues intend to deal with the enormous gulf which has opened up between practical initiatives and measures which are needed now and the supertanker of infrastructure which is out on the horizon.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this debate. Anyone who travels around Dublin will be well aware of the gridlock that exists in our transportation system. To give an example, this evening I had to be in Killarney Street, which is 2 km away from here, for 5 p.m. I did not get there because I was offered a lift in a car. I should have gone on my bike, which is outside, but I foolishly accepted a lift in a car. It took me 30 minutes to get from Leinster House to Killarney Street, a journey which would have taken ten minutes on a bike. That is just one illustration of the gridlock which exists in the centre of the city. In addition, anyone who uses the Luas will know that if one wants to get on it in the Minister's constituency or mine, one has a very slim chance of getting on between 8 a.m. and 8.30 a.m. The Minister may be aware of this. There is simply not enough physical room to get onto the Luas.

I want to deal with one aspect of the transport system which has been ignored not just by the Minister, but by the Government. It is an area of transportation which has huge potential and which is used widely in the city at present but which the Government has not given the resources or attention it deserves. I want to refer to people in this city who cycle. There are a huge number of people in this city who cycle into work on a daily basis. I cannot claim to do it every day, but I do it most days. We have seen from research carried out that the number of people using bikes in this city has doubled in the past six years. In 2017 there were very nearly 95,000 people using bikes on a daily basis in the capital city. It is becoming an increasingly popular and effective form of transport and the statistics show that between 2015 and 2016 there was a rise of more than 17% in the number of persons using bikes in this city.

We have also seen the extraordinary success of the dublinbikes scheme. It started when I was a member of Dublin City Council. At that time I was told that it would be extended beyond the canals. To date, that has not happened. We need to ensure that happens promptly, but it will only happen if adequate funding is provided by the Minister and the Government to ensure that we can extend out this extremely successful and effective form of public transport. I had an opportunity to look at the national development plan, as did most Members of this House, in order to see what is provided in it for cycleways. I wanted to find out what the Government's vision is not only for 2040, but for the near future in terms of providing cycle lanes throughout the country. Cycling is mentioned in the plan but only in a very general and limited way. It talks about the delivery of a comprehensive cycling and walking network for Ireland's cities. We need more specifics than that.

It is surprising that so many people are cycling as many threats are posed to cyclists. I regret to say it is extremely dangerous to cycle around this city. The Government needs to ensure greater protection for cyclists. Some 15 cyclists were killed in this city in 2017. I would like to hear the Minister talk about that and about measures that can be introduced to make cycling safer for people. One of the ways in which that can be done is by having designated cycling lanes. We have one or two of them in the city. There is one that goes down by the canal in my own constituency. It is hugely popular. However, there is no vision or plan in place to ensure that this type of cycle path can be extended beyond that area and throughout the city to a further

degree.

We also need a vision for cycling. In other cities in Europe, where there are successful cycle paths and where people engage in cycling happily and safely, there have been government plans behind it. In Amsterdam and Berlin, where proposals were announced recently, there is a vision to encourage and protect cyclists. Many people want to see their children cycling to school but they are concerned that they will not be safe. Regrettably, we do not have a vision for protecting cyclists at present. We do not have a vision as to how we can promote cycling to increase its use. People want to cycle. We have seen it from the use of dublinbikes that people are prepared to use it. More people want to avail of it. It really is for the Minister and the Government to drive this mode of safe transport that can be of such benefit to society as a whole.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I welcome the motion that has been tabled by our spokesperson on Dublin, Deputy Lahart. It is a sad and sorry coincidence that on the evening we are debating this motion, a further 17 bus routes have been redirected out of the centre of Dublin. Some 27 routes have now been moved away from College Green, while 30% of the total buses that serve the centre of Dublin have now been moved out of the city. It is basically down to very bad forward planning. It is an indictment of what should be an integrated public transport system. We are simply replacing one mode of transport with another.

I do not lay the blame for that solely at the Minister's door but I lay the responsibility for it at his door. Genuinely, it is a really sad indictment of the Government and how it feels about Dublin, Dublin commuters and those who are living and working in Dublin that there is not one Government Deputy here with the exception of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. There is not one Fine Gael Member in the Chamber, nor are Deputies from any of the other parties here at present. I am consistently hearing about there being this lurch towards Dublin, about overdevelopment in Dublin and the need for regionalisation. That need absolutely exists but who suffers in the meantime? It is not just the regions but also Dublin.

The Minister and his Government colleagues, particularly the Taoiseach, do not understand what it is like to be a commuter or what it is like to spend one and a half hours in a car to travel ten miles in this city. They do not understand what it is like to queue up for half an hour to try and get on a train that only goes every half hour from the commuter belt into Dublin.

This is a great county and a great city to live and work in. I am a very proud Dub myself. However, it is being choked at the moment. The city is choked and the county is at an absolute crawl. We can do a lot better but we need to get real about our issues and who the decision makers are. The city manager, the chief executive of Dublin City Council and the councillors in Dublin city, and particularly the executive branch of the city council need to be brought under the control of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. We need an integrated approach between the four local authorities. It is giving rise not only to a loss of investment and potential, but also to a serious loss of quality of life and people are turning away from the city and the county.

One example given this evening was the 17 additional bus routes that have been diverted to make way for the longer Luas cross city. It should not be one or the other. I will get another opportunity as we discuss the national development plan to talk about other failures like metro north, DART underground, the airport and all the other developments that we so badly need. This evening I am talking about the short-term measures, what we are doing to improve the situation but also what we are doing to make it worse.

I received a letter yesterday from the National Transport Authority on foot of a parliamentary question I put to the Minister. It is about Fairview, an area outside my constituency. It is one of only two arterial routes into the city from the north city and county. Everyone from Howth Head right through to Bayside, Baldoyle, Sutton and Clontarf, and everyone as far north as Donabate, Portrane, Rush, Lusk and Skerries right down through Malahide and up through Darndale and Coolock uses Fairview to access the city. What did our city councillors and city manager do? Before Christmas, they decided without debate in the city council to close one of those vehicular routes into the city on Fairview Strand. That is a decision that affects the whole city and county. I put it to the Minister that it is not a decision the city council should have taken without debate in its chamber, as it affects the whole city and county. That is just one example.

There has got to be an integrated approach to public transport and commuting, for those who use the car, those who cycle as Deputy O’Callaghan has mentioned, and those who use the train like I do every day. I commute to this House on the DART. Without planning, we will not get an integrated approach. Journey times are being extended, businesses are losing money and commuters are leaving Dublin. We can decide to have a modern city that actually works or we can be happy with a city that is choked and is choking to death. That is what is happening to Dublin, a city I am very proud to represent. The Minister and his Government unfortunately are letting Dublin down.

Deputy John Curran: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this motion proposed by my colleague, Deputy Lahart. In the two years since the Minister, Deputy Ross, was appointed, he has seen significant increases in the volume of traffic in the greater Dublin area. That has resulted also in an increase in passengers on all forms of public transport. The Minister will quite rightly say it is a result of economic activity and I acknowledge that. However, as the increase has occurred, journey times have lengthened, congestion has increased and there is an economic cost to the city.

This is not an issue that is new to the Minister. We have raised it before in different ways. What I would like to get from tonight’s debate is a change in tack. I know the Minister has a prepared answer from the Department that will probably make reference to what has been done in the last years and will refer to the mid-term capital review, the €2.6 billion or €2.7 billion over the four-year period, the €770 million for BusConnects and so forth. That is all fine but we have heard it before. I ask the Minister to park it for a moment and to engage constructively with us. The long-term projects to which the Minister refers will be needed but we also need a strategy to deal with short-term issues. We cannot condemn communities right across Dublin and the suburbs to increased congestion for the next five and ten years as these major capital projects are delivered.

I want the Minister to listen to a couple of different issues that affect my area. We hear regularly on the radio that traffic is backed up on the N7 as far as Citywest and Rathcoole. It used to be the Red Cow roundabout; it is back that far now. Those living in Rathcoole only have one exit if they are city bound, out at Avoca and across the bridge onto the N7. That whole community is in a bottleneck in the mornings because the congestion from Dublin is that far back.

Clondalkin village is served by public transport but while there is mainline rail and the Luas, there is no joined-up thinking. For the vast majority of people, the bus is the only option because the Luas and the mainline rail are too far away. There is no bus service linking all of those as hubs. We need to look at how that might be done ahead of some of the increased infrastructure to which the Minister refers.

The national development plan was published recently and for many people living in the Lucan area, it was the final nail in the coffin. For years, they were promised there would be a Luas line to Lucan. The line is still on the map but on page 55 of the national development plan as published, it is clearly indicated that it is a post-2027 development. For the next ten years there will be no Luas line servicing the greater Lucan area. While that is bad enough in itself, it impacts on other decisions; the bus rapid transit corridors will not be provided because it is deemed that they would be running in parallel with the Luas. These issues are not going to affect this generation, it is the next generation.

I have indicated to the Minister on several occasions that the number of passengers on public transport has increased. I have asked him again and again how many additional buses we will see in Dublin next year. What was the Minister's reply? That it is a matter for the NTA. We got in touch with the National Transport Authority and it said it depends on how much money it receives. The final reply, which was the best of all, was when the NTA wrote back to say:

We now have the budget allocation for 2018. It was confirmed to us in recent weeks. Fleet acquisitions for next year are currently under discussion.

The problem I have with this is that the solution is not designed around the demand of the market. We are doing things without the evidence base that should be in place.

When we consider the congestion on the arterial routes approaching Dublin, bus-based park and ride facilities should be available. One year ago the NTA said that it was assessing a number of bus-based park and ride facilities and that it expected to make a determination on whether or not to proceed with them in the coming months. It said that the decision would be contingent upon funding availability and that it had to wait on the outcome of the Government's capital plan review. In the year since there has been little or no progress. There should be a sense of urgency in terms of delivering short-term solutions for the chronic situation that exists in many parts of the city centre, the suburbs and arterial routes. The Minister will know the times that his colleagues are arriving at and leaving the Houses of the Oireachtas in order to miss the congestion in the greater Dublin area. I would like the Minister, in line with the stated objectives of his own Department's plan and the strategy for Dublin, to look at a policy to provide effective short-term solutions as the capital programme and associated projects are built out.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"recognises:

— that there is evidence of increasing levels of traffic congestion across the Dublin region; and

— the short, medium and long-term public transport investment priorities identified in Project Ireland 2040 encompassing the National Planning Framework to 2040 and the National Development Plan 2018-2027, will address congestion in the Dublin region and deliver real change on the ground and network-wide benefits across the region;

acknowledges:

20 February 2018

— the 2015 Dublin City Centre Transport Study, jointly published by the National Transport Authority and Dublin City Council, which sets out the various measures proposed for Dublin's city centre to ensure the efficient functioning of transport within the city centre;

— the important role of the National Transport Authority's Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016-2035 which sets out a clear vision for transport planning in the Dublin region;

— the Government's investment in recent public transport projects and initiatives across the Dublin region including Luas Cross City, the upgrade to the Phoenix Park Tunnel, bus fleet replacement, sustainable transport projects, improvements to rail and bus station facilities and integration projects to increase public transport use and improve customer experiences through the use of responsive and passenger-friendly smarter technologies;

— the major integrated public transport projects identified as investment priorities in the recently published National Development Plan 2018-2027 which will address growing congestion in the city and capacity constraints on the existing public transport network, including:

— BusConnects (inclusive of ticketing systems, bus corridors, additional capacity, new bus stops and bus shelters);

— Metro Link (a full north-south high-capacity, high-frequency, integrated rail corridor through the central spine of the metropolitan area); and

— Priority elements of the Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) Expansion Programme (including investment in new train fleet, new infrastructure and electrification of existing lines);

— the planned investment in park and ride facilities at rail, Luas and bus locations and the continued investment in sustainable transport projects including traffic management and other smarter travel projects along with new urban and cycling routes in Dublin to allow transport infrastructure to function more effectively and relieve congestion; and

— the important role of both the new National Planning Framework and the National Development Plan in the development of an efficient, integrated and sustainable public transport system across the Dublin region; and

calls on the Government to:

— commit to achieving a modern, efficient and effective public transport system at a national and regional level including the Dublin region, in line with the commitments in the National Development Plan and the National Planning Framework; and

— request that the National Transport Authority, together with other key stakeholders, continue to pursue strategies for alleviation of congestion in the Dublin region.”

I welcome the fact that Deputy Lahart and the other Fianna Fáil Deputies produced this as a

topic for debate. It is a bit of an old story now. I seem to be meeting Deputy Lahart on the same subject at the same time, either on Topical Issues or on motions of this sort. If I thought that what he is doing is correct I would say that he is doing his constituents a great favour. However, I do not believe what he is doing is correct. He is persuading them that they are victims of something that has happened because of Government neglect and the fact that Government does not care.

Deputy Lahart said various things about standstills with a great deal of alacrity and pleasure, obviously optimistic that the standstill would continue so that he can make political capital out of it. However, he will not be able to come into this House for much longer and lament in this way. What was so fascinating about what the Deputy said was not the words spoken but rather the omissions. It was extraordinary. He strikes me as someone who is in total and utter denial about what has been happening in transport and about the immediate transport developments in the last week. He was very strong on congestion in Dublin in the last few weeks, and he is correct that the congestion problem in the city has been unacceptable. It has been addressed. What was missing from his speech was acknowledgement of what is going on.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is the Minister's job to tell us what is going on.

Deputy Shane Ross: Deputy Lahart is in denial. He reminds me of a polar bear in the desert looking for pickings, and the only pickings he can find are his own entrails. He spoke about the lack of investment. The reason for the lack of investment is that we have been going through a recession and there has been no money to invest. I would remind him that that is not the exclusive responsibility of people on this side of the House. If the Deputy is going to come in here and lament the entrails which the Deputy's party have left-----

Deputy John Lahart: That is rhetoric.

Deputy Shane Ross: It is rhetoric, but it is true.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Fine Gael has only been in government for seven years.

Deputy Shane Ross: I would have liked to have heard the Deputy say the words he cannot speak. Why did we not hear about DART expansion from the Deputy?

Deputy John Curran: It has no relevance to this motion.

Deputy Robert Troy: That relates to the national development plan.

Deputy Shane Ross: Why did we not hear about bus connections from the Deputy?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputies have had their opportunity and they will have other speaking slots.

Deputy John Lahart: He is not answering the questions.

Deputy Shane Ross: Why did we not hear-----

Deputy Robert Troy: I have an opportunity to come back at this.

Deputy Shane Ross: Why did we not hear about metro link from the Deputy?

Deputy John Curran: Has the Minister missed the motion?

Deputy Shane Ross: Why did we not hear about developments in park and ride?

(Interruptions).

Deputy Shane Ross: I did not interrupt any of the Fianna Fáil Deputies.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Minister is not speaking to the motion.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputies are out of order.

Deputy Shane Ross: Let me-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I have no control over what the Minister says. I presume the Deputies' colleagues will be able to respond.

Deputy Shane Ross: Why did we not hear about the great projects which have been announced-----

Deputy John Curran: They have been re-announced.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----and which will tackle and address this problem, but about which Deputy Lahart is in denial?

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputies are out of order.

Deputy Shane Ross: A few weeks ago-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: How many times has metro north been announced?

Deputy Shane Ross: A few weeks ago a man from the Green Party was here. He is not here tonight. He does not care as much about public transport as the Fianna Fáil Deputies do. He came in here and lost his memory. He is in denial about what his party did to the country.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister has only one script and he uses it for everything.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Troy will have an opportunity to speak if his party selects him.

Deputy Shane Ross: Deputy Lahart is in denial about what is happening at the moment. I suspect the Deputy knows this, but he does not want to admit it-----

Deputy John Lahart: The Minister would make a great therapist.

Deputy Shane Ross: Will the Deputy please be quiet for a minute?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy John Lahart: This is humorous.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is serious business.

Deputy Shane Ross: The Deputy is complaining about the Luas. He is making legitimate

complaints. I am not saying his complaints are not legitimate, but rather that he is committing sins of omission which distort the argument. Does the Deputy know what the percentage increase in passenger numbers has been since Luas cross city was introduced? I bet he does not. He has provided no evidence that he knows about things like that. There has been a 24% passenger increase since then. That is an extraordinary piece of good news.

Deputy John Lahart: The Minister has done well.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Deputy. If there had been no increase the Deputy would be crying about it being a white elephant, lamenting that hundreds of millions of euro were spent on this particular project and nobody is using it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Minister wrote plenty about the Luas in his newspaper.

Deputy Shane Ross: Now the Deputy is-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot continue like this.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----refusing to acknowledge the success of this particular project.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is a pantomime.

An Ceann Comhairle: I may have to take action.

Deputy Shane Ross: It has created difficulties because the demand is greater than the supply. If it were the other way round Deputy Lahart's lament would go on and on and on. This is a success story.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister got in trouble for his poems before.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputies should refrain.

Deputy Shane Ross: I wonder if I could have a sentence without interruption.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am appealing to the Deputies to refrain from remarks. Whether the Minister is inviting responses is not the point. It is not for the Deputies to respond.

Deputy Shane Ross: I reject the Fianna Fáil motion, and on behalf of the Government I have proposed a counter motion. We all know that congestion has a negative impact on the quality of people's lives and on the economy. The Government is continuing to take steps to address the prolonged underinvestment in integrated public transport of the last decade. This will not only provide an alternative to private car use and ease congestion but also move us towards our climate change objectives. Project 2040 rightly recognises that significant investment in public transport will be required to accommodate change and growth, while also providing more choice for the travelling public and improving quality of life. Together with the National Transport Authority's Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016-2035, Project 2040 provides for the planning and delivery of public transport infrastructure and services over the short, medium and long term.

My investment priorities identified will build on recent Government investment in public transport projects in the Dublin region, including the Luas cross city, the upgrade to the Phoenix

Park tunnel, bus fleet replacement, sustainable transport projects, improvements to rail and bus station facilities, and the introduction of passenger-friendly smart technologies.

The Fianna Fáil motion states that there was no forward planning to allow for the introduction of Luas cross city. This is simply nonsense. The House may be aware that Dublin City Council and the NTA jointly published the Dublin city centre transport study in 2015 which sets out the various measures proposed for Dublin's city centre to ensure the efficient functioning of transport within the city centre. In preparing the 2015 study, Dublin City Council and the NTA reviewed the current and future transportation needs of the city.

Yesterday, I held a meeting with the chief executive of the National Transport Authority, NTA, Anne Graham. She is well aware of my concerns, those of the Deputies opposite and other colleagues in this House. Today, the NTA announced additional changes to further reduce bus numbers in the area of the plaza.

I have been advised by the NTA that passenger numbers on the Luas green line have increased, as I said, by over 24%. That is a huge, sudden increase in the number of people using our public transport system.

One could say that the Luas has been a temporary victim of its own success, but while it is welcomed that so many new customers are using the extended green line, this success, as I and the Deputies fully recognise, presents new challenges and difficulties. It has meant that, at certain times of the day, some trams are operating at above or below capacity. However, that is actively and robustly being addressed. As part of the Luas cross city project, we have purchased seven additional new, long 55 m trams. These have a higher passenger capacity than existing trams and thereby significantly increase overall capacity on the green Line. The first of these additional trams recently came into service. Two more are currently in Ireland undergoing final testing and commissioning. One of these is expected to go into passenger service by the end of this week with the second to operate about a week or so later, at the start of March. The remaining four trams, following the necessary final testing and commissioning, will be put into service progressively over the following ten weeks. Coupled with increasing capacity, the NTA has also advised me of planned changes to the Luas green and red line timetables to improve the frequency of service, particularly in the morning and evening peak periods.

In addition, we have ordered more trams. Late last year, I asked Cabinet to approve the green line capacity enhancement project. This project includes the lengthening of existing green line trams to 55 m and the purchase of a further eight new longer trams. Again, this will greatly increase the capacity of the fleet to meet future passenger demand and, as the Deputies know, we have recently completed a project to lengthen the platforms at the existing Green line stations to enable the use of these new, longer trams so the stations are ready and waiting to be of use.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is now the Sinn Féin slot for which there is a total of 15 minutes. I call Deputy Imelda Munster who I understand is sharing with her colleagues.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is right.

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

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Minister described the problems experienced by the Luas since last month as teething problems. That is an incredibly flippant remark from someone in

charge of public transport because from the first day until today, there has been no sign of those teething problems abating. The new line has caused severe traffic congestion and lengthy delays in the College Green area of the city. The problem was compounded when tram frequency was reduced to try to deal with the problem. That has left passengers waiting for longer and regularly being unable to board a tram as they are too crowded at peak times. That has been happening every morning and every evening since then.

What the Minister considers to be teething problems are causing huge stress to commuters every morning and evening as they worry, first, whether the Luas will turn up on time and, second, if there will be room on it for them. People are late for work and they are having to endure long, overcrowded journeys on the tram packed like sardines.

Is it the case that, having repeated the mantra that the Luas cross city will be delivered on time and on budget *ad nauseam*, the line had to be opened regardless of the fact that sufficient planning had not been carried out regarding capacity and the required frequency of services? It was the Taoiseach's project, as Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, and he had reminded us on many occasions that it had to be delivered on time. Now, because of that, we have chaos in the city centre and huge problems with overcrowding in the suburbs.

The Government recently published the national planning framework. A substantial number of transport infrastructural projects have been listed in that document, but people may well be justified in having serious concerns about the Government's ability to deliver those projects given what has happened with the Luas cross city because it appears that the small existing rail infrastructure in the city cannot be managed without the entire place grinding to a halt.

Since the launch of the new Luas line, has the Minister been liaising with the NTA and with Dublin City Council with regard to finding a speedy solution to this problem? What role did the NTA and the city council have? What discussions were had prior to this in an effort to avoid this and what has happened since this chaos started?

If the message the Minister is trying to send out to the capital city is that we need to take people out of their cars and into public transport, how will that happen if it is the case that we cannot rely on public transport? If people do not know whether the Luas will come on time, if they are afraid they will be late for work, if they do not know whether they will get on the tram or be crushed like a sardine on it, how can the Minister instill confidence in the public that public transport is the way forward for our city because it will ease congestion when there are mess-ups like the ones we currently see?

We need reliable, affordable and accessible public transport if people are to be convinced of the merits of using it in the first place. If we do not get this problem corrected at the earliest date, the Minister will have a hell of a job convincing people to leave their cars at home and use public transport throughout the city.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Before I address the issue directly, I have to say I am loving the letting on rows between the Government Members and the "boyos" opposite who are backing them so completely and wholeheartedly. Most of it is pure comedy gold. I do not know if it amuses them or if they are getting any value out of it, but it certainly brings a smile to my face from time to time. When they come in hear with a Private Members' motion and decry the actions of the Government but then make sure the Government stays in power, one has to ask why none of this came up during the negotiations on the confidence and supply agreement. I am sure

it came up but perhaps it was dismissed, they did not push it or they only care about it now. I do not know, but it is possible for those of us who are watching it to knock a bit of sport out of it and it brings smiles to our faces.

There is an issue with regard to transport in Dublin, and I say this as someone who has worked in the city centre for about 16 years. In my previous job I had to bring my car into town, which was an absolute nightmare. I would look at the Luas and think that it would be marvellous if I could get onto it but now, as we see, people are struggling to get onto the Luas. I heard a man say on radio the other day that it was quicker to get off and walk. That is not acceptable, and everybody is asking why it was not joined up in the first instance. It is that kind of lack of foresight that has characterised much of the transport policy. The failure to join up the Luas line is a kind of microcosm of successive policies on transport and the lack of planning. For a city that is growing, there does not seem to be enough foresight and planning.

In my constituency of Fingal, one can see writ large the problems with regard to commuting and congestion. If one gets on the DART coming from Malahide or Portmarnock, one can see that people love the DART. I remember going on the first DART journey and we were all terribly excited. Everybody likes the DART. Everybody likes to take public transport unless they have to use it at peak times, in which case they are wedged onto it.

The same is the case with services in my town of Skerries. I was on it this morning. As I knew I would be speaking on this motion I thought I would chat to the people beside me to gauge their opinions - I often have to bring my car into town but did not this morning, which was welcome - and I got the same answer from all of them. They said it is a good service and one they value but the trains are not long enough, there is not sufficient capacity and they are squashed onto them like sardines. They are worried that when the weather is warmer they will be left in a situation whereby people on the trains will be fainting once again.

I live in the constituency with the fastest growing population so we need to see what is there in terms of forward planning, extending the rail line, extending the carriages and making sure that people who need to can get onto public transport. As someone who has to take my car into town on quite a number of occasions, it is no picnic to be sitting on the M1, which is effectively like a car park, for most of the morning. It is stressful and a rotten way to start the week or day at work. It stresses everyone out. One looks to the left and right and sees cars containing people who are stressed to bits. There is a case to be made for a lot more forward planning as we are all living with the consequences of the complete failure to plan for the future. The failure to link the Luas lines is a very good example.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It was interesting to see the fake outrage of Fianna Fáil Deputies when they were reminded of the past and their absolute failure to roll out a proper transport strategy for this city. I am with the Minister on that, which is not to say he has a proper strategy in Project Ireland 2040. I have my own Project Ireland which should be delivered before 2040. However, the one being discussed this week is comical. Some of the projects announced under a Fianna Fáil Government many years ago before it crashed the economy are still being announced today but with no urgency. This city is being crippled because of the failure to invest properly in the transport system and have a proper vision. Why are we going to wait until 2027 for the DART underground project? Why are we going to wait for other projects like a Luas extension to Lucan? Why do we hear to this day talk of park and ride facilities at Luas stations? That should have happened when the Luas rail system was planned in the first place, not as an afterthought. Others have mentioned the lack of interconnectivity between the Luas lines.

Life in this city is being squeezed because of the failure to plan the transport system. Turning the quays into a single car lane does not solve the problem for the ordinary Dubliner, those who are visiting the city or current and future businesses. Unless we get this right and the Government starts to plan the transport system properly, we will miss economic opportunities. This is not just to do with transport. We also have a housing crisis with which to contend. If it does not happen, the lifeblood will be sucked out of the city. I urge the large parties which have been in government to stop having the silly spats they have had for many decades and get on with proper planning and investment. Public transport pays for itself as it has shown at every step. The Government should get on with the job now.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Traffic congestion in Dublin, in particular in the city centre, has become a major problem for commuters, businesses and residents. It has impacted on the city by increasing travel times and imposes a negative cost on job growth and productivity. It may also result in increased carbon dioxide emissions. Restricting the use of private cars at College Green at peak times has resulted in minor improvements in traffic flow in the area, as did the new traffic arrangements on the north and south city centre quays. Commuting across the city has proved to be a nightmare for commuters who have to cross it to travel to work. There seems to have been very disjointed thinking in the delivery of public transport services in the city centre. Dublin Bus has greater capacity, but the Luas has dominance when it comes to infrastructure. Congestion in the city centre, even on a normal day, can cause the traffic to back up as far away as Finglas, Ballymun, Santry and Drumcondra. Traffic in Dublin can come to a virtual standstill if there is an unplanned incident such as a breakdown or a collision or as a consequence of harsh weather conditions.

There are plans to alleviate the congestion. Metro north was originally part of Transport 2021 which was announced in 2005. It was expected to carry roughly 35 million passengers a year and take 120 million km of car journeys off the roads. It was also intended to supply a vital link to the main airport from across the city. However, the Taoiseach suspended the plan in 2011 when he was Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. At that stage, €200 million had already been spent without a single passenger having been moved or a single track laid. Metro north is now part of the national planning framework and the national development plan with a new completion date of 2027. That will not solve the current congestion problem, although it might go towards doing so in the future.

It seems to be a question of nothing being done now and it all being left to the future. What we really need is an effort to tackle the obvious problems facing commuters. They include park and ride and set-down facilities at stations such as Broombridge and the provision of feeder buses to and from the surrounding areas.

Another obvious issue is the M50, which resembles a car park at peak hours. Previously, there were plans to build an outer ring road to take traffic off the M50 at an earlier stage. This project must be reconsidered.

Traffic in Dublin will not improve; it will only get worse. What is needed is a fit-for-purpose traffic management plan to remove cars from the roads and that will concentrate on developing our public transport services. I remember the rolling out of BusConnects with great fanfare. Three routes had been identified and bendy buses were going to be used. The Minister might remember that we talked about this in the past. Bus services must be enhanced. Buses have been taken out of areas in which a lot of senior citizens live. They are not profitable routes, but we cannot simply walk away from people in that way. We must enhance services in these areas.

There is a level crossing in Ashtown which is mechanically driven. That makes no sense and holds up traffic heading out into the country. We must look at cycleways to a greater extent. The Minister has talked about the route along the Royal Canal, the likes of which will help to bring more traffic into the city on bicycles or even on foot. These are some of the ideas that could help address the traffic issue.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: Another week sees another Fianna Fáil motion filled with lots of good stuff, including more bus lanes, feeder buses and buses in general, cycle lanes, park and ride facilities, the electrification of the Maynooth and M3 Parkway suburban line, and car parks at train stations. Who could disagree with this? Before Fianna Fáil tries to convince the House of its bona fides on the provision of greener and more sustainable transport services, however, it should probably begin to look closer to home. It was only in December that Fianna Fáil councillors on Fingal County Council tabled a motion to protect the existing lane structure in Fairview to benefit car drivers. A Dublin City Council proposal for an extra bus lane at this critical pinch point is secondary to local Fianna Fáil councillors' concerns for drivers. We must get people out of cars. The disconnect between what is said in local government and in the Dáil in the full glare of the national media is what erodes trust in a political party's commitment to political change. Is it acceptable to say one thing in the Dáil and another in local government chambers? I do not believe it is, but that is what is happening in Fianna Fáil-land. While the Labour Party will support the motion, that is why one must question Fianna Fáil's bona fides. How committed is the party to seeking proper and sustainable transport solutions in Dublin?

I notice that there is no mention in the motion of metro north, or metro link as it is now called. I hope Fianna Fáil remains committed to the provision of this important infrastructure. Despite the changed name and the extension of the route announced by the Government, the target date for delivery remains the same. I hope to see all political parties and none support the project and work to ensure it will remain on course for delivery by 2027. However, we cannot continue to allow towns such as Swords and Balbriggan to grow as commuter towns without, as we see happening in Swords, providing a high-speed light rail link to provide residents with a fast and comfortable commute to the city centre. Congestion is now the big issue and it is simply not good enough to describe it as a by-product of a recovering economy. That is like saying we would rather go back to the dark old days of the recession, when unemployment was sky high but traffic volumes were low. This congestion problem is worse now than ever. The motion notes that Dublin is the 15th most congested major city in the world. That is a league table for a league we would like to be relegated from, I am sure.

The cross city Luas has caused bedlam in Dame Street, College Green and through to O'Connell Bridge, and buses have been the victims. I understand the NTA is due to announce changes today to 11 bus routes to help tackle this congestion. It is simply not good enough that the planning for this project was not sufficient to identify the impact on traffic in the College Green corridor and the impact it was going to have on Dublin bus services. After all, Dublin Bus carries more commuters than any other public service carrier in the entire State. Dublin Bus has had to suffer from not being as attractive as Luas, rail or metro north, and it has always had to compete with private car use while sharing its bus corridors with other forms of transport, such as taxis and even competitor bus companies.

The motion calls for more buses, which we need, but these buses need every chance to make their journeys as quickly and as comfortably as possible. This means supporting the provision of quality bus corridors. The low-hanging fruit in terms of providing quality bus corridors has been plucked and the NTA now needs to make the more difficult choices - difficult choices such

as whether to remove trees in Fairview Park to allow space to develop cycle lanes and bus lanes, for example. We cannot be afraid of making these decisions. Trees, as historic and beautiful as they may be, can be replaced and replanted in other areas in close proximity, in my view. Protecting our environment includes moving people to public transport options and taking cars off the road. We will not be able to convince people to leave their cars at home unless they have confidence in the reliability and speed of the public transport options, be it bus, rail or Luas.

Investment in parking at stations is a must. We need more spaces and, more importantly, these spaces need to be affordable. The cost of parking at train stations should be set at the most nominal level. We also need to provide more bicycle lockers at train stations. We have had problems in Fingal, with bicycle theft at train stations, which understandably discourages people from taking their bicycles to the train station. This forces them into cars to commute to the train station, or even all the way to work. This type of investment is relatively cheap but its value is immeasurable.

Overcrowding on trains and buses is a problem and we support the call in the motion to increase capacity on both. A bus journey on the 33 service from Balbriggan or Skerries, or the 41 from Swords and across Fingal can be a long journey, and can be made quite uncomfortable if one has to stand for the entire journey, which has been the experience for many people - people even have to stand on the first train from Donabate at 6 a.m.

In the first instance the Minister needs to fix the problems in Dublin city centre caused by Luas cross city, and this is an immediate concern. Second, congestion needs to be tackled and investment in bus, rail and cycle lanes is the way forward. Third, although it is not mentioned in this motion, a real commitment to metro link is required and we need to be counting down over a short period until the shovels are in the ground. I believe that once this thing is started, it will never stop, so the sooner we get it going, the better. If the Minister provides the infrastructure, the people will change their behaviour. As I said to him before, the Minister needs to be a champion of public transport.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is a critical issue because the capital city is obviously completely congested at key times. It was interesting that the Taoiseach got caught in a traffic jam a couple of weeks back and spoke about it taking 70 minutes from Castleknock into the city centre. God love the poor souls who live beyond Castleknock because the Taoiseach's experience would not have been as severe as theirs. It is interesting what happens when people who are high profile and in government have problems. John Bruton experienced a traffic jam some years back and, all of a sudden, an operation was introduced to clear traffic.

Dublin is not only facing major traffic congestion that impacts on the quality of people's lives but it also has a huge environmental impact, with the car still the dominant mode of transport. Some 43% of Dublin's commuters use the car to get to work, school or college, which is a huge figure. The limitations of the transport system are down to one reason only, and that is the ongoing lack of public investment in public transport. The motion mentions how Dublin is the 15th most congested city in the world yet there was a cut of €58 million in public subvention of public transport to the CIÉ group of companies since 2010, so it involves this Government, the previous Government and the Government before that. There is also the wider context of the lack of longer-term planning because economic development is driven by profits rather than by what is needed by regions and communities. Census 2016 showed that some 43% of Dublin commuters said they use the car. In Dublin West, to give an example of a suburb the Taoiseach and I both represent, the figure is even higher at 51%, so more than half the people are using

cars to get to where they need to get to. This is simply unsustainable.

I want to mention some of the problems faced by commuters in Dublin West. Yes, there has been a recovery and an improvement in economic fortunes in the sense that factories and pharmaceutical companies are opening up but there has not been any attempt to increase public transport to go with those openings and the area has no Luas or metro, despite it being the fastest growing area of population in western Europe in the last 15 years. One constituent who commutes in and out of town each day said that the service on the 39 bus route is inadequate and that the wait for a 39 bus can be up to an hour on most weekday evenings. The 39A stops approximately a half an hour walk from the area where this person lives so the person now has to think about getting up at 6 a.m. in order to be able to get to work without any hassle.

We have had representations from the Hansfield secondary school parents association. Many of the students have to commute from different parts of the constituency and beyond, particularly as it is an Educate Together school and people want school diversity. They made the point that the starting time of the school is 8.50 a.m. but the bus service does not correlate with when the school starts or ends, and there is no match or tie-in whatsoever. We all know the lack of school transport adds significantly to congestion and when the schools are off, we can see the difference. Even in parts of the US, where neoliberalism is at its height, there are school transport systems, but in this county it is seen as unnecessary. There is a particular problem in suburban areas where students and children are criss-crossing each other, with some going to one school and some to another because of the lack of school places.

There are frustrations with Dublin Bus due to the lack of investment. As I said, this is a busy urban area with many young people who need to get to work and college. The 39, 38 and 38A are the three bus routes that provide the main public service from Dublin West into the city centre. The common experience cited by users is that they wait for a bus and then two or three buses may arrive full because they do not have the capacity to deal with the demand caused by the population. People are left waiting for the next bus an hour later, and this is during the day, not at unusual times at night. We need a massive expansion of the bus service. We need public investment to increase the number of buses and their frequency, and we need to employ more drivers.

Obviously, cycling has increased massively in popularity in recent years and this has been reflected in Dublin West.

9 o'clock

There could be a great expansion in cycling routes which could link in with the transport system.

There is a problem with the quality of trains. Dublin West has a train line that serves 6% of people commuting daily. Today, the Taoiseach put out a press release for constituents regarding a Luas service on the train lines. Commuters need to live very near the line to access it. Most people rely wholly on buses. Among those who do use the train, there are often complaints. People write to me saying that the train stations are extremely cold, and then when commuters manage to get on the train, they are extremely overcrowded and they cannot get seats. This is because there has not been enough investment. One commuter, originally from France and now living in my constituency, wrote asking why we cannot have double decker trains, for example. He contrasted the service that he had experienced in France with what he experiences in Ireland.

When companies set up in suburban areas of cities, is there any demand that they contribute towards extra public transport? One noticeable feature of the industrial areas in Dublin West, and I am sure it is the same in many other places, is that most of the people who work there drive in and out of the constituency daily. They do not live there. It adds significantly to the transport problems and congestion which people face. It is often assumed that when a Minister comes from a constituency, it enjoys a huge upgrade in services. In Dublin West, we had the Minister of Finance, the late Deputy Brian Lenihan, then the Tánaiste, Deputy Joan Burton and now we have the Taoiseach. We have not had an extra scrap of public transport in Dublin West and all the testimonies from people about waiting for buses and overcrowded trains testify to that. We need massive investment in public transport. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a commitment in this Government to provide it, and there has been no empathy with Irish Rail or Dublin Bus workers recently. That is the only way that we can get people from A to B and make a positive impact on the environment and on climate change.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am happy to have the opportunity to speak on this motion tonight. Last week I spoke on transport and road networks throughout the country and highlighted the investment inequality in transport between the greater Dublin area and rural Ireland, making particular reference to the N71 in my constituency of Cork South-West, the unfinished Bandon bypass, congestion in Innishannon on the main Clonakilty to Skibbereen road, and the Ballydehob to Bantry road, which is in scandalous condition. These are only some of the roads in Cork South-West that receive little to no money for development or repairs each year. A small amount of funding can go a long way to improving our road network. In contrast, millions of euro have been spent on the Luas cross city project which opened last December. Despite the huge investment and years of development in building the new lines, there has been nothing but bad news. Yesterday, and the five days before that, the only Luas updates have been continuous warnings about service delays and technical faults. We have seen the Luas carriage that is too long for O'Connell Bridge and blocks off the yellow box, restricting buses, taxis and private cars from moving, which results in hours of delays.

The motion proposes to build and incentivise commuters on the N11, N7, N4 and N3 to use park-and-ride facilities. I believe it is absolutely necessary. I travel the N7 each week to and from the Dáil. At times, it can be compared to nothing but a car park. Commuters from the greater Dublin area can spend hours in their cars each morning and evening. This is not efficient and it is totally unfair to workers. It is embarrassing that despite the huge investment into the roads and transport network in Dublin, we still experience such traffic problems. Obviously, proper plans were not made or perhaps not followed. How much money has been spent or wasted on building this inefficient Luas service? Had just a fraction of that money been invested into the roads in my own constituency instead we would be in a much better position.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy needs to talk about Dublin.

Deputy Michael Collins: I do, but there is a whole point-----

An Ceann Comhairle: It is very important.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is and I have dedicated most of this speech to Dublin but I need to keep reminding the Minister that there is a west Cork there. I need him to look further at it.

I am calling on the Minister and the National Roads Authority to re-evaluate their priorities and focus investment into Dublin traffic issues more, so we do not see further waste of

resources, but also to get over the anti-rural agenda by this Government and ensure that all Irish citizens can experience a good road and transport network. I am not in denial. West Cork roads are in an appalling state. The Minister travelled on them himself during the summer and saw it at first hand. It looks as though the people of Cork South-West will have to wait beyond 2040 as no Minister has had any vision for our roads in the national planning framework. This Government's solution to west Cork roads is to keep filling away the potholes with watered-down tar or, in some areas of west Cork, only with sand. It costs west Cork motorists tens of thousands of euro. That will be the legacy of this Government of Fine Gael and its partners. It is time to take off the veil and be honest with the people. Rural Ireland is nowhere near the Government's agenda. It squanders money in Dublin bringing further traffic chaos to the capital. Who is accountable for the money being wasted on the capital's roads? A recent television programme had three people use three means of transport to get around Dublin, bus, Luas and car, with the car getting there first. I rest my case. Millions were squandered. There is no accountability. The Government should stop the waste and spare the money for rural Ireland.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Dublin traffic is a serious problem. I have long asked the cause. The obvious cause is continuous policies by this Government, by past Governments, and if the 2040 plan materialises, it will also be by future Governments. It is because everything revolves around Dublin. Continuous policies have directed investment to ensure that industry and business continue to come to this city. Most likely, when one listens to Kerry radio each morning, the first news headlines at 7 a.m. will announce another hundred or 500 jobs for Dublin, but it is very rare when there is a job directed towards Kerry or the west. Then the story is how we get the traffic into Dublin and out of it.

Deputy Cowen spoke about the midlands. We know that the whole midlands are travelling into Dublin each morning. They have to because no jobs at all have been directed towards the midlands. The further west a person goes, the worse the story is. We cannot attract business into our counties because we do not have the infrastructure. We have been fighting for 22 years for the Macroom bypass. It is to be hoped it will materialise. Most of the county still does not have broadband. There is plenty of broadband here. It could be in Kerry, west Cork, or Clare if the people in power were minded to do that. They are hell-bent on doing things for Dublin. Everything has to be Dublin. I do not begrudge the people who live and work here in Dublin but we are asking for fair play down the country. That is all we want. There is to be another runway built for Dublin Airport while at the same time our fine Shannon international airport has been downgraded. It is half empty most times one goes there because the policy of making planes stop there ended. Now it is all Dublin. They can build another runway, it does not matter what it costs. They should build it anyway and bring more people in. The 2040 plan says it will build a metro, extend the Luas, and have more DARTs. I believe the Government gave €135 million for a glorified footpath in Dublin. That is more than we would get for the roads programme for the year in the county of Kerry. God Almighty, is anyone going to stand up and say, "Stop"? If the Government keeps putting people into this side of the country it will topple into the Irish Sea. It will have to happen.

We are depending on the local industries the indigenous people set up. We cannot attract investment into our county. We have failed because we do not have the infrastructure. I am looking at the Minister, Deputy Ross. I am saying I believe we are not getting a fair crack of the whip. Where would we be without Liebherr that has been in Kerry for 60 years, FEXCO in Killoglin, Munster Joinery on the Cork-Kerry border, Michael Cronin Readymix, Seán Murphy KWD, Tricel, O'Carroll Engineering, Walsh Colour Print and Dairymaster?

We have a Sneem community group voluntarily fundraising to try to get infrastructure into an old hall in Sneem so that it can provide a few jobs. We are not getting a fair crack of the whip at all. They have to buy this broadband dearly so that they can employ people in that place.

I heard one Deputy mention here that there should be more investment in transport to take children to school. Our trouble is we cannot keep the rural schools open because we cannot keep the people at home. This new plan will invest in Cork city and Limerick. There is not one word about Kerry and that is what is wrong. That is why Dublin is choked.

Everything is directed at Dublin. Whether it is Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael or Sinn Féin, they are all so much more interested in Dublin than they are in the rural part of this country and that is what is wrong. We will have to change tack.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Catherine Martin lives in Dublin but did not come from there originally.

Deputy Michael Collins: She holidays in west Cork.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I have rural and Dublin roots.

An Ceann Comhairle: Exactly. Over to Deputy Catherine Martin.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I am happy to be living in Dublin for the last 25 years.

Tá an Comhaontas Glas fíor-shásta tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo.

In recent months, commuters in the constituency of Dublin Rathdown, a constituency the Minister represents too, have been continually frustrated by the Luas green line which has overnight gone from a consistent, reliable service into one which commuters can no longer currently depend on. In recent days and weeks, I have been flooded with complaints from constituents who are exasperated with the current quality of the Luas service. I can only assume the Minister is receiving similar emails and phone calls.

Commuting at peak times is a nightmare for Luas passengers due to overcrowding resulting from inappropriate capacities, delays and the repeated failures and malfunctioning of the real-time information displays and debit card machines. Some of the technical failures have been resolved today but the substantive problem persists, namely, there are not enough trams and for the pressing demand, the trams simply do not arrive frequently enough. This is not to mention accessibility issues for commuters, with the lifts at Dundrum and Connolly stations consistently out of service in recent weeks.

We have also witnessed an entirely unacceptable lack of communication between the Luas operators and passengers. Passengers are the lifeblood of the service and should be treated with an appropriate level of professionalism and courtesy. They should not be taken for granted. At the weekend, I was contacted by constituents who told me of an instance on Sunday where passengers on the Luas green line travelling into the city centre were given no advance warning of having to disembark at the Luas stop at Cowper. That problem at Cowper did not occur suddenly and the authorities had adequate time to warn passengers travelling on that line, but failed to do so. Cowper is not an isolated example. This caused distress for many of the passengers, particularly several elderly and less mobile passengers, who were stranded halfway between their starting point and their destination. This simply is not good enough. The Minister referenced these issues in the House as “teething problems”, but the problems grow day by day.

When will this teething period end?

Yesterday I called for Transdev to appear before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport to explain the poor service in recent weeks and to find out what is needed to restore the reliability of Luas services. I welcome the fact that the chair of the committee has indicated that he would be happy with this suggestion. I would also call on the committee to consider calling other stakeholders in, including the Minister, officials from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, and Dublin City Council officials to outline the measures being taken to ease the current pressures on the Luas lines.

The problems faced by commuters on a daily basis have shown an unacceptable lack of preparation on the part of the Government in the roll-out of the Luas cross city. It has shown a distinct lack of proper and thorough forward planning and joined-up thinking.

While I welcome the publication of the Project Ireland 2040 plan, and its commitment to planning ahead, there are real concerns about where the emphasis is placed in terms of transport investment and the lack of detail in the document. The bulk of planned transport investment is still set to go on inter-urban roads and by doing so, the Government is committing a generation to longer commute times and urban sprawl. While the long-delayed Dublin metro and light-rail plans for Cork are to be warmly welcomed, they will not be enough on their own and the details for public transport in Cork city are non-existent.

Dublin needs the DART underground, real investment in cycling infrastructure and an upgraded bus network to avoid being crippled by traffic gridlock. Galway, Limerick and Waterford need similar radical transport plans if they are to be able to grow. However, in the here and now, and into the medium term and long term, the capacity issues with the Luas green line will not go away. With the Cherrywood development bringing at least 3,000 new homes at the end of the current line, and further developments along the Ballyogan Road, we need to be planning now for an increase in Luas capacity which will be needed not too far into the future. There is no evidence of this planning. I emphasise that the Luas service is vital to the daily life of so many.

Commuters do not want an analysis of recent Irish political history, especially not a jaundiced one, on so many occasions when the Minister is asked in this House to respond to and account for many transport concerns. With respect, all commuters care about is tomorrow and the next day and they would really appreciate knowing how reliable the service will be. As a new Deputy to this Dáil, I want the same. Commuters do not want what they perceive as evasive comments or party political distractions. I repeat it is about how reliable the service will be tomorrow and into the future, what is being done and what precise concrete assurances and detail the Minister can give commuters tonight that they can rely on the Luas to get to their job on time and home to their families in the evening on time. As it stands, the faith and confidence of commuters need to be immediately restored as a matter of priority, and I call on Deputy Ross, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, to deal with this.

Working, efficient, reliable public transport lines are essential to our working and functioning properly and effectively as a city. This is an essential part of reducing our carbon emissions and making Dublin a more liveable city and these issues need to be sorted out as soon as possible.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Jack Chambers will be followed by Deputies Lawless and

O'Rourke, all sharing time. Is that correct?

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is correct.

I welcome the motion brought forward by my colleague, Deputy Lahart.

The Minister has delivered for the people of south Dublin in the recent Transport 2040. They will have another mode of transport with the metro being extended, in addition to their Luas and DART lines and their quality bus corridors. However, in north Dublin, we are still faced with congestion, chaos and a lack of options for suburban sprawl on a broad scale. While house building is welcome, we are not seeing the delivery of the transport connectivity that people on the southside of this city have on a constant basis. It is surprising that a northside Taoiseach did not include that in his plan.

We are crippled by traffic congestion across the city and the Minister's hope and strategy of just wishing things will get better will not work. He needs to implement necessary changes. He is supposed to be the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, but with the gridlock we are seeing in the city, he is fast becoming the Minister for red lights because under his watch nothing is happening, nothing is moving and the city is at a standstill. Congestion in the capital is now costing the taxpayer €358 million per year and according to analysis made by his own Department that figure is set to rise to €2 billion by 2033. Since the introduction of the Luas cross-city line which my party and I welcome, bus journey times have increased by 110% and there have been extensive knock-on impacts, with bus services rerouted, cycle tracks cut off and chaos across the city. While Deputy Shane Ross was not the Minister at the time, there was no traffic plan for the delivery of the Luas and its haphazard management by the city council, the NTA and his Department. There is a lack of leadership in that regard. No one person is driving the changes in order that we see improved bus times.

Regrettably, the problems are not limited to roads and traffic congestion. A major factor contributing is the ailing and failing public transport system. There are more cars on the road, due in part to the fact that bus, train and other transport services are totally inefficient. For example, my office is contacted regularly by commuters on the Docklands-Maynooth rail line who describe the daily chaos experienced in trying to get to and from work due to overcrowding on the service. It is a sardine service on which they are packed in to a dangerous extent. I have raised this issue directly with the Minister through parliamentary questions. Train carriages are full to the brim and packed to capacity day in, day out, so much so that commuters often cannot physically board the trains. People trying to get to work or school must instead wait for the next service, whenever it comes, and it does not come with the same frequency as the DART and the Luas. This is now a major health and safety problem. The problem is so dire that people regularly faint because of the congestion on carriages. We are not talking about rush hour at Grand Central Station in New York. People have reported fainting on services on the Docklands-Maynooth line on winter evenings in January and February. Irish Rail's Twitter account constantly deals with passenger concerns in that regard. I have printed off page after page of complaints which I can show to the Minister from disgruntled passengers who have witnessed this happening on trains. It cannot go on. People are being forced into their cars and how could anyone blame them? As the line serves the Docklands which is set to boom in the coming years as the economy grows, the problem will only get worse.

Under the 2040 plan it is promised to electrify the Maynooth line which I welcome, but in replies to parliamentary questions I have tabled to the Minister there is no set plan for when this

project will be delivered for the people of Dublin West. I also point to Ballycoolin Industrial Estate in Dublin 15. It is one of the most developed and fastest growing industrial estates, employing thousands of people, yet there are no public transport services to the site. People living in Sandyford are looking for additional public transport options - I stress the word "options". In Ballycoolin, without a car, one has no option; one cannot get to work. It seems Dublin West has been forgotten. As I said, a new metro system in north Dublin is very welcome - the announcement of more Luas lines for south Dublin was surprising - but there is absolutely nothing for those living in Dublin West, except a light rail project for which we have no timeframe. Simple practical measures can and will make a big difference. There is little point in building train stations or Luas stops to serve a high volume of people spread over a large area if we do not have adequate car parking facilities adjacent to the stations. The Luas is connected to Broombridge station, for example, without car parking spaces, as the residents are very much at pains to point out to the Minister and everyone else. There are practical and sensible solutions that would result in more people using public transport and their cars being taken off the road if the Minister was to address the issue of congestion. Addressing safety matters and other issues for cyclists is also extremely important in increasing capacity across the city.

An Ceann Comhairle: For the view from County Kildare I call Deputy James Lawless.

Deputy James Lawless: I come to the Chamber as living proof of the failures in the transport system, as someone who came into politics through public transport campaigns and who still commutes daily into the city centre from north Kildare, specifically Sallins. People often ask me whether I still commute by public transport now that I am a Member of the Dáil. I say I would love to but very often cannot do so, one of the simple reasons being I very often have commitments in the evening in other parts of the constituency. In cities such as London or Paris one might be able to get on a tram or a train, travel into the city centre, go from A to B, B to C and C to D and eventually get home, D to E, by connecting lines. Unfortunately, in my constituency and anywhere in Dublin, that is very difficult to do.

Not so long ago I repeatedly asked questions in this Chamber about public transport issues. I have received some bizarre replies. I asked questions about the industrial relations disputes at Bus Éireann and Irish Rail, to which the Taoiseach gave me a very nostalgic, self-congratulatory answer about how he had launched the Luas cross-city line with great fanfare a number of years previously. It was slightly bizarre. I am not sure whether he would take ownership of the planning fiasco that has erupted around it. The Minister told me in response to another question I had asked that he could not possibly be responsible for operational issues. I remind him that those operational issues were the ten-minute DART and the Phoenix Park tunnel - hardly, I would have thought, operational issues with which a Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport would be unfamiliar. These are the flagship projects in the greater Dublin area.

Going back to my experience, in the morning I can travel into Dublin city through the Phoenix Park tunnel, which is a fantastic facility which I use regularly. I travel from Sallins through the Phoenix Park tunnel, disembark at Pearse Station and walk around the corner. Unfortunately, in the evening I must walk, hop, skip or jump across to Heuston Station to get home because the Phoenix Park tunnel has a one-way system. It is not used at rush hour, off-peak or at weekends; therefore, it is essentially halfway there. Like the curate's egg, it is good in parts but spoiled on the whole. I am not sure whether the interconnector is included in the 2040 plan launched with great fanfare in Sligo last week.

I heard Deputy Micheál Martin talk about the DART underground project. It is the missing

link in the Dublin transport system. It is what would enable us all to make the connected journeys. I was in London recently where I marvelled at the transport system in place. The Minister often criticises my party, but Fianna Fáil, when it was in Government, spent €500 million on feasibility studies of boring drill holes and very advanced planning for the DART underground project, all of which was abandoned when the Government came to office. We are still not quite sure whether it is in or out of the current system. I recently submitted parliamentary questions about rolling stock and we have heard Deputy Jack Chambers talk about capacity on many lines such as those serving Maynooth and Sallins. According to the responses given to my parliamentary questions, we know that the Minister has not spent a single cent on rolling stock in the time he has been in office or for the past three years. We need to tackle this problem which we need to take seriously and we need to do so rapidly.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Frank O'Rourke who also has the Kildare perspective.

Deputy Frank O'Rourke: Absolutely.

I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. As the Minister is aware, there is major traffic congestion in Dublin which is having a massive negative impact on people who are trying to commute into the city on public transport or in their cars to attend work, college, etc. The current problems in the city centre have led to many others in the constituency I represent, Kildare North, with which I know the Minister is very familiar. I refer to people travelling from Celbridge, Leixlip, Maynooth, etc. Their travel times have increased by perhaps 15 to 20 minutes because of the current rerouting, whereby buses can no longer travel where they used to travel, and the negative impact this is having. There is a problem in that, on the one hand, we are advocating the use of public transport, while, on the other, it has become less attractive in recent weeks because of the issues I have highlighted. As a result, people have stopped using public transport in the hope this issue can be resolved as a matter of urgency and that they can then re-engage with the transport system again.

The M50 which was upgraded is at congestion point. This all leads into part of the problem. Will the Minister consider implementing the following? BusConnects is a great service. A park and ride facility could be introduced at Junction 5 on the M4 to capture traffic from the towns of Leixlip, Celbridge and Maynooth, with a bus rapid transit service into the city. Continuous bus corridors should be introduced where they are not in place. The problems I have outlined are a negative for public transport. There is also a problem with reduced capacity and the frequency of services on train lines such as the Kildare line to Hazelhatch and Sallins and the rail line to Kilcock and Maynooth, which is compounding the problem. Perhaps the Minister might consider these measures. I have engaged with him directly and the NTA, etc., to try to deliver results to help and encourage people to continue to use public transport, deal with the extra demand and free up the city, as the Minister wishes and in line with the introduction of no-car zones. Some time ago I also mentioned the possible consideration of an outer orbital route connecting the M4 and the M7. It would reduce congestion on the M50. According to the traffic counts done on the M50, a large volume of traffic exits and enters between those interchanges. This could be quite productive and very helpful in alleviating the congestion. These are just some measures the Minister and the Department might consider examining. They are implementable and it just needs funding to improve the service. If we look at the Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann routes servicing my constituency and the greater outer Dublin area into the city, they are all at congestion and people at bus stops are being passed because the buses cannot pick them up. The Minister might say this is a result of the times we are in with low unemployment, and that is acknowledged, but now we must improve services to match it and ensure we can

give the people the service and delivery they require.

Deputy Noel Rock: I am glad to see the House taking an interest in this issue. As a councillor and then Deputy for Dublin city, I have been raising this issue for some years. As a councillor I raised this issue many times with the city manager, the city manager being the relevant authority for traffic and traffic management in the city. The Government is certainly not to blame for the situation we have now. There are three chief architects behind traffic issues in Dublin. One is the economy, the next is the Luas cross city and the third is the Dublin city manager.

Starting with the Dublin city manager, the chief executive of Dublin City Council, as he is known, was the manager in 2014 when my questions first emerged about how the city was equipped to handle the Luas cross city. I was the one asking these questions, therefore I should know his position on it at the time. It is clear that when it came to traffic management, the Dublin City Council body tasked with traffic management, the traffic advisory group, has somewhat failed in its duties. This is one element of the issue. The second is the Luas cross city, and that is self-explanatory for many people traversing from south to north and north to south, and I will return to this in due course. The third issue, as Deputy O'Rourke acknowledged, is the recovering and recovered economy. There has been no question that over the past two years we have seen more and more people commuting into the city, be it by private vehicle, by train from outer suburbs, by bus from inner and outer suburbs and by light rail, as we see with the Luas issues at present. Quite simply, this is a consequence of the recovering economy, and it is fair to say the recovered economy is one of the main drivers of congestion in our city.

The question now is how we manage it from here and how we balance the competing resources of private vehicles, private service vehicles such as taxis, buses, coaches, trains and light rail systems. Make no mistake, there is an issue coming which everyone hopes will resolve itself, but it will not. This is one of deploying limited resources and making tough choices. There can be no way the workhorse of public transport, the Dublin Bus network, with more than 50 routes traversing north to south through College Green, serving the entirety of my constituency and the north side beyond it, as far as number 33 to Balbriggan in my case, should be forsaken for one line serving one narrow portion of the north side of the city. It is clear when we make considerations and choices, and when we impress upon the city manager and the NTA the need to make these choices, we need to be canny and cognisant of the number of people that use each mode of transport.

It is quite clear that transport is always an issue in times of an improving and improved economy. Deputy Róisín Shortall distributed, and continues to distribute to this day, leaflets on traffic issues. They were distributed between 2005 and 2008 and they are being distributed again today. The reason for this is that traffic, transport and the built environment are becoming the predominant issues in Dublin city. It is no longer necessarily an issue simply of jobs and employment, which was the predominant issue from 2011 to 2016. Rather it is an issue of getting to and from work and getting one's own house. In my constituency of Dublin North-West, which is also Deputy Shortall's constituency, it is a relevant consideration because, as we have spoken about previously in the House, we are dependent on one mode of public transport. It is not the case like other constituencies that we have a light rail system as a secondary back up or a DART that can get us into the city centre. We are entirely dependent on the bus. I appeal to all who are listening, be it the National Transport Authority, NTA, the Minister, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, or the city manager, that due consideration must be given to these areas and constituencies when we are considering the main artery through the city. The north-west of the city must not be forsaken in this regard.

Regardless of the solution to this issue that we choose, the issue itself is certainly not one of Government creation and we have certainly put a great deal of finance and resources into the transport network. I have full confidence and full faith that the Minister and his predecessors at the Department were and are fully committed to giving the public transport network the resources it needs to undo some of the congestion we see in Dublin city at present, which is a consequence of the improved economy we are in today.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will now have the national perspective as viewed from Limerick.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Absolutely. Last Friday saw the launch of the Government's Project Ireland 2040, which included investment priorities for public transport over the next ten years under the national development plan. Project Ireland 2040 reinforces the Government's commitment to tackling congestion in Dublin and all our cities, and to improving public transport services for all.

There has been criticism in the House of the Luas cross city project and the traffic issues around the College Green area. The Minister, Deputy Ross, outlined the range of measures that have been put in place to accommodate the operation of the new Luas line. The 2015 Dublin city transport study sets out measures for Dublin's city centre to ensure the efficient functioning of transport in the city centre. The National Transport Authority and Dublin City Council are working closely with Dublin Bus, Transport Infrastructure Ireland and other key stakeholders to implement measures progressively to keep the city centre moving.

As the Minister stated, the decision on the College Green plaza proposals, inclusive of the associated traffic arrangements, is the subject of an independent process and we must await the outcome of the process. However, in the interim, the NTA, in collaboration with Dublin Bus, Dublin City Council and other key stakeholders, has proceeded to reduce bus vehicle volumes passing through the area, which allows the junctions and signals to function more effectively. Further changes have been announced today, and all of the parties continue to keep the situation under review. Changes were needed throughout the city centre to accommodate the operation of the new Luas line. Changes have been made and, if necessary, further changes will be introduced.

The Government's national development plan launched last week includes five-year multi-annual capital envelopes for the period 2018 to 2022 for all Departments. The five-year capital envelope for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is almost €10 billion. Investment in public transport will be accelerated under the national development plan to support the development of an integrated and sustainable national public transport system in the Dublin region and across the country as a whole.

It will be a priority to reverse escalating congestion problems to secure a significant improvement in public transport services. As the Minister outlined, the BusConnects programme will be delivered across Dublin. This will include enhanced integrated ticketing systems, bus corridors, additional capacity, new bus stops and bus shelters. BusConnects can deliver network-wide benefits across the Dublin region quickly and is the appropriate scale of approach for the level of congestion we face.

There will also be investment in priority elements of the DART expansion programme, including investment in a new train fleet, new infrastructure and the electrification of existing

lines. This will enable additional passenger services to be put in place much earlier using existing infrastructure with some enhancements. Over the period of the national development plan, metro link will also be developed, which will deliver a full north-south high-capacity, high-frequency, integrated rail corridor through the central spine of the metropolitan area. These major new public transport projects will provide interchange between bus and rail services, offering a more integrated public transport network across the capital.

There is also a commitment for investment in an extensive park-and-ride programme, with strategic park-and-ride facilities at rail, Luas and bus locations and continued investment in sustainable transport projects. These will include traffic management and other smarter travel projects along with new urban and cycling routes in Dublin to allow transport infrastructure to function more effectively and relieve congestion. As Deputy Rock pointed out, this is as a result of the growing economy. The Government recognises there is increasing traffic congestion across the Dublin region. The short, medium and long-term public transport investment priorities identified in Project Ireland 2040 will address congestion in the city and capacity constraints on the existing public transport network. The new national planning framework and the national development plan will deliver an efficient, integrated and sustainable public transport system across Dublin. The public transport priorities in these two overarching policy documents include a range of measures across bus, rail, cycling, walking and traffic management that will provide viable alternatives to private car use in the city, which is what everybody desires. I, therefore, commend the counter-motion to the House and urge Members to give their support.

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and thank my colleagues on this side of the House, who have ensured that the issue of congestion is kept high on the political agenda. It is not solely a result of the Luas cross city. Certainly, it has been a major contributing factor in recent months but congestion in the capital city has been getting progressively worse over the past number of years.

Listening to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, not only this evening, but when I raised the issue on Priority Questions last week and when Deputy Lahart raised it during the Topical Issue debate, it is obvious that he simply does not grasp the severity of the congestion. The Taoiseach takes great credit for the Luas cross city, something he claimed to have spearheaded, and he relegated the Minister on the day of its opening. What Deputy Rock said about the NTA and Dublin City Council having a role to play is correct.

However, the Minister has been *in situ* for two years. He should have ensured adequate preparatory work was completed in advance of the opening of the Luas cross city. It is worth remembering that planning permission for this project was submitted in 2010. Even at the height of our economic crisis, the then Fianna Fáil Government laid the foundation and had the foresight to carry out the preparatory work and invest in public transport.

There were seven years to plan for this. Some €360 million was a very significant and welcome investment of taxpayers' money. It was great for the infrastructure of our capital city and has contributed to a welcome 24% increase in people using the Luas. However, not every section of society or every geographical area in Dublin and the greater Dublin area has access to the Luas.

We heard earlier about the financial impact of congestion. It runs to €350 million per annum in lost productivity, a figure which could rise to €2 billion in 2033. My colleagues have spoken

of the impact on their constituents, but this has a much wider impact. Talk to my constituents in Athlone, Longford and Mullingar. It is having a detrimental effect on them. I attended a public meeting with Bus Éireann in Mullingar a number of weeks ago and we heard stories of people getting up before 6 a.m. and not getting home until after 7 p.m. That is partly a consequence of job strategies by this Government and previous Governments, where there was an over-concentration on creating jobs in the capital city.

We are robbing people of their lives. The quality of life is compromised. We are forcing people to commute, and we have a finite amount of road space. We want to get people out of private cars, but the journey times on public transport are increasing. The Minister talks about preparatory work, such as the second bus lane on the quays. It takes 40 minutes to get from Heuston Station to O'Connell Bridge. How would that encourage anyone to get out of his or her car and take the bus?

The lack of preparedness is simply appalling. This was preventable. Who is answerable for the fact that the necessary work was not done? The failures of the State are hijacking people's lives. The quality of people's lives is eroded more and more. As congestion is getting worse, not better, people are leaving their homes earlier and are arriving home later. Mothers and fathers are missing the chance to put their kids to bed, and they are not there in the mornings when the kids get up. That is morally wrong. That is the impact that congestion is having on people's lives.

Tomorrow, at my suggestion, some of the key stakeholders will appear before the Joint Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport. Reading some of their pre-prepared opening statements, I can see they are already blaming each other. Dublin City Council blames the National Transport Authority, NTA, that is, it is up to it to reroute bus routes. Dublin City Council did not want to move in advance of An Bord Pleanála making its decision on College Green. It hoped that the decision on College Green would be made before the Luas cross city opened. Why did the council not submit the application on time? Why was it left to the eleventh hour to submit the application? It knew the opening date of the Luas cross city, and yet it left it to the eleventh hour.

The Minister spoke about the positive aspects of the Luas cross city, and they are welcome. However, he seemed to forget that not every area in Dublin is served by the Luas. He spoke about the new buses that are coming on stream. The Minister has never actually answered the following question, and will not have an opportunity today. I will submit a written question, although I know I will not get an answer. How many additional buses will be introduced? New buses are coming on stream but the majority of them are replacement buses. New buses have been ordered, but we recently learned that many of them have diesel engines. Where is the joined-up thinking?

Dublin Bus accounts for 140 million passengers a year, and a third of its bus routes go through College Green. Why were those responsible not more in tune? Why were they not better prepared for the Luas cross city? We know that 17 bus routes changed in January, and tonight we have been told that a further ten routes will change in March. Only two days ago, when Dublin Bus's opening statement was prepared, only eight routes were to be changed in March but now it is ten. This is being made up as we go along, and the Minister is saying that it is all part of a plan. That is rubbish.

The frequency of the trams, the time it takes them to get from one area to another and the

time it takes for the tram to clear O'Connell Bridge were all known. Therefore, the length of time available to the buses would have been known. However, there was no preparation by the Minister, the Government or, quite frankly, many of the stakeholders.

Deputy Noel Rock: We cannot regulate for people stopping in a yellow box, to be fair to the Minister.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister talks about BusConnects and last week he spoke about Ireland 2040. The Ireland 2040 plan failed to identify any key investments in rail infrastructure for the commuter towns. If we were serious about getting people off our roads and onto trains, where was the investment to show it? Yes, the Phoenix Park tunnel opened, and it is welcome, but it only operates at peak times. The Phoenix Park tunnel is evidence that when connectivity and an alternative to car use is provided, people will use it. However, we are not putting an alternative in place. There is no rail line to Navan. There are no increased services to Mullingar or Maynooth. There are no expanded park-and-ride facilities.

Earlier, my colleague, Deputy O'Callaghan, spoke about cycling and how it can help alleviate congestion. I must comment on the Minister's management of the cycling budget. In 2015, there was a cycling budget of almost €19 million. In 2016, when the Minister came into office, it fell to €10.5 million. In 2017, it fell to €6.9 million. That is at a time when the Minister could take policy decisions and when the number of people cycling in our capital city has doubled but he has almost halved the budget in those two years. That does not show any commitment to getting people out of their motor cars or using bikes. Why is that?

Last week, presentations were made at the Joint Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport on traffic congestion in Galway. We heard from a witness who spoke about how real data can be used to make decisions. The possibility of adopting new technologies, such as Waze, was outlined. Waze was adopted in Boston. Standardised internationally accepted metrics such as journey time should be used. AA Roadwatch reports every morning that traffic is slow or heavy. I never hear that it takes five or six minutes to get from one location to another. The technology that was introduced in Boston a number of years ago reduced congestion by 18%. Why are we not looking at that in Ireland for the here and now? Why are deliveries allowed to take place during peak hour traffic? Why can one see cars and skips parked in bus lanes when driving through Dublin city centre? Why is there no sense of free flow in the city centre?

Decisions can be taken here and now that will help those who rely on public transport. People are being robbed and their lives are being hijacked as they are forced to spend unnecessarily long periods in traffic and, frankly, the Minister does not get it.

Amendment put.

Deputy Robert Troy: Vótáil.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 22 February 2018.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.55 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 21 February 2018.