



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 25 Meán Fómhair 2018

Tuesday, 25 September 2018

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Dara Calleary: In November six years ago a referendum was put to the people about children. We were told it was historic and that its aim was to establish a child-centred approach to protecting all children. Another aim was to support families who were struggling rather than allow crisis situations to develop. Part of Article 42A inserted in the Constitution recognises that all children have rights and pledges to uphold those rights by law. On the ground, however, that admirable intent has not been achieved six years later. The assessment of needs for children with disabilities is not being provided. The Disability Act 2005 provides that an assessment should be carried out within three months of it being requested, but the latest figures supplied to my colleague, Deputy Murphy O'Mahony, and to RTÉ news illustrate that there are more than 3,850 children with suspected disabilities who have still not had an assessment.

The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Finian McGrath, announced in 2016 that 128 disability care teams would be put in place and that they would resolve the waiting times. In 2018 there are only 56 such teams in place and, in fact, the waiting lists have grown longer. There are 37,229 people in the country on speech and language therapy waiting lists. Some 15,000 of them are waiting for the crucial first assessment. A further 7,894 are waiting for their first treatment and 14,300 are waiting for further therapy. Separately, there are 31,000 people waiting for occupational therapy and over half of these, more than 16,800, are children who await a first assessment. More than 6,000 of that 16,800 have been waiting longer than one year for the crucial first assessment. As one can imagine, this is causing huge frustration, anger and worry for parents and families. Where is the child-centred approach promised in 2012? For those who can afford it, they are paying hundreds of euro just to get a diagnosis. Even in the public system, there are inconsistencies in the treatment across the country, when one can get it. How can the Government stand over this inaction and lack of delivery in any improvement of waiting times for assessments under the Disability Act 2005? Does the Taoiseach believe this situation is defensible and acceptable and what plans does he, as Taoiseach, have in place to ensure these waiting lists are prioritised?

An Ceann Comhairle: Fáilte romhat ar ais.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. First, I am very proud and pleased to have been a member of a party, and of a Government, that enshrined children's rights in our Constitution, and did so for the first time. In the years since then, we have been doing everything we can to realise those rights and to make them real in our laws and society and not just in the words in our Constitution. Taking the area of education, for example, children going to school this September are in classrooms with the lowest ever pupil-teacher ratio.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That has nothing to do with the referendum.

The Taoiseach: A record €10 billion is being invested in education this year. In the health area, children with profound disabilities, 40,000 of whom are in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance, DCA, now have a medical card as of right. They do not have to be means-tested based on their parents' income. When the party opposite was in power children, even though they had profound disabilities, were not provided with free healthcare or medical cards because their parents were working, or had an average, or in some cases below average, income. We have changed that. We have also brought in free GP care for the under sixes. In the area of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, a dedicated Department set up in recent years, we have brought in two years of free preschool, giving children early childhood education which is so beneficial for them.

In the last year or so, we brought in subsidised childcare, reducing the cost of childcare for lots of parents around the country. We all know the enormous burden that childcare costs are on families. Those subsidies help to make a difference and we propose to continue them in the years ahead. Also, in terms of leave for parents in order that they can spend more time with their children, we brought in paid paternity benefit for the first time. I appreciate there are areas where there are still enormous difficulties and areas where more work needs to be done.

In regard to the assessments under the Disability Act 2005, to which the Deputy referred, the number of applications has risen steadily since it was enacted. There were 1,138 applications in 2007. However, in 2017, there were 5,839 applications, such that in the space of ten years, there was an almost five-fold increase in the number of applications. The system is struggling to deal with this level of demand. There is a new standing operating procedure for the assessment of need but it has been delayed due to necessary discussions and consultations with the professional bodies. This process is now entering its final stages and we hope that if we can get it agreed it will make a real difference. Also, efforts to progress the establishment of disability network teams around the country have been delayed as well, due to deliberations with Fórsa and with voluntary providers on the appointment of managers of these teams but an agreement has now been made and this will allow recruitment to start in the next month for some of the community healthcare organisations.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Does the Taoiseach get it? Does he get what it is like for parents and children who are waiting on those lists? The Taoiseach spoke about standard operating procedures and new rules for the disabilities assessment. Does he actually get what it is like to be waiting on a list for over a year, 7,000 of them for an initial occupational therapy, OT, assessment? Does he get what it is like to be one of the 15,000 children waiting for a first assessment for speech and language therapy? Early intervention is crucial and key to getting a positive pathway in this regard. The Taoiseach speaks of standard operating procedures and technical matters. He does not get what it is like for parents and children in this situation.

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The Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities, who is known for leaking from Cabinet meetings, is the captain of the disability ship in this country and he is not delivering. As long as he remains captain of that ship, that ship is the *Titanic*. It is time that the Taoiseach took charge and gave some hope to the 37,000 children waiting for speech and language therapy and to the 31,000 waiting for occupation therapy, OT. He needs to stop talking about standard operating procedures and to start talking about people.

The Taoiseach: Of course I get it and everyone on this side of the House gets it. The Deputy and his party do not have a monopoly on either empathy or compassion.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Lots of empathy but no delivery.

The Taoiseach: All of us do constituency work and all of us have friends and family. All of us are aware of plenty of individual cases on which all of us work hard to try to get results for parents. Instead of coming in here trying to pretend that somehow he has a monopoly on understanding or a greater empathy or compassion than people on this side of the House, the Deputy could come in here with solutions-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: The National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Childish comments.

The Taoiseach: -----but he did not do that in either of his contributions. The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, is working extremely hard on this. There is a large budget of €1.8 billion for disabilities. As I mentioned, we are putting in the procedures and recruiting the extra staff we need.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: By every measure, the Taoiseach's Government is failing to tackle the national scandal that is the housing emergency. Private rents and house prices continue to spiral out of control. Social housing output remains glacial with fewer real council houses to be delivered this year than last year. Not a single affordable home to rent or buy has been delivered by the Government over the past three years. An entire generation of young people, unlike their parents before them, face the prospect of never owning their own home.

Since the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, assumed office, homelessness has reached unprecedented levels. Tonight almost 4,000 children will sleep in emergency accommodation and all the while the Taoiseach persists with a plan that is not only failing but is, in fact, making things worse. People know that and they are justifiably angry. That is why thousands of people demonstrated at the Take Back the City rally in Dublin last weekend. That is just a glimpse of that anger. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions' Raise the Roof demonstration on 3 October will amplify that message all the more loudly.

Yet the Taoiseach and the Minister blame everyone but themselves for their failure to address the underlying issue, namely, a lack of homes. They have blamed local authorities, local councillors and opposition Deputies and I heard the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, on RTÉ radio this morning explaining away his deplorable record by saying that the numbers of people in homelessness are going up because people keep on presenting to emergency accommodation. I want to know if the Minister is now blaming the homeless for being homeless because the buck stops with him. Both the Minister and the Taoiseach are responsible but their plan is not working.

The Minister claims that Sinn Féin has not offered solutions but we have offered ample solutions. We have offered solutions around investment in social and affordable housing, the introduction of a temporary tax relief for renters, alongside a rent freeze, the introduction of legislation to prevent buy-to-let landlords from seeking vacant possessions and the proposal to introduce legislation requiring local authorities to offer assistance to those at risk of losing their homes or tenancies. These are alternatives - take them and use them. Listen to the NGOs, listen to the approved housing bodies and take their alternatives and use them. It is not that no one has offered solutions; it is that the Taoiseach and the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, have refused to act and to listen. True to form, their friends in Fianna Fáil bury their heads in the sand as well.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Deputy did a fair bit of burying herself.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They will snipe from the ditches about a lack of housing but what will they do tonight when faced with an opportunity to vote? The answer to that is that they will do absolutely nothing.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have a question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We need bold, meaningful action and we need real leadership. We need a new plan and we need a new Minister so is it not time that the Taoiseach dismissed the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy? He is quite happy to hang the prospect of dismissal over the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, for refusing to state her confidence in the Minister but would it not be more productive and appropriate to sack the Minister for not doing his job?

The Taoiseach: I, as Taoiseach, and everyone in this House understand the depth of the housing crisis, whether for a generation of people who are renting, who want to buy but struggle to put together a deposit or find a property to buy or for people waiting years for council houses or for people who have to spend time in emergency accommodation. I agree with Deputy McDonald on one point, which is that the underlying problem is a lack of housing supply. We have a country that has a growing population. The population grew by more than 60,000 people last year through natural increases and inward migration and as a result of Irish people who had left coming home. When the population increases by about 60,000 a year it stands to reason that we need to build many new homes every year, probably about 30,000 to 35,000, and we are not doing that yet. If it were possible to ramp up house building overnight with a soundbite-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It has been seven years.

The Taoiseach: -----a speech or a single item of legislation, we would of course do that. It has not been seven years.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is seven years.

An Ceann Comhairle: Order, please.

The Taoiseach: Let us not forget that of those seven years we spent the first four rescuing the country, taking it back from the brink, putting our public finances back in order-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Slashing expenditure on public housing.

The Taoiseach: -----and getting people back to work. We were opposed at every step along

the way by Sinn Féin.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: For cutting funding on housing.

The Taoiseach: The first four of those seven years at least were spent putting this country back in a position where we could afford to invest in housing, infrastructure, healthcare and transport again. We are now in that position. It is not possible to ramp these things up overnight. No number of soundbites, easy solutions or one-line amendments will do anything like that.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Taoiseach is discovering that himself. The soundbite king.

The Taoiseach: This is the kind of progress that is being made. New building is picking up. People can see that now all around the country particularly in the city of Dublin.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is not affordable housing. It is €340,000. Student accommodation is €1,000 a month. The Taoiseach is embarrassing himself.

The Taoiseach: There were 14,000 new homes built last year and behind that number there are 14,000 individuals and families who moved into a new home last year, a new house or new apartment, and in many cases freed up other properties for other people to live in. That was a 50% increase on the year before. We estimate that this year, approximately 20,000 new homes will be built, particularly if one includes vacant homes brought back into use and student accommodation. We estimate that by 2020 we will be up to around 25,000 and 30,000 after that. Anybody who thinks there is some way to speed that up dramatically is engaging in dishonest thinking.

We also brought in the rent pressure zones to reduce the rising rents.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: There has been a 7% increase in Dublin in 12 months despite a 4% cap.

The Taoiseach: We had double-digit increases in those zones before the rent pressure zones were brought in. That is not the case now.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is 7% in 4% cap zones.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Sinn Féin supported 4%.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Surely the Taoiseach can add.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Sinn Féin supported them.

The Taoiseach: The old tactics of Sinn Féin have not changed. Its tactics are just to shout us down.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You poor pet.

The Taoiseach: Its Members do not like to hear the truth. They do not like to hear the facts. They do not like to hear real statistics. They just shout us down.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up. All Members are entitled to ask their questions in silence and the Taoiseach is entitled to the courtesy of being allowed to respond. This is a democratic forum. There are people sitting in their homes watching how we transact

our business.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: If they have homes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Could we please transact our business with a little bit of decorum?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I can only surmise that the Taoiseach is delusional. It is the only conclusion I can arrive at. He seems to believe that everything is okay and that he is on track despite the facts. It is not opinion or speculation but a fact that homelessness has risen and that house prices and rents are out of control and beyond the reach even of people at work. The Taoiseach seems to be entirely immune to the fact that people are now taking to the streets and taking direct action to give voice to the anger and desperation they feel. The Government's plans are not working. The Minister has failed and is failing in his duty to the tens of thousands of people on housing lists and to the 10,000 people who are homeless. He is failing the children I referred to earlier who will sleep tonight and the next night and the night after that in emergency accommodation.

We make no claim to have a monopoly on empathy but on these benches we have plenty of exposure to those families and their very real and desperate experiences yet the Government is immune to them. The Taoiseach is delusional because he stands up as Head of Government and claims his plan is working and Fianna Fáil assists the Government in that regard. The Taoiseach has failed, his Minister is failing and the desperate people with real stories who came out at the weekend want an answer from the Taoiseach and they want somebody held to account. I suggest to the Taoiseach that the person to be held to account in the first instance is the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy.

The Taoiseach: We all know what this is about. The Dáil is back, Sinn Féin is looking to score some political points so it puts down a motion that is just pure politics.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is not as shallow as the Taoiseach.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The Taoiseach should stick to facts. He should stick to the families.

The Taoiseach: A motion that is just pure politics, tactical, cynical, personalised and ineffective.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is not personalised at all.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is not talking about the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: There is one thing that is absolutely certain: the Sinn Féin motion that has been put down for tonight, if passed, will not house a single person nor will it help us to build houses any more quickly than we are already doing.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It might force the Government to change its course.

The Taoiseach: This is all we have from Sinn Féin, oppositional politics, cynical politics, personalised politics. It does not really care about people who are homeless, about people on the housing list or young couples struggling to buy for the first time. That is why it has put forward no solutions. When it puts forward solutions they are solutions that do not work.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Policy after policy, budget after budget, the Minister has received

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more policy documents from us than he has had-----

The Taoiseach: All over the country when it can help, its councillors vote down social housing proposals.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Never once has Sinn Féin voted down social housing in this city. Never once.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy please.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Taoiseach cannot lie in the Chamber. Sinn Féin has not voted down social housing. Councillors from the Taoiseach's party have.

The Taoiseach: Whether in south Dublin, whether in the north inner city, whether it is putting up property tax to reduce funding for homeless services this is the truth of Sinn Féin.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Taoiseach is lying in the Chamber.

Deputy Colm Brophy: Sinn Féin councillors voted against it.

The Taoiseach: Once again the Sinn Féin benches demonstrate that the truth hurts.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Taoiseach is misleading the House. He is knowingly misleading the House.

Deputy Mick Wallace: It looks like spin rather than substance remains the order of the day when it comes to the Government's housing policy. I have built plenty of apartments and houses and it does not take seven and a half years to build them.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: How is that working out for you Mick?

Deputy Mick Wallace: I have been here since 2011 and things have got worse since then. The one consistency I have seen in the Government's policy in all that time is that it is wedded to the philosophy that the markets will fix it. I have news for the Taoiseach: the markets will not fix it. They do not want to fix it, they actually like it the way it is.

The Government's latest inspiration is the Land Development Agency. The Taoiseach described it as radical. It is the opposite of radical. It is not the ESB or Aer Lingus. It promises to be crony capitalism at its finest. This is the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, mark 2, exactly what we do not need. It is soul destroying that the Government would appoint a former NAMA individual as chief executive officer. That is like getting the fox to mind the chickens.

I will give an example of how crony capitalism works in this country. Avestus is an Irish asset management company which has decided it would like to build residential property. The four directors of Avestus were in NAMA. They had directors' loans worth €350 million. In 2012 NAMA decided to sell the loans to a company registered in Luxembourg for €26 million, a 92% discount. Last week it emerged the Luxembourg company and Avestus share a director, in breach of the NAMA Act 2009. One could not make it up but it gets worse. Avestus has received €25 million from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, to develop. We literally allowed this company to buy its loans back for peanuts and now we are funding it to build. Can it be true that the Government wants to use the expertise in NAMA for the Land Development Agency? It wants to do deals with developers to build out State land while they sit on their own

land. This is nuts. The developer is looking for a profit margin in the region of €80,000 a unit. Why would the Government want to put money in the developer's pocket? Why did NAMA want to do it? NAMA is funding Gannon Homes to build three-bedroom semi-detached houses in Millers Glen in Swords. Prices start at €365,000. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government says that is affordable, but affordable for who?

The Government says the Land Development Agency will put downward pressure on land prices. How will it do that? Can the Taoiseach explain that to me? What will put downward pressure on land prices is a 25% tax on land-banking and I hope the Government allows the legislation for that to go through the House with a bit of speed rather than let it collect dust. As for the State land, if the Taoiseach thinks the local authorities are not fit for purpose to supply housing why does the Government not strengthen the local authorities and make them fit for purpose, give them the necessary skilled personnel and let them hire builders, not developers, to build housing that is 100% affordable not 30% and 10%? Why should we allow State land be used to provide a minimum of 60% at a price that is unaffordable to most people? Will the Taoiseach explain why we would do that?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. Deputy Wallace spoke once again about spin over substance. If he wants substance, here it is. There were 14,000 new homes built last year, which is 50% more than the year before. This year 20,000 new homes will be built. That is a significant number of new homes being built in this country for people and families to live in. These are real homes with front doors, brick walls, windows and gardens. It is not spin. They are there. There is some evidence that house prices are starting to level off. Rent increases have gone from double digit increases to 1% or 1.1% in the last two quarters. In the last year 5,000 families were taken out of homelessness. Rough sleeping is also down by 40%. These are real numbers and there are real facts and real people behind all of those, and real substance. I am not pretending for a second that there is not much more that needs to be done or that we have got on top of this issue. I am not claiming that but I am giving real factual examples of the progress that has been made.

It is not the view of this Government that the market will fix it. That is a charge made against us by our opponents but it is not the case. If we believe that the market on its own could fix the problems in our housing sector we would not be investing in 110,000 new public homes. That is what is there. It is in Rebuilding Ireland and Project Ireland 2040. It is a substantial public housing building programme with 110,000 public homes to be built over the next ten years. Last year 7,000 houses were already added to the stock and that will rise to 10,000 in the years ahead. That is where we think it needs to be, at about 10,000 new homes being built every year by the public sector. If we believed the charges of Deputy Wallace, that the private sector had all of the solutions, we certainly would not be implementing a policy like that. We also have the Land Development Agency which is designed to operate like a semi-State such as An Post, the ESB or Telecom Éireann in the past. It has a commercial mandate but its primary principle is not to make a profit. It is to deliver necessary infrastructure and services for people and to break even and that is the way it is going to work. It will be a public developer developing publicly owned lands for a mix of housing - social, affordable and private housing for people to buy.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I do not know who gives the Taoiseach his figures. I am not saying it is his fault but there is so much spin in there that it is not funny. The housing supply co-ordination task force, which checks out completions in the four Dublin local authorities for ten units or more, gave a total number of 1,095 for the first two quarters of 2017. For the first

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two quarters of 2018 the number is 397. Those are hundreds and not thousands - 397. In 2017, 394 local authority houses were built in the whole country. Approved housing bodies built 270. That is 664. The Taoiseach is telling me that the figures for Dublin for the first two quarters of this year are private and social. He telling me that there will be 20,000 new houses built this year. That will not happen. There is not a prayer in Hell of that happening. It is not possible. It will not even get close to it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Government is buying and acquiring houses and even over half of the Part V's were not built. They were purchased. The Government is massaging the figures no end. When the Government buys something that does nothing for the housing supply. Even if it is used for HAP, the Government is eating into the private sector of it. I ask the Taoiseach please to listen. It is hard for him to be on top of every section of the Government and I do not expect him to be. I am, however, convinced that he is listening to the wrong people. The Government is not fixing the problem. It is actually getting worse.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Wallace's time is up.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Government needs to change tack.

The Taoiseach: The figures for new home builds come from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, the independent body that collects numbers and does statistics for the State. I do not think anyone disputes the accuracy of the CSO. It is the organisation that does the census and produces the employment figures every quarter. It is an independent body trusted to produce statistics. The figures for rent come from the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, and the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI. I appreciate that other figures come from a property website which is a private sector entity. The official figures come from the ESRI and the RTB. The CSO figures show that in the last quarter some 4,400 new homes were built in Ireland. We are on track to build approximately 18,000 new houses and apartments this year. When vacant homes being brought back into use and student accommodation are added the figure will increase to more than 20,000. It will increase to 25,000 the year after.

Visit of Egyptian Delegation

An Ceann Comhairle: Before proceeding with business, I wish on my own behalf and on behalf of the House to offer a céad míle fáilte - a most sincere welcome - to His Excellency, Dr. Ali Abdel Aal, speaker of the Arab Republic of Egypt. The speaker is accompanied by six Members of Parliament, including the chairs of the foreign affairs, human rights, tourism and aviation committees, as well as the chair of the Egypt-Ireland Parliamentary Friendship Group. Her Excellency, Soha Gendi, Ambassador of Egypt, and parliamentary officials from Egypt are also with us. They are all most welcome to Leinster House. Salaam alaikum.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí (Atógáil) - Leaders' Questions (Resumed)

Deputy Michael Lowry: I wish to draw a matter of national importance to the attention of the Taoiseach, which is the rapid decline of rural Ireland and the policies that encourage urbanisation. As a Deputy representing Tipperary, a predominantly rural constituency, I see the decline of communities, the reduction of resources, the closure of facilities, and a growing sense of disillusionment amongst the rural population. This is happening at a time our economy is improving at a faster rate than any in Europe. This economic trend is bypassing rural Ireland. The opportunities created by this growth in our economy are designed to sustain urban areas at the expense of rural Ireland. The Government and the national agencies are not doing enough to correct the imbalance between city and rural regeneration. There has been a gradual erosion of confidence and belief in the Government's support for rural development. In recent years, there has been a growing perception, evident in public policies such as the national development plan, that the future of Ireland only exists in the context of urban development and facilitation. People in rural Ireland now believe they are undervalued and less important in this new post-Brexit Ireland. There is an unsettling mood of powerlessness among rural dwellers. This is affecting their well-being and enthusiasm for continuing to contribute to an economy and society that offers little in return. The urban sector is absorbing a disproportionate amount of available resources. A balance must be restored or rural Ireland will die quickly and quietly.

The facts are clear. Agriculture and food production are the backbone of the rural economy. Every sector in agriculture is under enormous pressure and struggling to survive. Farm costs have escalated dramatically and net income has been decimated. Rural roads are neglected to the extent that many are impassable. Poor access to a proper broadband service and information technology is a huge disadvantage. It is impossible for country towns to attract industry as they have little prospect of competing against the city locations that have it in place. Rural depopulation is rampant due to lack of jobs. Significant numbers of young people are forced to migrate to urban centres. Post offices are closing in huge numbers without consideration of the social and community impact.

We have a wonderful nation of talented and creative people and, regardless of their addresses, those people are entitled to feel valued and empowered. We have to look at Ireland as a single entity and not two separate components. Our policies must be national and must benefit everyone.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue and I assure him that the Government is committed to rural Ireland and to making sure that it is vibrant and prosperous and a place that people want to live in, stay in, and move their families to and where they can establish successful businesses. Our plan for the nation, Project Ireland 2040, has rural Ireland at its heart. We want the cities outside Dublin to grow twice as fast as Dublin for the first time and we want 200,000 more people living in rural Ireland by 2040. I travel around the country regularly, as does the Deputy, and it is becoming more evident that there are very different rural Irelands.

The tourist towns are very different from the market towns. What may be happening in a small town can be very different from what is happening in another town. We have plenty of towns that are vibrant and are doing well and we have other towns that are doing very poorly, where one can see the empty shop fronts and derelict premises in the town square. It is very sad to see that. At the same time we see towns and villages that are doing extremely well. We know

that in every county in Ireland, bar two, the population has increased in last five years, and in every county, bar none, the population has increased in the last ten. Even in counties one can see movements from smaller towns to bigger towns and from some areas to others.

At the centre of ensuring rural Ireland does well is making sure there are good jobs. Jobs allow people to stay in the community, move into those communities and create revenue that supports business in those areas. We have seen a dramatic reduction in the percentage of people unemployed in recent years, down from 15% in 2012 to only 5.6% now. In the Deputy's own county of Tipperary, very much a rural county although a county with many large to medium-sized towns, the number of unemployed has gone from 18,000 in 2012 down to 9,000 now. The number of unemployed has halved in the last six years, which is really significant. We have seen jobs growth in seven out of all eight regions, and in the year gone by, four out of every five new jobs created were created outside of Dublin.

We have seen some really encouraging job announcements - for example, Combilift in Monaghan. I was there to hear 200 jobs announced. Some 90 jobs were added in Burnfoot by E+I in Donegal. Netwatch in Carlow is another example. What is great to see about those companies is that they are Irish indigenous companies setting up in our small towns and going global. We need to see more of that. We obviously need to continue to bring foreign direct investment, FDI, into the country and continue to promote foreign investment, but we need to further support Irish companies that do well and can grow themselves.

On broadband, I think the Deputy makes a very valid point. It is important to bear in mind that when this Government, Fine Gael and the Independents, came into office, about 52% of premises in Ireland had access to high-speed broadband. That is up to about 75% now, and we are going to go the whole way so that we become one of the first countries in the world where every premises, no matter how remote, has access to broadband.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I appreciate the Taoiseach's overview. I must ask him one specific question. Some months ago, I raised with him the issue of rural roads and funding therefor. We have had storms, floods and frost. All of those events have had a serious impact on the condition of rural roads. At the time, the Taoiseach said to me that it was an issue and I said people in rural areas felt abandoned, forgotten, neglected. Many roads are impassable due to their condition. We need a concerted and co-ordinated plan to restore rural roads. The last time I raised this the Taoiseach said in response that he would look at it when the councils had spent the money they had been allocated. I am now asking him to look at it in the context of the budget. Can the Taoiseach make further funds available to councils to repair our rural roads?

The Taoiseach: People in rural Ireland pay road tax, tax on their diesel and petrol and property tax. They are entitled to have decent roads. As the Deputy will know, there has been a significant increase in funding for roads throughout Ireland this year. In the Deputy's county, the regional and local roads allocation, which had been €18.4 million in 2017, was increased to €21.7 million this year. That is in line with increases in the budget for roads across the country. Moreover the local improvement scheme, which is really important for people living on lane-ways that are not taken in charge, was restored and a budget of €10.8 million was set aside for it.

First, I encourage local authorities that have not spent all their allocation to do so. I know that many have but some have not. The weather is deteriorating, so I encourage local authorities that have not done so to spend the budget they have to improve roads across rural Ireland and in urban areas too. Yes, a further increase in spending on regional and local roads is something

we will examine as part of the budget, acknowledging that for many years there was underinvestment in roads, particularly during the crisis period, and we need to catch up on the backlog.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Clare Daly to announce the Order of Business for this week.

Deputy Clare Daly: Today's business shall be No. 19, motion re EU Agreement with Kazakhstan - referral to committee; No. 20, motion re technological universities - referral to committee; No. 21, motion re JHA protocol of the Treaty of Lisbon - referral to committee; No. 39, statements on Brexit negotiations; and No. 40, Markets in Financial Instruments Bill 2018 - Order for Report, Report and Final Stages. Private Members' business shall be No. 210, motion re confidence in the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, selected by Sinn Féin. Wednesday's business shall be No. 41, Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015 [*Seanad*] - Order for Report, Report and Final Stages; No. 40, Markets in Financial Instruments Bill 2018 - Report and Final Stages, resumed, if not previously concluded; No. 22, motion re Multilateral Convention to Implement Tax Treaty Related Measures Order 2018, back from committee; No. 23, motion re Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income and Capital Gains) (Republic of Ghana) Order 2018 - back from committee; and No. 11, Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2018 - Order for Second Stage and Second Stage. Private Members' Business shall be No. 60, Local Government (Restoration of Town Councils) Bill 2018 - Second Stage, selected by the Labour Party.

Thursday's business shall be No. 21, motion re JHA Protocol of the Treaty of Lisbon - back from committee; No. 1, Children's Health Bill 2018 [*Seanad*] - Second Stage; and No. 11, Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2018 - Order for Second Stage and Second Stage. No. 25, motion re report on Engagement with Investment Funds — Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, will be taken in the evening slot.

I refer to the first revised report of the Business Committee dated 20 September 2018. In relation to today's business, it is proposed that Nos. 19 to 21, inclusive, shall be taken without debate and any division demanded on No. 21 shall be taken immediately. No. 39 shall be brought to a conclusion after 85 minutes and shall be confined to a single round of statements for a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties or groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, of ten minutes each, with a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time.

In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that Second Stage of No. 60 shall conclude within two hours. No. 22 shall be brought to a conclusion after 45 minutes. Speeches shall be confined to a single round for a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties or groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, of five minutes each, with a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time. No. 23 shall be brought to a conclusion after 45 minutes. Speeches shall be confined to a single round for a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties or groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, of five minutes each, with a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State and all Members may share time.

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In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that No. 21 shall be taken without debate.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with Tuesday'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 Dara Calleary: In his response on rural services earlier, the Taoiseach mentioned his ambitions for broadband. A total of 543,000 homes, businesses and farms are awaiting the roll-out of the new national broadband plan but the process is more like "Lanigan's Ball" than anything else with so many people stepping in and stepping out of it. Will the Taoiseach confirm the procurement rules are still being complied with in the process in spite of all of the changes to the tendering parties? Will he also confirm when the assessment process for the current bidder will be finalised? Is he still confident that the roll-out of broadband for those 543,000 premises is on schedule?

The Taoiseach: I assume that the normal procurement process is being followed. I met the Ministers, Deputies Naughten and Donohoe, on this issue just last week. I will ask the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment to give the Deputy a more detailed answer than I can. I am confident it is on track and we will be able to sign a contract, and that we will have shovels in the ground and work under way in 2019 to bring high-speed fibre to some of those homes. It will be the biggest single public investment in rural Ireland in a very long time, as big a project in many ways as rural electrification. I look forward to-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: Does the Taoiseach have his high-visibility jacket ready?

The Taoiseach: -----having the contracts signed.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Will that be on camera?

The Taoiseach: I look forward to turning the sod, absolutely.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Page 35 of the programme for Government contains a number of commitments in respect of public sector pay. Yesterday, the Minister for Finance made a much anticipated announcement in respect of pay restoration. As the Taoiseach knows, more than 60,000 public sector workers, including 16,000 teachers and nearly 10,000 nurses who entered service after 2011, currently earn less than colleagues for performing the same work. We have consistently called on the Government to find a fair and sensible unwinding of pay cuts and to deliver pay restoration and equality. The proposals announced yesterday fall very short of the mark and do not provide full pay equality until as late as 2026, which is almost a decade away.

This could be done sooner. We have proposed the delivery of full pay equality by the beginning of 2020. This is affordable and would see all post-2011 entrants receiving an initial pay increase at the beginning of 2019, with full pay equality by 2020. Does the Taoiseach agree that the Minister should go back to the drawing board in this regard?

The Taoiseach: The proposal published yesterday was negotiated between the Department of Finance and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU. It has been welcomed by some unions such as SIPTU and Fórsa, while others have given a more muted response and some have given a negative response. It is now up to people to make a decision for themselves and

ballot as to whether it should be accepted.

To bring about equal pay scales in one go would cost €200 million and we just do not have that money for next year if we are to invest in housing, health and all the areas that Members are calling on us to invest in. We have agreed with ICTU a staged restoration of basic salaries over a number of years in a way that is affordable and does not mean we would have to find the money by reducing services, cutting back on new schools or anything like that. It is important to point out that of the 60,000 new and recent entrants to the public service who will benefit, 58% or 35,750 will benefit from year one, which is next March. Of the total, 78% will benefit by year two, with many receiving substantial uplifts in pay. Ultimately, if the proposals are agreed, we will be able to accommodate them in the budget. Something that would cost much more, such as what the Deputy proposes, could not be accommodated without having an impact on other spending areas, particularly health and housing. That would not be right.

Deputy Gino Kenny: In the programme for Government, there is a commitment to a health-led approach to the process of decriminalisation of personal drug use. There was an extraordinary number of submissions to the Department of Health over the summer as part of its public consultation process. This debate has been ongoing for many years. Most people here agree that harm reduction is the way forward to stop people going through the criminal justice system. When does the Taoiseach envisage this policy being realised? It has been suggested for many years and the vast majority of people in this country want to see a system that is health-led rather than one which throws people into jail.

The Taoiseach: I agree with the Deputy that we should adopt a health-led approach to combatting the use of illegal drugs. Convicting people for minor possession has not worked. We have appointed a judge to head a group to examine the matter under the auspices of the Minister of State with responsibility for the drugs strategy, Deputy Catherine Byrne. The group was given a year to do the work and it must be coming close to the end of that time now, although I do not have the exact date. I will certainly make inquiries and inform the Deputy as to when we expect to receive the report.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The programme for Government has the ambition of protecting farmers' incomes. Suckler farmers are experiencing severe difficulties in County Kerry and all along the west of Ireland. These farmers provide the source of our beef, by and large, for most of the rest of the country. Suckler prices are down by a third in Cahirsiveen, Castleisland and Kenmare marts. Farmers are losing today. I ask and beg the Taoiseach that the €200 that was promised to suckler farmers be made available this year. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine gave back €76 million to the Exchequer last year and €106 million the year before. Suckler farmers need this money now as otherwise they face extinction. I ask the Taoiseach to take action in the budget this year.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: I want to address the same matter of agriculture. Storm Ali devastated up to 70% of the maize crop in Louth, Meath and north Dublin last week. Less than 60% of the crop, if it is salvageable at all, will only be salvaged by the introduction of imported specialist machinery. Much of that maize was grown to meet the demand of the cereal crisis that we have had over the past number of years. In view of the precedent that was set last year in regard to cereal and potato crops in Donegal and the north west, will the Taoiseach see to it that the Minister, Deputy Creed, will offer similar assistance to those devastated farmers who have lost up to 6,000 ha of crops? It will cause a serious impact on fodder supplies later in the year in the rest of the country.

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Deputy Timmy Dooley: I wish to address the same matter of agriculture. Like others, I too recognise the importance of the suckler herd. The constituency I represent probably has one of the greatest populations of suckler cows nationwide. It is an important part of the cycle of beef production. If calves are not born and there are no suckler cows, the beef sector on which the country has come to rely, in terms of the jobs and the products for export it provides, will not be the same. Suckler farmers are under considerable pressure this year and Deputy Healy-Rae is right to say that a considerable amount of suckler cows have been sold. The size of the national herd is dropping significantly as a result of the pressure, particularly because of the drought and concerns as to whether there will be enough fodder over the winter. It is important that any possible supports be provided to that sector of the farming community. There is no doubt that suckler farmers are the poor relation of the farming cohort and they deserve the support of the State because of the line of product that ultimately feeds the country's agricultural sector, which is important for exports.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: For the past two months meat processors have consistently reduced the price they are returning to farmers. At the same time, prices are increasing in the UK. There is now a huge differential between what cattle are making here and in the UK. There is a beef forum and it should transparently examine the returns from the market place in order that factories cannot continue to exploit farmers.

The Taoiseach: There is no promised legislation on this matter but, as regards budgetary matters, they are obviously under discussion now and I am not in a position to make any announcements about the budget until the budget happens. I know the Minister, Deputy Creed, is working with the stakeholders' forum on all of those issues and, if he is in a position to, I will ask him to give a more detailed reply.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Minister has to work a bit harder.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Taoiseach said last week that the people of Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Galway will be able to vote for their own directly-elected mayor. Will the Taoiseach outline if that is due to go to a plebiscite in each of those cities this October, or will that just proceed because the Government has made a call on it? When will we know what the powers and structures for that office will be?

The Taoiseach said he will create a Citizens' Assembly to look at the position of the mayor of Dublin. We did something similar ten years ago. It was not a Citizens' Assembly, but involved people within the political system. I put it to the Taoiseach that he should do something similar on this occasion. As well as including citizens, it should involve people from the political system because no one else knows how local authorities work as well as those who have worked in them. It could also include public officials. If an assembly will be established, it should comprise a mix of citizens, people from the political system and public administrators.

Does the Taoiseach believe the recommendations of such an assembly would only be implemented in 2024 or 2025, or what is the timeline for that proposal?

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Proposals are about to go to Cabinet on this, but the intention is to have a plebiscite of the people in the four cities that were named. I will consider the point about an assembly to consider the issue regarding a Dublin mayor.

Deputy Brian Stanley: On page 97 of the programme for Government, the Government

states it will support the investment in closed-circuit television, CCTV, at key locations along the road network in rural and urban centres. There are several community CCTV schemes nationwide and the Department committed €1 million per year over several years. In County Laois, however, the Donaghmore and Mountmellick schemes have been held up and a similar situation exists across the country. Many of these schemes have raised funds through their own voluntary efforts such as through cake sales, raffles and so on. There has been a game of ping-pong between senior Garda management and local authorities as to who will take responsibility for storing the data. This has dragged on and on and the schemes are now in jeopardy as a consequence.

I have raised this matter with the Minister for Justice and Equality who replied that he is trying to resolve it but in the meantime, these CCTV schemes and community alert schemes are paralysed as a result. I call on the Taoiseach to examine this seriously with the Minister for Justice and Equality. It cannot be allowed to drag on. Grant money the Department has allocated is going down the tubes because this matter has not been resolved. The County and City Management Association has said its members will not touch it because they are not the police force. The Garda also has stated it is not its baby either. Someone must take responsibility and it is up to the Taoiseach and Minister for Justice and Equality to knock heads together, make somebody take responsibility and sort this out so that community alert schemes in counties Laois and Offaly and across the State can benefit from this funding.

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I thank Deputy Stanley for this question. I am particularly familiar with the situation at national level and particularly in the area mentioned by the Deputy. It is an important crime prevention measure. I am very pleased that the Government has made available, through my Department, a sum to allow community CCTV.

There is a regulatory framework. I assure Deputy Stanley and Members that I am very keen to deal with this issue in a satisfactory manner. The regulatory framework to which I refer involves the local authorities, An Garda Síochána and the Data Protection Commissioner. I imagine everyone will agree there must be a proper legislative framework for this sensitive issue. I am keen to resolve the matter. Officials from my Department are engaged with the County and City Management Association and local communities with a view towards resolving the matter in order that the CCTV system can be up and running across the country at the earliest opportunity. Twenty-six of the 31 local authorities have now embraced the scheme in accordance with the regulations. I am anxious to sit down with the remaining handful of local authorities with a view towards dealing with the issue to which Deputy Stanley referred.

An Ceann Comhairle: A further 11 Deputies are offering to speak. I call Deputy Brophy.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I raise the issue of BusConnects. There are many concerns relating to BusConnects. Like many Deputies, I support the investment in public transport. While the overall intention of what is being attempted with BusConnects should be warmly welcomed, nevertheless there are genuine concerns among communities across my constituency and across Dublin relating to existing bus services and the consultation process that is currently ongoing.

Will the Taoiseach raise these concerns with the National Transport Authority, NTA? Many concerns are genuine. There are some local politicians and politicians of various stripes who are trying to stoke fears. They are trying to make people fearful that they will lose their service when many people will have an increased service. Nevertheless, there are genuine concerns

about bus services to local communities that will be affected.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Brophy for raising this important issue, which is causing enormous concern across the capital city. BusConnects is Government policy. It is a €2 billion investment in improving our bus services, not only in Dublin but also in Cork and Galway.

Some people in my constituency spend more than an hour each day travelling to work on the bus. That is an hour in and back which is ten hours a week. BusConnects, if we get it right, could reduce journey times by half.

This would mean that people could spend an extra five hours a week with their families or on their own daily lives. It is clear that we need to get it right. When I met the chief executive officer of the National Transport Authority last week, I expressed the enormous concerns of many people in Dublin about the proposals, particularly regarding direct routes into the city centre and the termination of routes long before the city centre. I said that the authority needs to make major modifications to the plan and I asked that a revised plan with major modifications be submitted and put to consultation again.

3 o'clock

Deputy Mary Butler: The programme for Government contains a clear commitment to improve the quality of life of older people. I understand that the Taoiseach was away on Government business for the last few days, so he might not be aware of media reports today that the Christmas bonus will not be paid to pensioners and social welfare recipients this year. Can the Taoiseach assure those who depend on this bonus that these media reports are untrue, unnecessary and unfounded? They are causing huge stress to people who depend on this payment. I have been inundated this morning with calls from people who have seen the reports in the media.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Brassil on the same matter.

Deputy John Brassil: Page 36 of the programme for Government sets out a commitment to provide a fairer and more inclusive society and spread the benefits of a recovering economy more equally. I ask the Taoiseach to put this rumour, which may be unfounded and untrue, to bed immediately. It would be of great concern to pensioners and social welfare recipients if they were unable to rely on this extra money around Christmas time, when it is most needed. The timely ending of this rumour, which I hope is inaccurate, would be welcome. If it is Government policy not to pay this bonus, I ask the Taoiseach to reverse that policy immediately.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for raising this important issue and giving me an opportunity to allay people's concerns. The Christmas bonus is really important, particularly for people who are on low and fixed incomes. It gives pensioners an opportunity to buy presents for their grandchildren. It gives people on very low incomes an opportunity to meet the inevitable bills that come with Christmas. I can assure the Deputies that the Christmas bonus will be paid this year.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Taoiseach.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, which was announced last week, contains many positive recommendations that would modernise policing in areas like civilianisation, human rights, training and community policing, which is a key point we have emphasised. However, some concern has been

expressed about the proposal to do away with the Policing Authority and to move some of its functions, for example with regard to appointments, to the Garda board and the Garda Commissioner. It is significant that there were differing views on the issue of appointments within the commission itself. When the Government is implementing the report, will it give weight to and take account of this difference of opinion within the commission? When will we have a debate on the report in this House?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I would be very anxious for us to have a debate on aspects of this important report in the House at the earliest opportunity, subject to the agreement of the Business Committee. I assure the House that the Government has noted the far-reaching recommendations in this report, which is a blueprint for policing for the coming decades. I am anxious to ensure an implementation body is put in place and that is my priority currently. I will engage intensively in the coming weeks with a view to putting together an implementation committee headed by an independent chair. We will proceed accordingly with the 50 recommendations, subject to the observations expressed by Deputies during a Dáil debate on this report, which is really important for the future of policing in this country.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Thirty patients were waiting on trolleys in Letterkenny University Hospital yesterday. There were 2,000 instances of patients waiting on trolleys in Letterkenny University Hospital over the course of 2016, and that figure increased to 5,000 last year. When the Taoiseach visited County Donegal two weeks ago, he decided not to visit the hospital to meet management and to assess the pressure being experienced by staff. Last year, the hospital put to the Taoiseach a proposal, costing €1.8 million, to provide additional staff to reopen a 19-bed ward that would alleviate some of the pressure on the hospital. It has put that proposal to the Taoiseach again this year. Will he take the steps necessary to ensure the funding is delivered to alleviate some of the pressure on the hospital so the patients of Donegal, in particular, and other counties will not be facing a crisis in which they will be on trolleys and in which staff will be asked to deal with unacceptable working conditions that are simply atrocious?

The Taoiseach: Overall, the number of patients on trolleys this morning was 291. That is 18.5% down on the figure for this day last year, and 17.56% down on the figure for this day two years ago. I appreciate, as always, that the figures vary from hospital to hospital. One could have very high numbers in one hospital and a figure of zero, or of only one or two, in others. Extra beds were brought into the system this year. As the Deputy knows, a decision was taken by Fianna Fáil during the boom to reduce the number of beds in acute hospitals. We reversed that decision around 2014 or 2015 and have been increasing the number of acute beds since then. I will not be making individual decisions on which hospitals the extra beds go to, but there will be extra beds again next year.

Deputy Martin Kenny: There is a clear commitment in the programme for Government to provide home care services, home care packages and home help services for elderly people. In recent weeks, I have been inundated with people coming to me trying to get additional home help hours that they cannot get. When I speak to the service in the north west, it tells me it would need to get at least 20% more funding to provide adequately for the number of people who need to get the service. Most people are being told they have to pay for the home help services privately to be able to subsidise the State's intervention. It is really unacceptable because many people are on the poverty line. They find that when an elderly relative or another individual comes home from hospital, they cannot get home help services for him or her. They are told to pay for it themselves when they cannot afford to do so. In the forthcoming budget, I expect

a strong commitment from the Government to put the funding in place to ensure the promise in the programme for Government is kept in respect of this. It saves money in the long run. Not only does it save money from the point of view of the health service but it also puts money into the hands of people living in rural areas, many of whom are providing the service. It makes absolute sense. It is the one area in which the Government needs to invest with absolute haste.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: On the same matter, I raised this with the Tánaiste last week and he did not give a satisfactory answer. As I can hear in the Dáil Chamber, there is a chronic crisis in the home help sector right across the country, particularly in my area. Home help organiser posts are not being filled. This is leading to a chronic backlog that dates right back to the end of June. No extra home help has been given to patients who have been discharged. In cases where patients are waiting to be discharged, the Government should put a proper home care package in place. It makes no economic sense to do what is now being done because it is costing the State on the other side. We need to be very realistic. The home help package is a massive facility for elderly people, in particular. What is happening is shameful.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): I thank both Deputies for focusing our attention on this important issue. I agree with both in that I would like to see increased investment. The Government has increased the investment in home help budget on budget. I am very hopeful that we will do it again this year.

It is important to note, however, that there is a dual challenge; it is not just about funding. If we had all the money in the world in the morning, we would need to get the people to provide the service. In many areas, including mine, west Cork, the biggest challenge is not the financial one but getting people to deliver the service. As the Deputies will be aware, with a view to dealing with this I recently concluded a consultation with the public to hear its views on setting up a fair deal-type scheme, underpinned by statute, that would guarantee the delivery of home help hours and the appropriate training, and require a requisite number of staff to provide the service. That will take two to three years to bring about, bearing in mind that the fair deal scheme itself took seven to eight years to introduce. We are working and making a lot of progress towards that. In the meantime, however, I hope we will see an increase in this year's budget, but it will not solve all the ills in the area of home help.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Michael Healy-Rae has two seconds.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Some chance.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: In the programme for Government, there are commitments on health issues, especially regarding children. Last weekend, a mother brought her small child, Rose, to my clinic. Rose was able to point to her hair, eyes, nose and mouth. A short time ago she could not do that. Rose suffers from a spinal muscular problem and, thankfully, she is on the drug Spinraza which is working very well for her. That is the reason she has some power to move her arms. Sadly, however, there are 25 other children in this country who cannot move their limbs and whose little muscles and limbs are getting increasingly weak. As a medical professional the Taoiseach would be far more knowledgeable about this than me. It is a disgrace that the drug is not being made available to the little children who could benefit so greatly from it. Anything the Taoiseach, the Minister for Health and the Government can do to help those 25 children to be like Rose and to be able to move their hands, point and use their muscles would be important beyond belief.

The Taoiseach: I am glad to hear that Rose is doing well and that Spinraza is providing benefits for her. I gave an oral answer on this topic last week and it is on the record. The position has not changed since then.

An Ceann Comhairle: My apologies to the six Deputies who have not been called today. The Deputies who take more than a minute, which is the allocated time, do not leave time for their colleagues to ask questions.

Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Emissions Targets) Bill 2018: First Stage

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 to specify emissions reduction targets to be achieved and to include these targets in the national mitigation plan and national adaptation framework.

The purpose of this Bill is to set in law targets for the reduction of carbon emissions up to 2050. This follows international precedents. For example, the UK's Climate Change Act 2008 sets specific targets for both 2050 and 2020. Despite our international commitments the Government's attitude towards climate change has been less than exemplary. Ireland is now unique in Europe in the scale of its failure to meet both emissions and renewable energy targets. Earlier this summer, the Climate Change Advisory Council outlined how Ireland will fail to meet both its 2020 and 2030 targets and will fail to decarbonise the Irish economy by 2050.

This is simply not good enough and without action we will face massive changes to our climate. Met Éireann projects a 30% increase in heavy rain and storm events, a 1° centigrade to 1.6° centigrade increase in average temperature and a decrease of 50% in the number of frost days by 2050. Sitting on our hands and expecting others to do the heavy lifting for us is not good enough. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 contained no eventual or specific targets for Ireland's emissions reductions. Fianna Fáil heavily criticised this aspect of the legislation at the time of its introduction. These targets appeared in Ireland's first attempt to legislate for climate change, which was the Climate Change Response Bill 2010 brought forward by the Fianna Fáil-Green Party coalition Government, yet this Government did not deem them worthy of inclusion in its legislation. We recognised that its legislation was a roadmap to nowhere and that it did not set clear metrics for the Government or its policy makers. Sadly, our fears have proven well founded.

This Bill seeks to address this issue and amends the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 to set specific targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. These are: an 89% reduction by 2050 relative to 1990 levels; a 40% reduction by 2030 relative to 1990 levels; a 20% reduction by 2020 relative to 2005 levels. These targets are in line with Ireland's international commitments and are clear targets towards which the country should strive. They will hold the Government to account on its rhetoric and promises and ensure that Ireland plays its part in the battle to prevent further climate change.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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The Taoiseach: No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Agreement with Kazakhstan: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I move:

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the terms of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and its member states, of the one part, and the Republic of Kazakhstan, of the other part, signed at Astana on 21 December 2015, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 6 July 2018, be referred to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, in accordance with Standing Order 84A(3)(b), which, not later than 23 October 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.

Technological Universities Order: Referral to Joint Committee

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I move:

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

Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2018, copies of which have been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 13 September 2018, be referred to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills, in accordance with Standing Order 84A(4)(k), which, not later than 9 October 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.

Regulation establishing Internal Security Fund: Referral to Joint Committee

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I move:

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Internal Security Fund,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 9 July 2018, be referred to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, in accordance with Standing Order 84A(4)(k), which, not later than 27 September 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

British-Irish Council

1. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the British-Irish Council in Guernsey; the meetings he held; and the issues raised. [29006/18]

2. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the British-Irish Council in Guernsey. [30087/18]

3. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent meeting of the British-Irish Council. [30412/18]

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

I attended the 30th British-Irish Council, BIC, summit in Guernsey on Friday, 22 June, hosted by Chief Minister Gavin St. Pier. I was accompanied by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy.

The BIC is an institution created under the Good Friday Agreement and brings together representatives of the eight member administrations: the British and Irish Governments, the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and the governments of the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey. It works to promote harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships across the islands and provides an opportunity to consult, co-operate and exchange views on common policies or on areas of shared interest.

The discussion at the summit covered key political developments for the administrations since the previous summit in November. The discussion focused largely on the implications of Brexit, particularly for relationships across the islands. The council also discussed the current political situation in Northern Ireland and I reiterated my regret that Northern Ireland, until the Executive is restored, is without political representation in this important forum.

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The council also endorsed plans for a future programme of work proposed by environment Ministers and agreed to a new area of work on social enterprises.

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, took part in a thematic discussion on the issues that collectively impact on the marine environment of these islands.

David Lidington MP, Cabinet Office Minister, and Karen Bradley MP, Secretary Of State for Northern Ireland, attended for the British Government along with the First Ministers from Scotland and Wales and the heads of administration from the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey.

I took the opportunity to have bilateral meetings with the Welsh First Minister, Carwyn Jones, and the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon. In both meetings we exchanged views and perspectives on issues of mutual interest and continued co-operation, with discussions focusing mainly on Brexit and its impacts on business and citizens and on developments in Westminster and Brussels. In my meeting with the Welsh First Minister, Mr. Jones, I confirmed our intention to reopen our consulate in Cardiff as part of the Global Ireland 2025 plan.

I also held brief discussions with David Lidington and Karen Bradley on Brexit and on the absence of an agreement between the parties on re-establishing the Northern Ireland Executive. I underlined the importance of the restoration of the institutions in the context of full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, and undertook to continue to work with the British Government to support the Northern Ireland parties to achieve this outcome.

Deputy Joan Burton: I note that the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Theresa May, did not attend the summit. In his conversations with Mrs. May, has the Taoiseach suggested that her attendance at the British-Irish Council could be valuable for understanding the difficulties and likely impacts of a difficult Brexit for the island of Ireland, North and South, and Scotland and Wales, which were represented by their First Ministers? In that context, I note the Taoiseach had discussions with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Mr. Lidington. Having met Prime Minister May at the meeting in Salzburg last week, does the Taoiseach believe that the backstop is becoming more illusory, as there appears to be little chance of the British Government reaching a deal either in regard to the Single Market or the customs union? There are also issues arising from the Belfast Agreement regarding personal freedoms and rights and the rule of law, particularly in Northern Ireland. What is the Taoiseach's assessment of where we stand in terms of, potentially, a difficult Brexit? We do not have any great detail from the Government as to how it plans to protect Irish businesses and Irish situations in light of a difficult Brexit. There are various schemes for grants and so on for businesses but little preparation has been made by Government on the details of how Brexit will impact on businesses north and south of the Border.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In July, the Taoiseach said the talks in respect of the Northern Ireland institutions and the re-establishment of them would reconvene in the autumn. I would like him to set out if this is still his proposed timetable. What action does he propose to take in respect of the rights that are still outstanding in the North? I refer to marriage equality, Acht na Gaeilge and the struggle of so many families to secure inquests. As the Taoiseach will be aware, for many of these families, these sagas have been decades long and this struggle is not defined by, or confined to, Orange or Green, but a dilemma right across society. The Taoiseach will also be aware that I have challenged Mrs. May many times on the ethic or the morality of withholding inquests from families, which is after all a basic democratic norm and a basic right

for anybody who purports to have any interest in the rule of law.

Last February, we achieved an accommodation, not perfectly formed to the nationalist or republican eye but an accommodation nonetheless, that we believed had sufficiency to allow us to proceed to re-establish the Executive but the DUP walked away from it. The DUP's toxic relationship with the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, has given them safe haven at Westminster. No incentive or pressure has been exerted to encourage the DUP to do what needs to be done to re-establish the institutions. Now, as the drama of the renewable heat incentive inquiry, RHI, unfolds, we are witnessing the absolute neurotic behaviour of so many within the DUP leadership. I would not give the Taoiseach much hope for the future. That said, we need to move forward. As stated by the previous speaker, the Brexit dilemma will reach its crescendo and the jeopardy is very great for Ireland, North and South. In regard to the Taoiseach's timetable for talks, what has Karen Bradley told him because she has told us damn all and will he set out his plans in this regard?

An Ceann Comhairle: I will allow two brief supplementaries from Deputies Calleary and Boyd Barrett. I ask the Deputies to be brief otherwise the Taoiseach will not have time to reply.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The meeting in Guernsey was held up by the Tánaiste in particular, as, possibly, a game-changer or a major meeting in the context of the continued vacuum around the Northern Ireland Executive, yet the British Prime Minister did not turn up to it. The strength of the British-Irish Council, BIC, over the years has been full participation and full sharing of information around the table among all the taoisigh and prime ministers on the island. What plans does the Taoiseach have to reinvigorate the BIC? While I accept that the focus of London right now is on Brexit, urgency needs to be injected into addressing the vacuum in the Northern Ireland Executive. With respect to Deputy McDonald, she is not necessarily an impartial observer either because her party is part of the problem and it needs to come forward with solutions to address the vacuum otherwise we will return to the situation we had.

In the context of Brexit, what is the Taoiseach's reaction to the speech delivered this afternoon by Sir Keir Starmer in which he said that the Labour Party would be unlikely to vote for any deal in the UK Parliament, if such a deal is arrived at, once again throwing huge uncertainty into the Brexit process?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It goes without saying that we cannot trust the Tory right - the Tory Brexiteers - in terms of the consequences of, and negotiations around, the British exit for obvious reasons. We have always said that we do not necessarily trust the EU to look after Irish interests on the issue of the Border if those negotiations do not go well but the Taoiseach has always said that we will not accept any hard border. While that reassurance is welcome, is there a contradiction in his references to the recruitment of customs officials and his statement that we will not accept a hard border because the former would appear to suggest that the State is preparing to erect trade and customs barriers? Can he give us an assurance that those customs officials will not be deployed at any point along the Border, regardless of what happens, or what deals do or do not happen, between Europe and Britain? While I do not trust the Tory Brexiteers, I also do not trust the EU to not insist on a border to protect the Single Market, which would be unacceptable. Can the Taoiseach give us an assurance that the State will not deploy customs officials along the Border between the North and South?

The Taoiseach: The Prime Minister, Mrs. May, did not attend the BIC and I understand she has never done so. While former Prime Minister Cameron attended one such meeting during

his six year tenure, the practice since the early days of the Good Friday Agreement has been that the Taoiseach attends on behalf of Ireland and the Secretary of State attends on behalf of the UK Government. I have not spoken to Prime Minister May about her attending the council but I have spoken to her about the need for a new mechanism by which the British and Irish Governments can engage on a structured basis. We do this well at the moment because both countries are in the EU and every Minister and his or her UK counterpart attends EU Councils three or four times a year, which is always a good opportunity for bilaterals. We will now move from a situation whereby we see each other at least four times a year in Brussels to a situation whereby we will not. This will happen from March next year and I have spoken to Prime Minister May about how we might deal with that and put in place a structured mechanism by which the two sovereign governments could meet more regularly. Perhaps, the mechanism for doing this is not the BIC, but the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference, BIIGC, which can meet in different formats. The Good Friday Agreement may have been more foreseeing than any of us could have imagined in that, perhaps, this mechanism for east-west co-operation between the two sovereign Governments could be reinvigorated and used an opportunity for us engage Minister to Minister and Prime Minister to Prime Minister on a structured basis after the UK leaves the European Union in March.

On the backstop, or the protocol in Ireland and Northern Ireland, Prime Minister May once again restated her commitment to having a legally operable backstop as part of the withdrawal agreement. In Salzburg, the other 26 member states reiterated their solidarity with Ireland and restated our position that there will not be a withdrawal agreement and no transition period for the UK if there is not an Irish protocol - a legally operable Irish backstop - as part of that agreement. I believe we will get there - and in November - because nobody wants us to end up in a no deal scenario. The damage for the UK would be immense. The damage for Ireland would also be immense and it would have a serious impact on other countries like Belgium, Holland, France and Denmark. As I said, I believe we will get there in November but we are in uncharted territory. I have sought a lot of advice on this over the past couple of weeks and over the summer. I have met many wise old heads who know Europe, British politics and Northern Ireland and all the issues around it and I came away from those meetings with the advice that it is uncharted territory and unpredictable and I was advised to do my best. That was probably the best advice I could have got. We will have to stay engaged and stay vigilant and that is what we will do in the period ahead.

In terms of talks on getting the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly back up and running, the Tánaiste and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland are in touch about new talks. There have been suggestions around the possibility of having an independent chair for these talks but I understand that proposal has not found favour with the DUP and it will not be possible to form an Executive in Northern Ireland unless the DUP and Sinn Féin can come together and come to an agreement. Northern Ireland unfortunately now holds the international record for failing to form a government, which is a real shame. Clarity around Brexit could help so perhaps by the October or November summit, if there is one, we will have a road map as to how Brexit will work and what the new relationships will look like. We might then be in a better position to bring the parties together again and Government stands ready to do exactly that.

I did not have a chance to hear Sir Keir Starmer's speech so I cannot really comment on it but it is the case that any withdrawal agreement will have to be ratified by both Westminster and the European Parliament so while we may assume that because something is agreed by the European Council and the UK that it will go through both parliaments, we should not actually

make that assumption. There is the possibility that the Heads of Government in the European Council and the UK will come to a decision in October or November and we may find that it runs into ratification problems in Westminster or the European Parliament. We will have to manage that and see how it develops.

On Deputy Boyd Barrett's question, we are recruiting customs and revenue officers for the ports and airports, particularly Dublin Airport, Dublin Port and Rosslare Europort. It must be borne in mind that when the UK leaves the European Union, whether it is in March next year or at the end of the transition period at the start of 2021, it will be leaving the Single Market as well so there will be changes. The rules of trade and the trading relationship between Britain and Ireland will not be as it is now. We need to make provision for those changes and that is what we are doing but we will not be deploying any of them along the land Border with Northern Ireland.

Cabinet Committee Meetings

4. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, last met; and when it is scheduled to meet again. [30410/18]

5. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, last met. [30674/18]

6. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, last met. [37438/18]

7. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, will next meet. [37536/18]

8. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, will next meet. [37538/18]

9. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, last met; and when it next plans to meet. [37752/18]

10. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, last met. [38378/18]

11. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E, health, last met. [38530/18]

12. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he is satisfied that his Department has sufficient expertise to ensure that it can effectively service the preparation of Cabinet committee documents relating to health policy. [38687/18]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 4 to 12 together.

Cabinet committee E last met on 11 April 2018. The next meeting of the Cabinet committee has not yet been scheduled. In addition to the meetings of the full Cabinet and of Cabinet committees, I meet with Ministers on an individual basis regularly to focus on particular issues. In this regard I meet regularly with the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, to discuss issues related to our health service, including last week.

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Support for Cabinet committee E is provided by the social policy and public service reform division of my Department. The Minister for Health has primary responsibility for the preparation of documents relating to health policy. Government is committed to enhancing the quality of the health system. This year has seen the highest ever level of health funding in the history of our country and the Government has also allocated significant capital funding of almost €11 billion for health over the past ten years. That is double what was provided for the previous ten years. This is investment in new buildings, equipment and ICT.

However, in order to ensure meaningful and sustained improvements in the health service we also need to deliver a major programme of reform. Important milestones have been reached in recent months. The Minister for Health launched the Sláintecare implementation strategy in August. This provides the framework within which a new system-wide reform programme can be advanced. The new programme office has been established and is now led by Laura Magahy and a Sláintecare advisory council has been established, which will be chaired by Dr. Tom Keane who led the reform of the cancer services in Ireland some years ago. The new structures will support and drive the implementation of the reform programme. Work is also under way to establish a new HSE board to strengthen the management, governance and accountability of the executive. Ciarán Devane has recently been nominated as chairperson designate of the HSE. He is chief executive of the British Council and was a chief executive of the UK health charity, Macmillan Cancer Support. He is also a former member of the board of the National Health Service England.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are so many questions grouped here that I have to insist that we stick to the time allocated. I call Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Taoiseach as ucht a chuid freagraí. The Taoiseach recently visited the site of the former mother and baby home in Tuam where hundreds of babies are buried. As the Taoiseach knows, the survivors of the home and the families of those who resided or died there have expressed disappointment that he did not meet with them during his visit. I wrote to him in August asking that he meet with Catherine Corless and the Tuam mother and baby home survivors and I ask that of him again. We owe a lot to Ms Corless for her research which uncovered the deaths of 796 children at the home. When the Taoiseach meets with Ms Corless and the survivors, he will hear first hand of their particular healthcare needs. One child died every fortnight when the home was in operation. Many of those who survived a regime of malnutrition and neglect where measles, tuberculosis and pneumonia were rife now suffer very significant ill health and yet the Government has yet to provide a scheme specific to their needs. Three years have passed since the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes was established and its timeline for reporting has been extended to February 2019. We know from the industrial homes and the Magdalen laundry scandals that the State moves at a glacial pace in providing redress and access to supports and services when it finally accepts wrongdoing. Survivors of the home need access to health services today. Many of them are elderly and many of them are very unwell. I ask that the State has healthcare provision in place for these survivors and I ask that the Taoiseach acts on that with all due haste.

Deputy Joan Burton: Has the Cabinet committee on health met to discuss the health budget? There are constant leaks to the newspapers that the likely level of deficit in the health service will run anywhere from €800 million to €1 billion this year. I do not know how a functioning Minister for Health can be in charge of a Department where that level of overspend, that lack of control and that lack of involvement in the management of the Department is such

a regular feature of it, and Fine Gael has run that Department for over seven years.

It means that the situation for children with scoliosis, for example, will always be out of reach of being addressed. When I was Tánaiste I secured extra funding which the Taoiseach used to build the additional facilities and yet I read harrowing accounts every week from families, particularly those with children with special needs who are also affected by scoliosis. The numbers are growing and the patients are getting further away from having their surgery. How can the Taoiseach countenance a Minister in his Cabinet being entirely unable to even influence the level of the budget? How can he talk about Sláintecare happening if there is no concept of what a proper budget for the Department is? It is a total failure and shambles on the part of his Government.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The last meeting of the Cabinet committee on health was almost five months ago and the Sláintecare implementation body was launched in August in a quiet news month. I wonder if that was the reason it was launched in that month but we have to look at a number of issues. I have raised the home care packages twice on the Order of Business since we have come back. The home help system is providing an excellent service the length and breadth of the country but there is major frustration for families who are trying to get care for elderly people and who are trying to bring those elderly people back to their community where they can have a quality of life. The home help teams providing this service are saving the State millions of euro. If it is looked at in the context of the fair deal scheme or the nursing home subvention, it is clear they are saving the State millions. The Minister of State said the staff were not available but that is not the information I have. The hours of people working on home help teams around the country are being cut. New contracts are being entered into and there are negotiations in the HSE on their pay and conditions. It is not that there are no people available to take them up.

With regard to waiting for services, particularly for young kids waiting for diagnostic services and interventions, there is a huge crisis.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I have raised this issue numerous times in the two and half years since I was elected to the House. I understand that over the summer the Minister for Health brought a memorandum to Cabinet on the medical cannabis access programme. Over the summer the Department of Health issued guidelines on the access programme, some of which are quite flawed. It has been going on for a long time and the situation has become ludicrous. A man called Kenny Tynan, a father of four from Roscommon, was granted a licence one month ago from the Department of Health which was signed by the Minister. Today he was sent an email by the medicines management programme to say it would not reimburse the licence. The licence system is unworkable. People are getting licences when they cannot afford them. On average, it costs tens of thousands to go to Holland four times a year to get the medication. The system is completely flawed. In Britain the Tory Government has changed its policy. It is very restrictive but people are at least gaining access to medical cannabis. It saves them going to the black market or going abroad. The situation is unworkable. The Taoiseach has to show leadership. This has been going on for years now. There has to be some sort of clarity either on the licence system, the medical cannabis access programme or the legislation I have put forward.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will raise the issue of Sophia Daly. It is a case with which the Taoiseach is familiar. She is 12 years old and has cerebral palsy, arthrogryposis and scoliosis. She was diagnosed with scoliosis in 2013 and put on an urgent waiting list for surgery in April 2017. In August, 17 months later, she was taken off that list and is now not on any list

even though the Minister claims only 20 people have been waiting longer than the four months which he said was the longest anybody would be waiting. I talked to Sophia's father today and she is in increasing pain. The screws in her back and hip are loosening. She may have to be taken into emergency surgery because her condition is deteriorating. Her internal organs have been affected. Her curvature has significantly increased. It is completely unacceptable. Her father, Aaron, said he has asked on several occasions to meet the Minister. The Minister, Deputy Harris, is refusing to meet Aaron. He asked me to ask the Taoiseach what he is doing about the backlog, apart from, it would appear, manipulating the figures on the extent of the backlog. What is being done with the treatment abroad scheme to clear the backlog in order that people like Sophia can get the surgery they urgently need?

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the House agree to give five minutes from Question No. 13, which is a single question, to allow the Taoiseach to respond to these questions because otherwise he will only have two minutes to respond to quite a lot of questions? Is that agreed? Agreed.

The Taoiseach: I made a private visit to Tuam on my way home from a conference in Galway. It was an opportunity for me to pay my respects to the children who were buried there and to see the site for myself. It was not quite what I expected. I expected to see the grounds of an old abandoned institution. It is not that at all; it is a very small site, almost within a housing estate, beside a large playground. I only had about 30 minutes. I would have liked to meet with Catherine Corless, representatives of survivors, residents who have concerns and the local authority but in the period I had, about 30 or 40 minutes, it would not have been possible to do that or to do any of them justice. It was a case of either postponing my visit for a later point in a few months' time or taking the opportunity to stop by and pay my respects and see the place for myself, which I did. I have replied to Catherine Corless and I will meet her with the Minister, Deputy Zappone, because the Minister is the person who is dealing with this issue for the Government and who understands it in a depth that I do not. I will meet her in due course when we are ready to make a decision on the next steps.

The Cabinet sub-committee on health has not met to discuss the HSE budget overrun but it has been discussed at Cabinet. As Deputies will know from my previous replies to questions on this issue, I tend to discuss more things with the full Cabinet than in the past. In the past, bodies such as the Economic Management Council, EMC, or smaller groups were used to discuss important issues. I decided to do it differently and to include the entire Cabinet more and to be more collective in decision-making rather than using bodies such as the EMC which excluded Ministers from decision-making in the past. I am glad to have made some changes in that regard. It has been discussed with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, and the Minister for Health. We are trying to get an accurate fix on the likely overrun.

We often talk in healthcare about how money should follow the patient and money should get to the patient. We are not in a very good position at all to follow the money in the health service due to the very outdated financial systems so we are trying to calculate what the likely overrun is going to be for this year. As things stand, notwithstanding the fact that health has a huge allocation of €16 billion, which is the biggest ever in the history of the State, health spending is running 9% ahead of what it was last year so that overrun could be quite substantial. It could be in the region of the figures people have seen in the newspapers and that certainly limits our room for manoeuvre when it comes to the budget in two weeks' time because much of that overrun will have to be accommodated in the base for next year as well. Much of it is happening for good reasons. Recruitment is happening apace. There are 1,000 more nurses working in

our public health system than we had this time last year. There have been pay increases across the board for 115,000 healthcare staff. Our children's hospital is flying up. The urgent care centre in Blanchardstown is almost roof on at this stage. We have extended things such as free GP care to carers because they need to be cared for too. We are also seeing substantial reductions in the number of people waiting for operations and procedures in our hospitals. Whether it is hips, eyes, knees, cataracts, angiograms or skin lesions being removed, there are 10,000 fewer people waiting for an operation or procedure now than a year ago. The average person is waiting less than six months now for an operation or procedure. We want to get that down to three months over the period ahead.

In terms of medical cannabis, as I understand it, it is required that one has a prescription from a consultant and that one has a licence from the Minister for Health. That is an unusual situation and not one that is desirable or workable. I can guarantee the House that the Minister for Health, while he has signed all except one of the requests for a licence, does not want to be in a situation where he is doing that. It is not the role of a politician to be signing licences for individuals to have their medicines. That is why he is developing the cannabis access programme to do it better. I understand they are running into difficulties with sourcing. If this is a medicine, it needs to be treated like a medicine and we need to make sure it is at pharmaceutical and medicine grade. They are running into difficulties in sourcing it.

On Deputy Boyd Barrett's question, I am not in a position to talk about individual cases or patients in the House. I do not have access to patients' files or records. No politician does or should. There are issues of confidentiality and privacy involved in any individual case. What I can say more generally is that patients can be moved to what is called the suspended list. A patient who may be on a waiting list for surgery may become unfit for surgery for any number of reasons for a period. They are put on a suspended waiting list but can then be put back on the active waiting list when they are fit for surgery again but I do not have the full information on individual cases and it would be wrong for me to comment on them. I am told, however, that the scoliosis figures for the end of January show there are 188 patients of which 109 are spinal fusion patients on the list for spinal surgery. Of the 90 actively waiting, 14 are to come in, which means they have a date for their surgery, 40 are suspended and 44 are on the planned procedural list with an indicative date for their procedure. The Minister for Health has prioritised the development of a sustainable solution for scoliosis and an additional €9 million has been provided to the HSE this year specifically to develop paediatric orthopaedic services including further increasing access to those services.

Commissions of Investigation Expenditure

13. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if commissions of investigation under the aegis of his Department have been allocated additional funding as a consequence of the wind-down of the strategic communications unit, SCU. [29281/18]

The Taoiseach: The commissions of investigation for which I am the specified Minister under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 are the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, IBRC, commission of investigation and the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, commission of investigation.

Following consultations with the Opposition parties by the then Minister for Finance, the IBRC commission of investigation was established in June 2015. Mr. Justice Brian Cregan is

the sole member of the commission. The commission is required to investigate certain transactions, activities and management decisions at the IBRC and in its first module it is investigating the Siteserv transaction, which has been identified as a matter of significant public concern in Dáil Éireann. Following a number of requests from the commission and further consultation with Opposition parties, its deadline for reporting has been extended to the end of 2018.

The NAMA commission of investigation was established in June 2017 following consultation with Opposition parties by Government. Mr. Justice John Cooke is the commission's sole member. In its first module the commission is charged with investigating matters of significant public concern regarding the disposal by NAMA of its Northern Ireland loan portfolio, referred to as Project Eagle. Following a request from the commission, its deadline for reporting has been extended to the end of 2018.

The commissions are entirely independent in their work and I have no information on the status of their investigations other than in relation to administrative matters for which I am responsible as the specified Minister under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004.

At the end of April, a further Revised Estimate for my Department was voted through the House. This reduced my Department's 2018 net budget allocation by €2.5 million from €35.89 million to €33.39 million. This budget reduction followed the decision of Government to wind down the strategic communications unit on foot of the comprehensive review of the operation of the SCU which was completed by the Secretary General to the Government.

Deputy Joan Burton: I found the Taoiseach's reply on health issues and the health budget overrun to be helpless and hopeless because, notwithstanding his experience of that Department, he is throwing in the towel on being able to influence it.

When the SCU was closed down, there was an indication, as the Taoiseach said in his reply, that there would be significant savings. In respect of the commission of investigation and the Taoiseach's visit to the Tuam site, does he think it would be possible to transfer some of the savings from the SCU to carry out the wishes of the survivors and the families affected, mostly from Mayo and Galway, who may have had relatives, either women who gave birth to children or babies who were born and died there, to have a full excavation of the site? My understanding is that the investigation would be costly. I do not know if the Taoiseach has managed to visit St. Patrick's on the Navan Road in our constituency. More than 2,000 babies died there and, as local people have always said, they "died like flies" from a variety of diseases in the mother and baby home. Most of them are buried in Glasnevin Cemetery but people who lived there or who were born there want a full and proper investigation. Is there any chance that the Taoiseach could divert the savings from the SCU to something that would be an actual reparation for what happened to those in mother and baby homes?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Mr. Justice Cooke's report on NAMA, in particular the module one investigation of Project Eagle, which was to have been published at the end of June 2018, was extended to the end of December because of NAMA's failure to hand over all documentation relating to the sale of Project Eagle. I understand NAMA is now co-operating on that. Will that deadline for publication be met as indicated in the commission's first report?

The Taoiseach: I am sorry to tell the Deputy that there were not significant savings. The Department's Estimate was voted through the House in April and by then the decision had been made to shut down the SCU. The money was never voted to the Department, thus the voted

Estimate to the Department was €2.5 million less than was provided for in the budget and the savings never arose.

The mother and baby homes commission is under way. We look forward to receiving its report as soon as it is ready but these are independent commissions. While there might be an accountable Minister for them, they act independently. We need to allow them do their work and we can consider it when it arrives but I do not wish to interfere in the work of a commission of investigation in any way nor would it be appropriate to do so.

I do not have the date for Deputy McDonald on the other commission but I will see if I can get it and I will write to her if we have it.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann 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 Lisa Chambers — the need to discuss the provision and approval of Spinraza for spinal muscular atrophy sufferers; (2) Deputy Dessie Ellis — to discuss the sale of Permanent TSB distressed mortgages to vulture funds; (3) Deputies Bobby Aylward, Declan Breathnach and Pat Casey — to discuss the concessionary card scheme, capacity issues and the funding in budget 2019 for the school transport scheme; (4) Deputy John Brady — the need to consider the purchase by the State of Luggala Estate in County Wicklow; (5) Deputies Mary Butler, John Brassil and Jackie Cahill — to discuss the proposed changes to working practices of pharmaceutical assistants; (6) Deputy Clare Daly — to discuss the greater Dublin drainage project and the impact on the coast; (7) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire — to discuss the L2455, the Lehenaghbeg–Lehenaghmore road; (8) Deputy James Browne — the need for the Minister for Health to ensure that the HSE does not use 076 prefix telephone numbers for its services; (9) Deputies Gino Kenny and Stephen Donnelly — the Government’s proposed medical cannabis access programme and its planned commencement and the need for the Minister for Health to give details of the Government’s proposed medical cannabis access programme and its planned commencement; (10) Deputy Mick Wallace — to discuss the lack of 24-7 emergency PPI cardiac care at University Hospital Waterford in light of the new ambulance transfer time data recently revealed by “RTÉ Investigates”; (11) Deputy Charlie McConalogue — the need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to discuss the price beef farmers are getting for their produce from factories; and (12) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett — scoliosis waiting lists.

The matters raised by Deputies Bobby Aylward, Declan Breathnach, Pat Casey and Niamh Smyth; Deputy Dessie Ellis; and Deputy Mick Wallace have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Action Plan for Rural Development Implementation

68. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the progress made with the implementation of the Action Plan for Rural Development to date; the results that have been achieved to date to improve the life of those living in rural Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38642/18]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am looking for an update on the Action Plan for Rural Development. I know it was never going to be a bestseller and that it would be very late coming out but I do not blame the Minister for that. What progress has been made on the implementation of the action plan and what difference has it made to the life of the ordinary people in rural Ireland? That is the more important question.

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): Improving the quality of life of those who live and work in rural communities is a key objective of the Action Plan for Rural Development. It is the most comprehensive Government plan ever produced to support economic and social development in rural areas.

Progress reports on the implementation of the action plan are published twice-yearly on my Department's website. The most recent report, published in May 2018, shows that 254 of the 270 actions to be reported on were either completed on schedule or substantially advanced, representing an implementation rate of 93%.

Work is under way on compiling the third progress report, which will outline the status of actions due for delivery in the first half of 2018. The draft report will be considered at the next meeting of the monitoring committee which oversees the action plan, and will be published on my Department's website thereafter. The actions being delivered are having an impact. For example, in the case of my own Department's programmes alone, €31.6 million has been invested in more than 450 projects under the town and village renewal scheme while the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme has had €23 million allocated to almost 500 projects. More than 1,200 projects have been approved for total funding of €25 million under the CLÁR programme. Since last September, 1,100 private roads in rural areas have benefitted from investment of €28.2 million under the local improvement scheme and more than 1,300 projects with a value of over €39 million have now been approved under the current LEADER programme.

These, and other initiatives across Government, are improving the quality of life for people in rural areas and supporting job creation in the regions. Continued implementation of the Action Plan for Rural Development, together with the additional investment provided for through the rural regeneration and development fund, will ensure that the Government delivers on its commitment under Project Ireland 2040 to strengthen rural economies and communities.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister has confirmed what I thought. The action plan was purely a copy and paste job. He is, of course, saying that great progress has been made. That is not difficult because all the things he mentioned were already in train by Departments. The reality, however, is that rural Ireland is still without the essentials such as broadband, mobile phone connection and roads while the pupil-teacher ratio in the small school is worse than it

was in 2011. Basic services are disappearing. I have two specific questions for the Minister.

The Minister's mentioned that LEADER was one of the great actions of the Action Plan for Rural Development. What is the provision for LEADER from 2014 to 2020? It predates the Action Plan for Rural Development anyway. What is the comparison with the provision for the LEADER programme that immediately preceded it from 2007 to 2013? Will the Minister explain something to me about which I am curious? I asked a series of questions about the update and the action plan for which the Minister is responsible. For some inexplicable reason his Department transferred many of those questions, although not all of them because some of them were answered, to other Departments. That is the Minister shirking his responsibility for the Action Plan for Rural Development. I do not blame him for that.

Deputy Michael Ring: I thank Deputy Ó Cuív. He is aware of this but in respect of the action plan, there were 270 actions and 254 have been completed. That is a success rate of 93%. Deputy Ó Cuív is long enough in this House, longer than I am, to know and understand better than anyone how the House works. It is one of the things that he is actually good at. He also knows about Ministers and what responsibilities they have. I outlined my responsibilities very quickly to the Deputy in respect of the town of Enniskeane rural recreation scheme. He has specific questions on LEADER that I will answer later on.

On the question the Deputy posed to me on the action plan, we have had great successes. The Deputy raises the issue of broadband all of the time. The tender for the national broadband plan will be going out shortly. It is great to see someone else coming in and tendering for it.

When we came into government, 52% of the population had high-speed broadband. That is now up to more than 75%. That is a good achievement but it is no good telling that to the other 25% who do not have it. That is what we are now working on and that is the responsibility of the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Kyne. He is doing an excellent job on the broadband plan with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten. We ran into some difficulties but it is up and running.

I will give a simple example to prove the broadband scheme is working. My house was one of the houses connected last week because I just happened to be on the map. I have to say that having the high-speed broadband means that I do not have to be running into the office at 10 p.m. and 11 p.m. at night to check emails. It is great to have it in my own house. The broadband plan and the action plan are working. I will certainly respond in respect of the specific question that Deputy Ó Cuív asked on LEADER.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Would the Minister agree that the whole action plan was just a fig leaf to cover up the nakedness of the Government in respect of rural Ireland? Will the Minister admit to me, the House and the world that the net investment to date in the high-speed broadband that has been delivered to anybody in the country is zero? The broadband the Minister got last week and the broadband I have in my house, because like him I happen to be near the box, was provided by Eir without any subsidy from the Government. It was actually held up in that particular work by the Government. The Minister should not claim things he did not do. Will he stand up like a man and admit that he and his Government have not put one dime into rural broadband, except to have this massively expensive tender that to date has not provided one house or one business with high-speed broadband?

Deputy Michael Ring: Deputy Ó Cuív amazes me sometimes. When I give him statistics

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he does not like them. The statistics are that when we came into government more than 50% of the population had high-speed broadband. I do not have responsibility for it. It is the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Seán Kyne, along with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is all very well.

Deputy Michael Ring: Wait a minute now. More than 75% of the people in the country now have high-speed broadband.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister did not do anything.

Deputy Michael Ring: Deputy Ó Cuív is correct that the commercial sector did that and I compliment it. We are now going to deal with the rest and that is why the Government is putting a package and a tender in place. I am glad to see there is competition within that tender to make sure the rest of the country will get high-speed broadband.

The Deputy has travelled the world. I represented the Government in Boston last year and it has the same problems we have in Dublin city with traffic, housing and jobs. People just outside Boston do not have high-speed broadband.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: So that is-----

Deputy Michael Ring: It is a world-wide problem but people are looking at Ireland and are seeing what we are doing. They are saying well done on having 75% of the population with high-speed broadband. As I said, the 25% who do not have it want to have it. I am one of the people provided with it, where a commercial operator came in. That happened because the Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, the Minister, Deputy Naughten, and the Government put pressure on the commercial sector.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is not true.

Deputy Michael Ring: In fact, if we had not drawn that map we might have had up to 80% because there were areas where the commercial sector could not go ahead because someone would have had us in the High Court because we did not put it out to tender. I say well done to the commercial sector. It is doing its job and has rolled out as much as possible. I hope with the new tender that many corners of Ireland without high-speed broadband will get it. People all over the world are watching us and are saying well done, that we have rolled it out very well and have done a good job. I hope we can get 100% of people covered. I will admit it is the one tool that we all want in rural Ireland. It is the one piece of infrastructure that we need in Donegal, Mayo, Galway and elsewhere in the country.

Post Office Closures

69. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development his plans to ensure the viability and sustainability of towns and villages in rural Ireland that have lost or are losing their local post office. [38641/18]

Deputy Martin Kenny: As the Minister is aware, the issue of post offices is one he passed

back fairly quickly. He is not in charge of it and I do not blame him. It is, however, something that has had a huge affect on many places in rural Ireland. Over the past couple of months, we have seen proposals to close many post offices. Most of those, proportionately, are in rural areas and communities that already have huge problems. Many of the towns where the post offices are being closed are ones where the bank went not that long ago and where the credit unions are under pressure. All these services are under huge pressure. As a rural Minister and a Minister looking after rural affairs, the criteria that An Post is using are the most anti-rural that could be used. Under the review mechanism, it says that a settlement of people in a rural area must be 500 or more in 50 occupied dwellings, no more than 100 m apart. Anyone who can come up with that does not understand rural Ireland. Will the Minister do something about this? Will he do something to invest in these communities to ensure they can prosper into the future?

Deputy Michael Ring: As the Deputy is aware, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment has policy responsibility for the postal sector. However, I am acutely aware of the value placed by rural communities on services such as the local post office.

Ensuring access to services for rural communities is an issue that cuts across almost all Departments. It also relates to services provided by the private sector. In my role as Minister for Rural and Community Development I am absolutely clear on the importance of ensuring that rural communities can access the services they need in order that they remain vibrant places in which to live and work. Project Ireland 2040 laid out the Government's plans for the country's long-term development, and a key commitment within it regarding rural Ireland is the provision of €1 billion for the new rural regeneration and development fund, which is an unprecedented commitment by Government to strengthen rural economies and in turn support stronger local communities. Initially, €315 million has been allocated for the period 2019 to 2022 and the first call for applications to the fund closes next Thursday.

My Department administers a range of other funding programmes that support local communities throughout Ireland. Of particular importance for those towns and villages most disadvantaged in terms of access to services include the CLÁR programme, which is a targeted investment programme for rural areas that aims to provide funding for small infrastructural projects and other initiatives in areas that have experienced significant levels of population decline. The community enhancement programme was launched by my Department in May 2018 and provides small capital grants to community groups across the country. I was delighted to announce a further €8 million in funding for this programme last Friday, bringing the total for 2018 to €12.5 million. The town and village renewal scheme supports the revitalisation of rural towns and villages, with particular focus on projects which have a clear positive economic impact on local communities. Since its launch in 2016, the town and village renewal scheme has invested €31.6 million in more than 450 projects across the country. The social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, for 2018 to 2022, with funding of €38 million in 2018, provides capacity at local level to respond to the particular needs in each area. It helps those seeking employment or starting their own business. LEADER programme funding, administered by local action groups, LAGs, delivers the €250 million programme funding in accordance with the specific objectives and needs identified by the LAGs themselves as part of the development of local development strategies. Supports are tailored to the specific needs of each individual area. Libraries will also work with local partners to reach disadvantaged, marginalised and new communities, increasing these communities' awareness of services available for families establishing in the area and as a resource for all. Some €150 million is expected to be invested by local authorities in library services in 2018.

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In terms of directly facilitating access to services in rural Ireland, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has provided a funding allocation of €14.9 million for Local Link services in 2018. Such funding facilitated 1.9 million passenger journeys last year, providing a vital service for rural communities.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The list of statistics the Minister has read is impressive in one sense. Broadband was mentioned earlier as another acute issue in most rural areas. As Deputy Ó Cuív said, the reality for people on the ground is that they do not have broadband and cannot get it. That is the situation in many rural areas. The problem with rhyming off summary statistics is they hide many uncomfortable individual realities for people. The rural communities that really need investment are the places where the most potential exists. If the people in these places are given half a chance they will work harder than people from anywhere else, because they want to prove that their community is valuable and vibrant. They want to make it work, but they have to get that chance. They have to be stimulated by way of investment.

The Minister mentioned the €350 million fund, the deadline for which falls next week. My understanding is that much of that fund is earmarked for the larger towns in rural areas rather than the small villages which require investment. Small villages are dying on their feet. I drive through County Leitrim, and in places such as Drumkeeran, Mohill or Ballinamore, half of the shops are closed down. Shops in those towns are depending on the local farmers coming in and spending money. That is all they have. That is all that exists. We need to do something more than that for those areas. We have to provide opportunity for investment and the only way that can be done is to pump money into them. We should take risks on anyone who has an idea, because I can guarantee that those risks will pay back.

Deputy Michael Ring: I have provided €80,000 to the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment to support the establishment of ten digital access post offices on a pilot basis. An Post has picked the ten post offices; we are looking at how we can support it in the digital era.

I do not like saying things like this, but I have to be honest sometimes. I have said to Deputy Ó Cuív as well that we must be honest about post offices. I could provide all the figures for the amount of post office closures under the current Government and the last two Governments. I want to be fair to the postmasters and postmistresses. I know them. We have lost some in our own county; they are being lost all over the country. We must be honest and say that people are not using the services we have. Some €615 million worth of goods was bought online in this country last year. People are bypassing their local shops, supermarkets, women's shops and clothes shops, and doing their shopping online.

I was in a village of 500 people recently-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We are not against that.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Deputy should listen. It was a village of 500 people, made up of 300 families. In the local post office, 50 TV licences had been bought, which amounts to one per week. If people want post offices and small shops and such services they are going to have to use them. Almost 87% of people last year taxed their cars online. People are getting their passports online. They are banking and paying their bills online. People are doing everything online. We have to look at new ideas to ensure that existing post offices survive.

Deputy Martin Kenny: In many parts of rural Ireland people cannot access those online

services because they do not have broadband. The Minister really needs to deal with that issue. The points the Minister has made have some validity. It is true that services are not being used. Someone should have thought about the services being provided and questioned whether they were the correct services. It is clear that the post office services did not move with the times. We will park that issue for the moment.

There are issues concerning the roads in rural Ireland, which the Minister mentioned earlier. I welcome the money that was provided for local improvement schemes earlier in the year but will more money be put into such schemes before the end of this year, as happened last year? Some €17 million was provided for the schemes in 2017, and this year the amount is around €10 million. Can we come close to matching the figure from last year?

The reality for people is that rural Ireland is dying. That is the bare reality. When the children of these people are raised and go off to college, there is no opportunity for them to return to the place they come from. We do not want rural Ireland to become a tourist resort or a holiday home for retired people. We want it to be a vibrant community, where people want to live and work. We need to see that happen, we need to make it happen, but it will only happen with Government investment. Investment in broadband is key to ensuring that it will happen.

Deputy Michael Ring: I disagree with the Deputy; rural Ireland is not dead. There have never been as many people working and living in rural Ireland. However, the small shops and little businesses that once were there are no longer present because people are shopping with their feet. People are working in towns and going home to rural Ireland in the evening, and are using the bigger outlets. That is a decision people are making and I do not criticise it. People have rights. They work hard, pay their taxes, and have an opportunity to go and live where they want to live and work where they want to work. Where they spend their money is their business. Rural Ireland is alive and well. I listen to this kind of talk all the time. Post offices were discussed at length over the summer. The reason post offices are closing is they are not being used. I heard the postmistress in my local area speaking on local radio recently. She held a public meeting two years ago at which she was told by local people that they would use her post office. She has said she is sorry for the few elderly people who were depending on it but she is not sorry for closing her post office, because people did not use it. There is no answer to that. Returning to the rural regeneration and development fund, there is an urban regeneration scheme and a rural one. The urban scheme consists of €2 billion for towns with a population of 10,000 or more. The rural scheme will apply to towns with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. To me, the most effective scheme is the town and village renewal scheme, and the Deputy knows this. I refer also to the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme. The Deputy's own town of Drumshanbo has received €700,000 from my Department. The boardwalk attracted 80,000 visitors last year. Some eight new businesses were created around that. We have to do business differently in rural Ireland now. People say that rural Ireland is dead. It is not dead. We have fine, vibrant and good people working in rural Ireland.

Departmental Expenditure

70. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the capital spend by his Department to date in 2018, including the capital carry over from 2017, by subhead; the provision under each subhead, including the capital carry over from 2017 provided for in the Revised Estimates Volume for 2018; the details of the significant overspends or

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underspends under each subhead; the action to be taken to deal with them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38643/18]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am absolutely fascinated listening to the Minister talk about all this spending. However, tá difríocht mhór idir na fíricí agus an méid atá á rá ag an Aire. I have a question about spending in the Minister's Department. What prompted me to ask the question? The Exchequer returns at the end of August show that only €16 million, that is, 18% of the €88 million of capital allocated to this Department had been spent by the end of August. That leaves the Minister with 82% to spend between now and the end of the year. I am looking for details of the spend, the breakdown, etc. Will the Minister leave out the waffle at the beginning of his reply, all that general bumph Ministers offer to waste the two minutes, and just cut to the chase? Will he give me the figures for which I have asked?

Deputy Michael Ring: I will give the Deputy so many figures that he will not be able to take them all in.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I remind the Minister that he has two minutes.

Deputy Michael Ring: I will just give Deputy Ó Cuív the table. It might be easier.

The Revised Estimates for 2018 in respect of the Department of Rural and Community Development set out an allocation of €87.5 million for gross capital expenditure, supplemented by €7.7 million carried forward from 2017. I have provided an update of capital expenditure to date across the various capital subheads, including carryover, in a detailed table for the Deputy.

In overall terms, total capital spend, including carryover at the end of August - I want the Deputy to listen to this - was at 70% of expected profile. I will read that again. Total capital spend at the end of August, including carryover, was 70% of the expected profile. The community programme spending was 250% of profile at the end of August, reflecting earlier than anticipated spending on the community enhancement programme. Spending on the rural programme was at 60% of profile at the end of August. At this point in September, the library development and archive service subhead is ahead of profile. I am expecting an acceleration in spend towards end of year. Some 52% of our capital spend is profiled for the last three months. It is helpful to note that this acceleration is already evident. For example, the spend on capital in August was the highest in any month of the year at €6.2 million.

Deputies should note that the figures for spending are not an accurate reflection of the work carried out on the ground by those receiving support. In many cases, the projects in question are nearing completion, or are indeed completed. The requests for reimbursement, however, have not yet been received by my Department. For example, I announced the local improvement scheme, LIS, and allocations in February, early enough to give local authorities time to implement those projects. Details of the costs incurred are now being received by my Department and we will meet those as quickly as possible. LEADER programme drawdown is slower than I would like. As the Deputy will be aware, considerable work has been undertaken in preparing, assessing and approving new LEADER projects. There is now a very clear pipeline of projects approved by local action groups, totalling almost €40 million. This will translate into increased spending over the remainder of the programme.

I have instructed my officials to continue to closely monitor expenditure patterns and to stay in close contact with local authorities on planned spend. Should it be the case that for whatever reason expenditure is not being drawn down as expected, I will look at other options for reallo-

cation of that spend to meet other priorities. For example, the Deputy will be aware that I have already been able to announce €6 million of support to enhance digital services and facilities in public libraries. Moreover, last week I announced €8 million of additional investments under the community enhancement programme.

My focus remains on fully using the capital funding allocated by the Government to provide for the betterment of those living and working in rural communities throughout Ireland.

TABLE

<i>SUBHEAD</i>	<i>€'000's</i>	<i>€'000's</i>
	<i>Spend to 20th Sept</i>	<i>Allocation</i>
<i>V42 – GROSS</i>	<i>28,066</i>	<i>95,208</i>
<i>A - REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT & REGIONAL AFFAIRS</i>	<i>22,810</i>	<i>85,855</i>
<i>A.2 - ADMINISTRATION - NON PAY</i>	<i>131</i>	<i>166</i>
<i>A.3 - DORMANT ACCOUNT MEASURES</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>2,006</i>
<i>A.5 - NATIONAL RURAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEMES</i>	<i>2,078</i>	<i>18,083</i>
<i>A.6 - LEADER - RURAL ECONOMY SUB PROGRAMME</i>	<i>14,414</i>	<i>40,000</i>
<i>A.8 - TOWN AND VILLAGE REGENERATION</i>	<i>6,176</i>	<i>15,000</i>
<i>A.9 - RURAL BROADBAND, REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>600</i>
<i>A.10 - LOCAL IMPROVEMENT SCHEMES</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>10,000</i>
<i>B - COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT</i>	<i>5,254</i>	<i>9,353</i>
<i>B.2 - ADMINISTRATION - NON PAY</i>	<i>93</i>	<i>136</i>
<i>B.6 – RAPID</i>	<i>2,976</i>	<i>3,767</i>
<i>B.8 - PROGRAMME FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>700</i>
<i>B.10 - LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT AND ARCHIVE SERVICE</i>	<i>185</i>	<i>2,750</i>

<i>B.11 - COMMUNITY FACILITIES FUND</i>	<i>2,000</i>	<i>2,000</i>
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Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I would like to thank the Minister for confirming what I have said. The profile is an extraordinarily low €34 million for the first eight months. It works out at about 40%. Basically, the Department admitted fairly early that it was not going to spend the money. The reality is that the Minister has not done so. Leaving aside the money that should have been spent last year and has been carried over into this year - that should not have occurred - the fact of the matter is the Minister has only spent €16 million out of the €88 million in new money he got for this year.

Let us take just one subhead. What is the allocation for the LEADER programme this year and what is the spend to date? I am asking about allocation versus spend. It is a simple question. We will save time. It will only take the Minister two seconds to answer that one. The answer is in the Minister's table, by the way.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Deputy knows this. He has been around this House for long enough. I reject what he says about me spending the money. I have spent the money. It is the LEADER companies, the local authorities and the people who have actually got the money that have not spent it. I am putting pressure on the local authorities on a daily and weekly basis. The Deputy and I both know that much work has been done. He should look at the LIS and the town and village renewal scheme. Much of that work has now been completed. Members of every local authority stand up and complain every day about not getting funding from the Government, yet the local authorities are not actually spending. I will look at the LIS again. I have a few other plans if the local authorities have not spent the money that has been allocated to them to by the end of the year.

The Deputy knows it is very difficult for me. I make the allocation. If we take the LEADER companies, we were hoping to see a big improvement in the LEADER programme this year. We have seen a big improvement in the number of projects that have been approved. When people get approval they then have to get the work done. They have to come in with receipts and the Department has to check that the money is spent. It is not the case that I have not worked with that programme or that we have not made the changes. It is not the case that we have not made it easier. It annoys me when I see money spent on administration and not on the programme itself.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Is there a contagious disease in Government called blaming local authorities, LEADER companies and everybody except oneself? Ministers do not accept responsibility for their own failures. If the Minister sanctioned the money in time and said that if it was not spent, it would be taken back, he would have seen it spent. That is how it is done. I asked the Minister a specific question. I will ask it once again because I am a very patient man. Will he tell me the allocation for LEADER this year, that is, the total gross allocation and the amount spent to date, broken down between administration and projects paid for from that allocation? It is a simple question. Can he give a simple answer? It will only take two seconds to answer me.

Deputy Michael Ring: To date, 24% of the overall project allocations have been approved, totalling €40 million.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Can the Minister just give me the figures? I asked about spend. I

am not interested in-----

Deputy Michael Ring: The total to date is €40 million. Some 24% of overall project allocation has been approved. When the value of the project applications which we have received and provisionally approved is considered, this figure increases to 28% of overall allocation, €46 million. Some 1,300 projects have been approved with a further 324 in the pipeline. I have allocated the money in time. They have got the LEADER funding. They have received it over the last three years.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: In Standing Orders there is provision for the Leas-Cheann Comhairle to intervene when a Minister does not even attempt to answer a simple question that is asked.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: My recollection of the question is that it was on the amount allocated to LEADER this year-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: And the amount spent to date, no more and no less.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have no control over the-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: There is a-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----Minister's response. I ask the Minister to provide the two figures.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: They are in the table in front of him. The Minister said he had the table there.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The two figures.

Deputy Michael Ring: I have the two figures. The total of allocations is €164,503,189.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: No, just LEADER.

Deputy Michael Ring: There are 304 projects to a value of €21.111 million.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Is that what has been spent?

Deputy Michael Ring: No.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I just asked for the cash allocation for LEADER.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister is endeavouring to answer.

Deputy Michael Ring: With regard to what has been spent-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I can give it out myself tomorrow when I get it.

Deputy Michael Ring: I have given the information to the Deputy but the problem is he has come in here having asked a specific question about LEADER, for which I have all the details for him-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister said he has a table with the breakdown.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is a tabular statement to be circulated.

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Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It was in the initial answer. If the Minister looks at the first question, the answer was in the question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is a tabular statement to be circulated.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister has it. Will he not read out the two figures from it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I could give them to the Deputy but it is not my job.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Exactly. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle has the answer in front of him but he cannot give it. I just want it on the record of the House. I can publish it myself tomorrow, no bother. I will do that tomorrow. It is all right.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Dormant Accounts Fund

71. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the details and progress of projects earmarked for Galway city and county under the Dormant Accounts Action Plan 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38597/18]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have a specific question on the details and progress of projects earmarked for Galway city and county under the Dormant Accounts Action Plan 2018. I ask this with the background that a substantial amount of the dormant accounts has been underspent while community groups are crying out for money. I ask for this to be clarified in the first instance.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Seán Kyne): I thank the Deputy for her question. The 2018 Dormant Accounts Action Plan, which was published in July, approved funding of up to €39.7 million for 45 different measures across ten Departments. In line with the provisions of the Dormant Accounts Acts, the measures identified in the action plan target social, economic and educational disadvantage and people with a disability.

The approved measures will support a wide range of projects and programmes relating to issues such as social inclusion, assisting migrants, support for carers, speech and language therapy, support for dementia sufferers, and sports measures. The majority of measures will commence in 2019, subject to Voted expenditure being available in each relevant Department.

With regard to funding for projects based in Galway city and county, most of the measures in the action plan are national scale programmes, for example, sports measures for disadvantaged communities, a baby box measure through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and education and employment initiatives for disadvantaged communities. The funding for specific geographic areas will only become clear as the measures are implemented on the ground. However, while the delivery of measures is a matter for each relevant Department, I would expect such measures to impact throughout the country.

In my Department, the measure to support ICT utilisation among older people will involve the delivery of a pilot programme in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. The measure to support enterprise and digital hubs along the Atlantic economic corridor will also benefit Galway city and county directly.

The dormant accounts have been the subject of discussion at the Committee of Public Accounts and the Department has tried to take hold of them in recent months. Departmental officials have done an amount of work. This is the third change of Department with responsibility for dormant accounts. It has taken quite a while to get to the bottom of previous commitments, moneys not spent, decommitments and the rest. We published a comprehensive action plan in July. It is a rather complex programme and the projects can only be delivered from the action plan through a vote on the Estimates for each Department. Any project listed in the action plan must be funded through the Estimates of that Department.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister of State for trying to clarify the situation. I have read the action plan but I am not any wiser about Galway city and county. The Minister of State is telling me it will take a further Vote. I do not know what projects are earmarked for Galway city and county. There was more than a discussion with the Comptroller and Auditor General. He pointed out that over the period from 2012 to 2016, Departments spent €28.7 million, less than half of the amount provided in the Estimates, mainly due to a lack of preparedness. The Minister of State will agree we have a serious problem. Money is available but less than half of it has been spent. I wrote to the Minister of State in my capacity as a Deputy about a particular organisation in Galway, which I will not mention. Clearly, community groups and organisations are crying out for money but we have a 50% underspend. It took a very long time to conduct the recognised statutory review and it took a long time to publish the action plan but I am still no wiser as to what projects are earmarked for Galway city and county. Will the Minister of State try to spell them out for me? He stated some of them are national projects that will have a positive impact on Galway. What are the projects for Galway city? If there is none, tell me so.

Deputy Seán Kyne: The plan published is across ten Departments so the initiatives really are for the ten Departments. I have listed some of the measures for the Department of Rural and Community Development. The Deputy should ask each relevant Department whether it has the funding in the Estimates process. Over the summer, the Minister, Deputy Ring, departmental officials and I had discussions with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, to try to put in place a simpler process for the spend but the fact is the €39 million plan that has been published must still go through the Estimates process to ensure an equivalent amount is in the Estimates of every Department to fund the listed project initiatives. I suggest the Deputy table specific questions for those Departments that have sponsored initiatives because this question has come to the Department of Rural and Community Development. I have listed some of the measures under the remit of the Department with regard to ICT utilisation, the Atlantic economic corridor and other initiatives for which we have direct responsibility. Other Departments have responsibility for their own programmes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I did table a specific question but for some reason it became a general question. There must have been a misunderstanding somewhere in the Questions Office. I took the trouble of getting the action plan and going through it. Since it was so general, I asked a specific question about the Department of Rural and Community Development but unfortunately the question is general across all Departments. It was not my intention to ask that question. I asked specifically about the planned projects under the remit of the Department of

Rural and Community Development. I read page 47, which mentions social enterprise, senior alert schemes, new volunteer centres and young social innovators. These are all very worthy but I cannot explain to anybody in Galway city or county what projects are going ahead next year or how we can make it easier for them in terms of access. I am thinking in particular of the organisation about which I wrote to the Minister of State with regard to autism. I will not go into the details. It is crying out for money. According to the Comptroller and Auditor General there is an underspend and we seem to have a very complicated system. I think the Minister of State is nodding in agreement, which is welcome, but we really need to push this forward so we can use the money.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I agree it is a very complex system, which is why we have tried to get to the bottom of it. I again put on record the work done by staff in the Department in trying to get to the bottom of this. We had meetings over the summer with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe. I thought it was going to be easier to be able to spend the money but, unfortunately, there is still the process with regard to the votable element of this.

I cannot give the Deputy information on some elements with regard to Galway city and county. The initiatives for volunteer centres do not cover Galway city or county because they are for eight specific counties where volunteer information centres are being converted to volunteer centres. There are other initiatives across the board with regard to the Departments of Children and Youth Affairs; Transport, Tourism and Sport; and Rural and Community Development. I can get more clarity with regard to the Department of Rural and Community Development but I suggest the Deputy tables specific questions to the other nine Departments to ask them what projects they have listed for Galway city or county.

Leader Programmes Expenditure

72. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the additional funding that will be made available to County Donegal under the LEADER programme; when the funding will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38405/18]

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Will the Minister give an update on the additional funding that will be made available, or which we hope will be made available, to County Donegal under the LEADER programme? As the Minister knows, on page 42 of the programme for Government there is a commitment to provide additional funding to the LEADER programme. Initially, the programme had €250 million nationally. How much additional LEADER funding will be provided nationally and what proportion of that will be provided to County Donegal?

Deputy Michael Ring: LEADER is a multi-annual programme for the period 2014 to 2020 that has a total budget of €250 million over the programming period. Some €220 million has already been allocated to the LEADER sub-regional areas across the country. This allocation has been made for the duration of the programme, rather than on an annual basis, to provide greater flexibility to the local action groups, LAGs, which administer the programme. A further €30 million in funding is available for schemes that will be administered at a national level. This includes the LEADER food initiative and funding to support local action groups that come together to deliver a LEADER project.

The allocation to the local action group in Donegal is €12.9 million over the lifetime of the

programme. This allocation covers both project expenditure and the administration costs of the LAG. Significant progress has been made to date in Donegal, which I welcome. The LAG has so far allocated 35% or €3.9 million of its project budget to 92 applicants, leaving a further €6.3 million available to be allocated over the remainder of the programme. I am confident the funding available to LEADER in County Donegal is sufficient to meet the expected demand. However, the position will be kept under review by my Department over the remaining lifetime of the programme.

County Donegal has also benefitted significantly from funding under other rural development programmes operated by my Department, including the town and village renewal scheme, the local improvement scheme, and the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Minister for his reply but I am exceptionally disappointed by it. He has clarified that he does not see any need or have any intention to allocate additional LEADER funding to County Donegal over the coming years. As I indicated in my initial question, the programme for Government on page 42 commits to increasing LEADER funding. The initial allocation was €250 million nationally and the programme for Government has indicated that this will be increased. However, today in the Dáil the Minister has indicated his opinion that Donegal has enough money to meet demand.

First and foremost, I point out that the allocation given to Donegal under this LEADER programme is more than 30% less than it had in the previous programme. From speaking with LEADER management in the county and those on the various committees, I know the programmes in Donegal would be well able to deal with any additional funding that might be allocated to them. It would be of great benefit to rural development in our county. Will the Minister go back to the drawing board and revisit the programme for Government's commitment to increase funding and specifically to ensure there is increased funding for LEADER provided to Donegal? I give the Minister the utmost assurance that this would be spent well if allocated to the county.

Deputy Michael Ring: I state again that 35% of available funding, or €3.9 million, has been allocated. I cannot reallocate money until the money there is spent. I will monitor this to see how LEADER programmes do that. The Deputy's question relates to preparation support costs, which amounted to €1.468 million, with administration costs of €19.601 million. Project expenditure is €6.724 million, with total programme expenditure to date of €27.793 million.

I have made all the changes I can to the LEADER programme. Deputy Ó Cuív should look at his own county, which is a disgrace. There are two LEADER programmes there and in one case not one euro has been paid out.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister should respond to Deputy McConalogue.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Not in my side of the county.

Deputy Michael Ring: I will monitor what is going on with the LEADER companies in Donegal. I compliment the Kerry LEADER programme, which is great at initiatives for town and village and outdoor recreation. It is doing great and if that programme can do it, everybody else can do it as well. To date in Donegal, €3.9 million has been allocated, which is 35% of the total. We hope that this year we will have 40% of the budget approved.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The current LEADER programme has been mismanaged

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by the Government from the outset as there was much confusion over how it was to be administered and structured. As a result, there were two years of limbo with no funding given out. Only belatedly did the Government agree the structures and allow the LEADER companies to get on with work. As I indicated previously, the Government commits in its programme for Government to increasing those funds. Today, within a programme that was supposed to run from 2014 to 2020, only €27 million has been allocated at this stage, as the Minister stated. That is from a total of €250 million and despite the fact we are past the halfway mark.

I can assure the Minister that Donegal will ensure the money is well spent if further funds are directed towards it. I ask the Minister to look at his overall envelope to ensure additional funding can be allocated to the county. Unfortunately, the Minister has indicated that as it stands, he does not have any intention of increasing that overall amount.

Deputy Michael Ring: It is amazing that €19 million has been spent on administration of the LEADER programme while project expenditure only amounts to €6 million. The total programme to date has a spend of €27 million. We made 31 changes to simplify the programme and we must comply with European Union regulation and rules. We looked at the schemes and the programme, including ways to make it easier for people to make applications. It should be remembered there are supplementary schemes as well, including the town and village scheme and those relating to outdoor recreation and rural regeneration. There are many other schemes where people can now make an application. I have been told by some people working in LEADER programmes that groups intended making an application but did not do so because they got funding elsewhere. As the Deputy knows, one cannot draw down from two programmes in such cases.

I am monitoring the LEADER programme but I cannot do much more in the running of the scheme. I have simplified the process and made it easier. There were 31 changes to the LEADER programme. There is spending on the administration side. The projects must be approved so that funding can be drawn down as quickly as possible. At that stage, I can review the process and if LEADER programmes are not drawing down funding, I can see if the money should be redirected to other companies that are spending the money.

Programme for Government Implementation

73. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the details of the co-ordinating unit within his Department pursuant to the programme for partnership Government that is tasked with working with communities to develop co-operative structures; when it was set up; the membership of the unit; the work programme of the unit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38595/18]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question is very specific. I am asking for details of the co-ordinating unit within the Minister's Department pursuant to A Programme for a partnership Government. It is on page 42 of that document. Under the impact assessment heading, which is very important, there was a promise to set up a co-ordinating unit to consider the impact assessment on rural communities of various decisions. This was to work with communities and develop co-operative structures, etc. This was set out in the question. Has that been set up and what are the details?

Deputy Michael Ring: A Programme for a partnership Government, agreed in May 2016,

contains a commitment to task “a co-ordinating unit to work with communities to develop co-operative structures to keep vital local services in place and to retain and develop vibrant local enterprises.” This commitment in the programme related to job creation and rural development, and it was planned at the time that the unit and its work would be situated within a new Department of regional development and rural affairs. My Department was established in July 2017 and throughout the Department as a whole, rather than in one unit, various funding programmes and schemes are delivered within communities and in co-operation with them that are supporting enterprise development and job creation in rural Ireland.

The establishment of my Department continues to drive better co-ordination and prioritisation of all Government investment in rural Ireland. Structures within the community sector are also being used to further drive rural economic development. I can give some examples. On foot of the programme for a partnership Government, the Action Plan for Rural Development was put in place in January 2017. This sets out more than 270 actions being implemented across government to support the economic and social development of rural Ireland. Its implementation is overseen by a monitoring committee, which I chair. The committee meets regularly and publishes six-monthly progress reports. The community policy unit in my Department has policy responsibility for cross government co-ordination of local and community development supports. It provides guidance and supports to local community development committee structures which have primary responsibility for co-ordinating, planning and overseeing local community development funding.

The framework policy for local and community development delivered by my Department is formed on a cross-government basis and seeks to ensure joined-up approach to community development at a local level. Furthermore, the local action groups through which the LEADER programme is delivered, a significant source of funding for rural Ireland, ensures community engagement in delivery of this important programme. In addition, my Department supports the public participation networks, whose main purpose is to enable the public to take an active formal role in policy making and oversight committees of the local authorities, providing an avenue for community and voluntary groups to participate in the local decision making processes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister for reading out that answer, but he has failed to answer my question. I thank the Minister for confirming there is an action plan. I welcome that and he is to be praised for that and that there is a monitoring committee. That is not what I asked. I am looking at the programme for Government and the paragraph on impact assessment. Whoever wrote the reply might look at it and simply tell me whether the co-ordinating unit has been set up. The aim of that unit was to develop co-operative structures to keep vital local services in place and to maintain and develop local enterprises and that is a good aim. Has that now been abandoned? I do not hear a reply that it has been set up. I do not hear a reply that it has been abandoned and the Minister has taken a new direction. It is a very simple question: has that gone by the board and is the Minister now looking at the other things he is talking about, or has it not gone by the board?

Deputy Michael Ring: The question the Deputy asked related to commitments in the programme for Government. The new Department of Rural and Community Development has overtaken that. That is why, within the Department, other schemes have been set up, particularly in relation to local and community schemes, the community enhancement programme and local community development committees, LCDCs. The point of the community enhancement programme is to bring it down to a local level where local people who know the local needs and have the local knowledge want to be able to make local decisions. I have increased the funding

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for these programmes. Not only have I allocated money once this year, but I have done so twice because I believe the people on the ground know where the difficulties are.

The question the Deputy asked was in respect of commitments in the programme for Government. The new Department has overtaken that and my Department is leading community and rural development, particularly for libraries. That is why the funding I have allocated this year has gone down to the LCDCs, working with the county councils. Local people and local communities can identify where local problems are.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thought I had a grasp of the English language. I appreciate the Minister is doing his best but the new Department was to set up this co-ordinating unit. Whoever wrote that reply can go back and look at the paragraph in the programme for Government which states “within the new Department of ... Regional Development and Rural Affairs ..., we will task a coordinating unit to work with communities to develop co-operative structures”. It is set out in black and white. Looking at a co-operative way forward is a laudable aim and a specific unit within the Minister’s Department was to lead it. If I know anything from sitting on the Committee of Public Accounts it is that if there is no chain of command and responsibility, then nothing happens.

Has the idea of this unit been abandoned now? That is a simple question and I ask it in the context of impact assessment. For example, had an impact assessment been done on the issues pertaining to the recent post office closures? That is straying a bit from my question, so I will stick with my question. Has the new unit been abandoned? Is the Minister not going ahead with that?

Deputy Michael Ring: The Deputy has asked a question about a commitment that was given in the programme for Government. When that programme was formed, the particular Department that the Deputy refers to was in the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. A new Department was set up a year ago. In that Department-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That was acknowledged in the reply.

Deputy Michael Ring: That was acknowledged in the reply and I am trying to acknowledge it again. The responsibility for the schemes that were promised that the Deputy is talking about is now in that Department. The community enhancement programme, the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and all these programmes are now within my Department and the Deputy would agree it is better to have it in one Department than having over a number of Departments. The commitment is there.

The Taoiseach set up a new Department of Rural and Community Development. The operative word is “community” and what it means to me is that decisions that can be made at local level should be made there. Decisions are being made at the local level within programmes like community enhancement and SICAP. I am monitoring those. We meet on a regular basis in accordance with the action plan. People come in from different agencies. They respond and report to Government and to me, as the chair of that committee, and then we make policy decisions.

Rural Development Policy

74. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the extent to which he has identified specific issues in rural and community life with a view to putting in place particular measures to address these issues with the objective of improving prospects for all involved in rural Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38592/18]

81. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development his plans for the evolution of rural and community development with particular reference to those areas of responsibility under his aegis; the extent to which he has identified key issues most likely to contribute to an enhancement to community and rural life here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38591/18]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I ask the Minister the extent to which he has a vision in respect of the input he sees as being crucial to enhancing rural Ireland in its various forms throughout the country and with particular reference to community and local groups, as well as to the environment.

Deputy Michael Ring: I propose to take Questions Nos. 74 and 81 together.

As Minister with responsibility for rural and community development, my primary focus is to support the creation of vibrant and sustainable communities across the country. This can be achieved through the implementation of programmes and initiatives that facilitate economic development through the creation of jobs and the infrastructure required to support these jobs and to support our communities to become and remain desirable places to live, work and raise families.

Through Project Ireland 2040 and the national development plan, the Government will be providing investment of almost €116 billion over the next decade, much of which will be invested in the regions, including €1 billion through the rural regeneration and development fund.

Project Ireland 2040 will help breathe new life into communities across the country, providing access to recreational and leisure facilities, by increasing the attractiveness of communities to visitors and, most importantly, by supporting job creation and employment for people who live in rural areas.

My Department has also been working to achieve these objectives through a number of existing schemes and programmes, such as LEADER, CLÁR, the town and village renewal scheme, the local improvement scheme, the outdoor recreation scheme, the social inclusion and community activation programme and the community enhancement programme. These have delivered funding and supports to numerous small and large-scale projects and my Department looks forward to continuing to operate other programmes, including the rural regeneration and development fund in the future.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for his reply. To what extent has the Minister received a response from local rural communities across the country and have all areas responded in a way he expected and with sufficient enthusiasm to ensure the procedures he has put in place and the measures he is taking are going to have the maximum beneficial impact throughout the areas?

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Deputy Michael Ring: There is an investment of €44 million in community services programmes in 2018 to support more than 400 organisations. The Department also provides a lot of funding to the libraries programme and I know the Deputy is a supporter of libraries. I want to see libraries being used as community hubs to make sure that people will be able to use them across the country and that is what the capital programme and the extra funding I have given this year is for.

The community enhancement programme was given an investment of €4 million earlier this year and it has now been given a further €8 million. That is €12.5 million in total. Programmes like the town and village scheme, the CLÁR programme and the local improvement schemes all help to put a bit of life into rural Ireland.

If I was asked which is the best scheme that the Department has introduced, I would answer the town and village scheme. It takes public realms and makes towns and villages nice places to live. It supports community hubs, like food hubs and digital hubs. It also supports people who want to get investment into local areas. I have asked my Department to look at job creation this year within the town and village scheme. The scheme has worked very well. There has been approval for 1,300 projects within the LEADER programme, as we mentioned earlier. I would like to see more projects being approved. I would like to see more drawdown of funding and more schemes being drawn out of the LEADER programme.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Is the Minister in a position to identify specific issues such as infrastructural deficits throughout the regions, such as roads and communications, which might impede investment in major industries?

To what extent will the Minister be able to link in with other Ministers who are in the business of ensuring an even spread of industrial investment throughout the country?

Deputy Michael Ring: A big issue, which we discussed earlier, is that of broadband. We are having some success in the roll-out of broadband, particularly with the announcement last week of interest in competing or tendering for its future development, which is very important. A simple thing that has been a big help to local communities - I do not know if it is a big issue in the Deputy's area, but it is in mine - is the local improvement scheme, LIS. It is a very simple scheme that helps people to get in and out of their houses or boreens. These people pay for their water supply and they pay property and other taxes but the State does not provide any real services for them. The one thing that they ask for is the local improvement scheme. There are other schemes in my Department, including the CLÁR programme and the rural regeneration scheme, which we are excited about and the application process for which closes on Thursday. We will see how many applications for that come in from across the country. This targets investment in rural areas and I hope we will see some very good projects come in as part of that scheme. We hope adjudication on that scheme will be complete by November and that next year there will be a draw down of some of that funding and jobs created on the back of it. The town and village scheme is another scheme that has worked well. I have given the examples of Drumshanbo and Skibbereen but there are many other examples around the country where there have been digital, food and enterprise hubs and where people have broadband which gives them the opportunity and the start they need.

5 o'clock

Local Improvement Scheme Funding

75. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount allocated under LIS in 2018 nationally and in County Clare, respectively; if there will be a second round; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38322/18]

Deputy Joe Carey: Will the Minister give the amount allocated under the local improvement scheme nationally and in County Clare and if there will be a second round?

Deputy Michael Ring: The LIS is a programme for improvement works on small private and non-public roads. The scheme is currently funded by my Department and administered through the local authorities.

Following on from the successful relaunch of the scheme in 2017, I announced details of the 2018 local improvement scheme on 27 February. I allocated an initial amount of €10.8 million to local authorities across the country this year under the scheme. The 2018 funding includes an allocation of €482,000 for County Clare.

The list of projects which the councils have selected for improvement works on the basis of their allocations can be found on my Department's website.

As part of the LIS scheme this year, I also requested each county council to compile a secondary list of suitable LIS road projects which they could complete if additional funding becomes available within my Department's Vote later in the year.

I am assessing the level of expenditure on all my Department's programmes on an ongoing basis, and I will make decisions shortly on whether there is scope for any additional funding to be allocated to the local improvement scheme this year.

More than 1,100 roads have benefitted from improvement works since I relaunched the LIS in September last year. This is having a hugely positive impact for residents and landowners along those roads in terms of access to their premises and properties.

Deputy Joe Carey: I compliment the Minister for reinstating this vital scheme for rural Ireland. He listened to the Fine Gael backbenchers when they called on him to do so, and it was important that he did. It was great to see it reinstated last year, and also a further allocation being given late last year. I have welcomed the allocation of €482,000 for County Clare this year. It is fantastic. Much work has been done and applications have been submitted. There were requests that Clare County Council would draw up a secondary list. I compliment the road section of Clare County Council for its work in conjunction with landowners and the people who live in rural Ireland to deliver on this programme.

Will the Minister consider a further round of funding for the local improvement scheme? It is very important because it was delayed and was not there for many years before it was reinstated? He could continue this good work if he made a further allocation.

Deputy Michael Ring: This scheme has been one of my Department's success stories and I thank the Deputy for his kind comments. There had not been a local improvement scheme for many years. Last year there was a total allocation of €866,000. I am looking to see if the Department has any spare funding because this is a great scheme and is one that works well. The local authorities received funding in the middle of last year and again towards the end of

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this year. They did very well to complete it. I allocated the funding early this year, in February, and asked them to have the schemes completed by July so that if there was any extra funding, I would announce it. I will examine that in the coming weeks. To be fair to the local authorities, if I give them extra funding, I must do so now because they will need to get the work done before the weather gets bad. It is a scheme that has worked well and there is a deep appreciation among rural people for it. People in towns have an expectation that their roads should be done, but rural areas do not have the same chances, although the people who live there pay the same taxes and pay for their water supply.

Deputy Joe Carey: I thank the Minister for his reply. I encourage him to make the further allocation and to do so shortly, with winter approaching. It would be better if they received the allocation in the next couple of weeks so that they could get on with the work.

Deputy Michael Ring: I thank the Deputy for his kind words. The scheme has worked very well and I will make a quick decision on it. To be fair to local authorities, if they are to receive any funding, it must be soon so that they can do the work between now and the end of the year. Many people at the National Ploughing Championships said they were delighted to see the scheme and were looking for more funding. It is a scheme I want to develop. If other Departments came in and allocated a small amount of funds, twice the amount of work would be done. I am pleased I reintroduced the funding and that it is there.

Dog Breeding Industry

76. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he is satisfied that the new dog breeding guidelines due to come into effect in January 2019 will be adequate to deal with the mistreatment and illegal sale of dogs here. [38566/18]

89. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the steps he will take to enforce compliance by dog breeders with the recently published new dog breeding establishment guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38567/18]

Deputy Clare Daly: I welcome the Minister's publication of the new dog breeding guidelines as promised. There are many positive inclusions on the conditions in which dogs are kept, the environment, health and welfare record keeping and so on. However, the problem is that they are still only guidelines and it is up to individual breeders to take them on. There is a lack of sufficient enforcement by the local authorities. Given the public outcry over the "Panorama" programme on the Misty Meadow puppy farm in Cavan and the fact the council took no action in spite of the evidence, how can the Minister reassure us that the guidelines will make a difference?

Deputy Seán Kyne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 76 and 89 together.

I thank the Deputy for her continued interest in this important area. My Department published new guidelines for dog breeding establishments in July. These will come into effect on 1 January 2019.

I want to see the highest standards achieved by dog breeding establishments and these guidelines will help to do this. They form part of the framework within which local authorities carry out inspections and issue improvement notices, where required.

My Department developed these guidelines through consultation with both industry experts, including the Dublin Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals, the Irish Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals, and the veterinary sector, and the public. Some of the issues raised related to matters beyond the scope of the guidelines and they are now being considered as part of a wider review of the legislation.

It is important to bear in mind that the enforcement of animal welfare standards for all animals, including dogs, is a matter for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine under the Animal Health and Welfare Acts. Both Departments work closely with each other to ensure a co-ordinated approach is taken in this area. In this context, I understand that last May the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine launched a public consultation on a voluntary code of practice for pet shops and on the need for further legislation in relation to the advertising and sale of animals as pets.

Much co-ordination and consultation is ongoing between my Department and the veterinary section of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine as well as the local authorities, which fall within a third Department. This was something that was raised during the consultation, where people expressed the view that too many Departments were dealing with this issue, and I tend to agree. We discussed this with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine but we did not reach a conclusion in relation to changing the system. Obviously, the local authorities are responsible for enforcement and the registration regime. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is responsible for animal welfare. The Department of Rural and Community Development is responsible for dog control and for legislation. There has been a substantial shift in the guidelines. Experts have emphasised the need to socialise pups by ensuring they experience the company of people before they are sold. There have been changes in staffing levels. As part of the move towards an increase in socialisation, pups spend more time enjoying human contact. This is important because it helps to aid their progression when they are purchased by a family with children or by an individual. We are examining the primary legislation and initiating public consultation on the list of restricted dog breeds. A number of changes have been suggested by the people involved. A number of incidents involving dogs that are not on the list of restricted dog breeds have taken place. Consideration will be given to whether there should be a change in policy so that we have a list of dangerous dogs rather than a list of dangerous breeds. This consultation will be initiated by the Department in the coming year.

Deputy Clare Daly: The issue is whether the guidelines will improve the conditions in breeding establishments and have an impact on the sale of puppies. Our first concern relates to the local authorities' lack of ability to inspect premises properly, given that we are talking about criminal activity in some instances. The guidelines say that 24 hours' notice should be given, which means that those involved have a heads-up. Even though subsequent visits are unannounced, I do not think local authorities have enough resources to make unannounced visits.

Internet sales are particularly problematic. There were 126 dogs for sale on the Internet this morning. Illegal sales are continuing at an alarming rate. There were a number of tragic cases over the summer. In May, 27 puppies were found in Scotland in a van that originated in Ireland. In July, 16 puppies were found in a horse trailer in Galway. They all died afterwards. In August, over 100 dogs were rescued by the ISPCA. Earlier this month, a man was fined over €1,000 by the District Court after 37 dogs were seized from his farm. The only penalty he received was to be banned from having dogs for 18 months. He should not be allowed to have dogs ever again. Even though the number of convictions has increased, large profits are

continuing to be made from this activity, which shows no sign of receding. I think we need to monitor it constantly. We need to do more.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I agree that there is a need for continued and improved monitoring. As I have said, the local authorities are responsible for that. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is considering whether there is a need for further legislation governing the advertisement and sale of pet animals, including pups.

The Deputy has highlighted some of the atrocious cases that have made the headlines in recent times, including a case in Galway. I commend the volunteer groups like Madra that did tremendous work to try to save as many pups as possible in those cases. We must recognise the difference between illegal and legal activity. We want to stamp out illegal activity on the part of those who are operating small-scale dog breeding establishments that are hidden underground. We have to consider whether we should change the definition of a dog breeding establishment. If we wanted to provide for a reduction, as suggested in the consultation, that would have to be done in primary legislation. We need to improve standards in dog breeding establishments that are legal and registered while stamping out those that are carrying out illegal activities.

Deputy Clare Daly: The Minister of State has correctly identified one of the key problems, which is that responsibility for this key area is divided across three Departments. We must get to grips with that if we are to deal with this issue properly. Dogs are not livestock. They are not bred for slaughter or food production. We need to give this the attention it deserves. The problem is that the local authorities are not taking their responsibilities seriously, or have not been adequately resourced to do so. The inaction of Cavan County Council in failing to deal decisively with the Ray Cullivan puppy farm has sent out a dreadful signal to those involved in the illegal activity that has been mentioned by the Minister of State. We need to pay attention to this issue. Will the Minister of State agree to meet some of the groups that are at the coalface in this area? Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan has already asked the Minister of State to meet certain animal protection individuals who are eager to meet him. Would he be willing to meet a group of these responsible volunteers, who have stepped into the breach? I think they would welcome a hearing with the Minister of State if he were able to afford it to them.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I am delighted to meet groups that are interested in animal welfare, which is an important area. I accept it is not ideal that responsibility for this matter is spread across three Departments. There were discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on foot of the public consultation process. There is a lot of co-ordination and collaboration across Government Departments. As I have mentioned in this House previously, my family got a small rescue dog, Ciara, from the Madra dog rescue centre in Galway. Madra, which does great work, is inundated with volunteers who organise hugely impressive initiatives to raise funds for the centre. The local authorities and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine provide funding towards the end of the year to a number of animal rescue organisations that care for dogs, cats and other animals. I am happy to meet interested groups.

Western Development Commission

77. **Deputy Tony McLoughlin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if in the engagement he has had with the Western Development Commission the operation and administration of the western investment fund has been raised; and if the provision of additional resources to enhance the operation of the fund is being considered. [38324/18]

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: Has the operation and administration of the western investment fund been raised during the Minister's engagement with the Western Development Commission? Is consideration being given to the provision of additional funding to enhance the operation of the fund?

Deputy Seán Kyne: The Western Development Commission, WDC, operates the western investment fund, which contributes to the development of the region by investing through equity or loans in business startups, growth-oriented small and medium-sized enterprises and community-based measures to encourage enterprise development. The western investment fund was established as a revolving fund. The WDC uses the moneys revolving back into the fund to support new investments. To date, the western investment fund has invested €48 million in 140 enterprises, supported 2,500 direct jobs and leveraged more than €280 million in additional investment. At the beginning of 2018, the western investment fund had €21.4 million available for reinvestment in small and medium-sized enterprises, microenterprises and community and social enterprises in the western region. The Deputy will agree that this represents a huge opportunity to support job creation in the west.

When I met members of the board of the WDC last May, they raised with me their view that additional staff were required to maximise the potential of the western investment fund and the benefits it can bring to the western region. The Deputy will appreciate that any question of increased resources is a matter for consideration in the context of the annual Estimates process, which is taking place at present. The possibility of securing extra resources for the WDC will be examined in that context. I appreciate and understand that additional staff resources would help to maximise the positive impact and effect of the western investment fund. Such resources have been sought by the board. I congratulate the new chief executive officer of the WDC, Mr. Tomás Ó Síocháin, who is taking up his new position this week. I commend the outgoing acting chief executive officer, Mr. Ian Brannigan, on his work over recent times. The WDC has a huge role to play. It is important for the Government to support this important fund by maximising the potential for it to create jobs.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I thank the Minister of State. As he mentioned, up to the end of 2017 the western investment fund had invested approximately €48.5 million in 135 enterprises. I would like to focus on the demand for enterprises as we go forward. The Minister of State rightly mentioned small and medium-sized enterprises and community-based measures to encourage additional enterprise development. What are the plans? Is staffing going to be an issue? The amount of money available for reinvestment in small and medium-sized enterprises in the western development area, which I am talking about, is vital. Perhaps the Minister of State might elaborate on that.

Deputy Seán Kyne: The potential is great. The investment in these companies to provide loans and secure share capital has the potential to ensure the WDC investment fund can continue to grow. As it grows and as some companies spin out, make money and repay their loans, the return on investment is considerable for the Western Development Commission. The potential for the fund to grow is great. The board has requested, however, that it needs extra staff to realise this. This case has been made to me. There is an ongoing Estimates process and we cannot pre-empt the discussions. I will certainly be advocating for extra resources for the Western Development Commission so it can increase its number of staff. This is its top requirement.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: With the success of recent years, there has been an increase in demand for the fund, particularly given the number of entrepreneurs and various others who

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wish to avail of it. It is vital that the staff is in place. Perhaps this will be a priority of the Minister of State. Without an adequate number of staff, it will be very difficult to administer and provide what is needed. Across the western region, people are crying out for investment. The enterprises that have availed of funding over the years have been well served. It is vital to address the issue of staffing. I agree with the Minister of State on the appointment of the new CEO. Perhaps additional staff are required fairly quickly.

Deputy Seán Kyne: There is a new CEO, a new chairman of the board and a new board has been in place over the last period. There is potential. There have been a number of success stories and initiatives, including the western regional audiovisual producers, WRAP, fund, under the Western Development Commission and local authorities. It was launched last year and it has been a great success. It has generated enthusiasm across the sector. There is potential, and continued support by the Government is important. I will certainly continue to work with the board, the new CEO and the team to continue to drive investment in the western region. That is why the commission was set up. It has a positive track record. We can continue to enhance its importance and secure its future based on its experience and the new ideas, innovation and input of people.

Community Development Initiatives

78. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the policies and programmes he has introduced in order to reduce community and social deprivation in the most deprived urban communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38605/18]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Members who are waiting should note this is the last question. We have only five minutes left. If Deputy Ó Cuív forfeits his introduction, he will have time for one supplementary question.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Agreed.

Deputy Michael Ring: My Department's mission is to support viable, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland. In that context, it has a central role in tackling social exclusion and addressing deprivation in all communities, both urban and rural.

The Framework Policy for Local and Community Development in Ireland, published in 2015, focuses on tackling poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion and seeks to provide better ways of working with communities. A cross-sectoral group representative of all key stakeholders and chaired by my Department is developing an implementation plan for the framework policy.

I announced the second SICAP, covering the period 2018 to 2022, earlier this year. It has a funding allocation nationally of €38 million in 2018 and will provide some €190 million over its next five-year period. SICAP supports disadvantaged communities and individuals, including unemployed people, people living in deprived areas, people with disabilities, single-parent families, people on a low income, members of the Traveller and Roma communities and other disadvantaged groups.

I have announced €8 million in additional funding for the community enhancement pro-

gramme, which I put in place earlier this year. The programme provides funding towards grants for community groups across Ireland. The allocation of funding is weighted towards those communities in most need. I have provided ring-fenced supports for particular areas of urban deprivation including, for example, €3.5 million for initiatives in Dublin's north-east inner city, an area suffering from extreme deprivation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is to be one supplementary question and one response. The Deputy should make the best of it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister's reply is extraordinary because he did not address the very specific question I asked about the most deprived urban areas. Can he confirm that although he brought back the RAPID programme, it is no longer confined to dealing with the issues in the most deprived urban communities? Can he confirm that, under the RAPID programme, the area implementation teams that used to be in each RAPID area where the locals were involved no longer exist?

Deputy Michael Ring: That is not true. With regard to the community enhancement scheme, I have brought that down to the local authorities. I refer to the local community development committees, LCDCs. The Deputy always puts his hands up in the air. He reminds me of an umpire who gets it wrong when the ball goes wide. He does not know where he is; he wants the cameras. I am going to give him the figures. Very simply, I have brought this down to the local authorities, the LCDCs. Who knows best in Galway, Mayo, Cork, Kerry, Laois or Dublin where the poverty is and where the funding is needed most? The complaint the Deputy had on the last occasion was that I was not giving enough money to the bigger areas. I have done that. I started off with a base amount of €125,000. Then I took into account the areas based on their populations. Let me give examples of the areas that got the most funding. Cork city got €459,000 and Dublin city got €1,329,000. Fingal got €477,000 and south Dublin got €737,000. These are areas with real problems and difficulties. This explains the position regarding the community enhancement programme and SICAP. The latter has been a brilliant success. One hundred and ten thousand people have been dealt with and supported on a one-to-one basis. Five thousand-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat. I have been overly generous all day. I have to move on.

Deputy Michael Ring: I love giving the figures because Deputy Ó Cuív hates the figures. He hates the truth. These are not my figures. The Deputy just hates the truth.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If the Minister wants to continue-----

Deputy Michael Ring: One thousand six hundred and ninety-five people-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If the Minister wants to continue, he will have to go to MacHale Park or Pearse Stadium. That is it.

Written answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

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Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

School Transport

Deputy Declan Breathnach: The school transport scheme is 50 years in existence. It started in 1968. It is commendable that 117,000 children are availing of it in the current year. Some 12,000 of them have special needs. Over 4,500 vehicles have covered what I am told was over 100 million km since the scheme started. As the old poem states, “The wheels on the bus go round and round”, but unfortunately the doors of the bus open and shut. Sometimes they are shut to many.

Having just come from a meeting of the education committee, which was discussing this, I realise 450 special needs children are still waiting to be able to avail of this service. The reality is that between the contract with Bus Éireann and the Department, there are both planning and communications issues. I will start with the communications issues. Despite reviews and promises to examine the matter, the report in regard to communications could be to do better. We are told additional staff were taken on and that 35,000 calls were made, amounting to some 1,200 per day. The reality is that the lack of feedback to public representatives and parents has been nothing other than appalling. It is my firm belief that, where communication is concerned, one has to take responsibility. It is my belief and that of many others in this House, particularly the rural Deputies, who are particularly affected by this issue, that this scheme is demand-led. We have been told that €190 million has been allocated for it, of which €27 million is a further allocation for children with special educational needs. It is not fit for purpose financially and the Minister of State must get a grip on that. I appeal for full reform of this.

Finally, with regard to planning, I was a school teacher for 35 years and talking about a small window of time during which all of this must be processed is not acceptable. As a school teacher, if I take a special needs pupil into my school, I must plan to do so two or three years in advance. Likewise, the same should be done when the pupil is going to secondary school.

Deputy Pat Casey: In the two and a half years the Government has been in office, there has been a sad and frustrating predictability about the school transport chaos that has hit different villages throughout Ireland, including in Wicklow, every September. It essentially has the same characteristics. Letters of notification of withdrawal of Bus Éireann school bus transport services to families in Redcross and Tinahely are due to what the company claims are capacity issues. In reality, a dysfunctional management system is failing to provide adequate school transport services to students and families who are willing to pay for them. These notices were issued in late August and, in some instances, families were not notified at all prior to the start of the school term.

In the case of Tinahely and Redcross, leaving certificate and junior certificate examination students lost their concessionary tickets even though they have been travelling on the bus for years. The start of these important examination years is being marked by unnecessary stress caused by a system that should have a student and family based approach to service delivery. More than 20 families received these notifications and many have no alternative method of getting their children to school in Coláiste Chill Mhantáin or Coláiste Bhríde. Parents are obliged to car pool, change their working hours, take time off or consider changing schools in what has turned out to be an annual farce in the school transport system. In both of these cases, the

schools that are deemed eligible do not have transport services from Redcross or Tinahely. The pick-up point for the services are located some distance from the villages, over 4.5 km in the case of Redcross and over 3 km in the case of Tinahely, yet both villages have school transport travelling through the villages to Coláiste Chill Mhantáin and Coláiste Bhríde. There is no other public transport structure serving Redcross and Tinahely.

The stress caused to the students and their families cannot be underestimated and the poor response so far must be changed. The families in Tinahely and Redcross deserve better than this. The problem will not go away but will only get worse as more children will be attending these schools in the years to come.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: Every academic year children who are concessionary ticket holders are being left on the roadside. In the majority of cases the parents are not notified until a few weeks before the beginning of term. This places significant undue hardship on young families at what is a stressful time of the year. A number of key areas in the school transport scheme must be addressed urgently. The rules to determine eligibility must be changed as they are not fit for purpose. Parochial identity is important to rural people and the current rules dismiss family traditions of attendance at a preferred school within the parish, attendance of siblings at that school and the location of after-school and extra-curricular activities with local GAA or other sports clubs, which are important for people.

The rule stating, “Routes will not be extended or altered, additional vehicles will not be introduced, nor will larger vehicles or extra trips using existing vehicles be provided to cater for children travelling on a concessionary basis”, must be scrapped. The school transport appeals office must also be scrapped and a new system put in place, as it is totally pointless. Since 2015, 558 appeals were made to the board, none of which was upheld, at a cost of €59,700 to the taxpayer. We need to establish an independent office to examine and consider these matters whereby a degree of discretion and common sense can be applied.

However, there can be no change unless the Minister of State goes to the Ministers for Education and Skills and Public Expenditure and Reform and requests that additional money be made available in budget 2019 to restore the criteria to the pre-2011 eligibility rules that applied before the changes were made. Fianna Fáil costed this in its 2016 general election manifesto at €3.2 million. Recent research we have conducted now puts the cost at approximately €4 million, which is a relatively small amount in the budgetary context. Will the Minister of State request the funding from his colleagues in Government in advance of the budget and sort out this problem once and for all? It is an ongoing problem every year. The Minister of State will be aware of that because I have been raising it at this time of the year every year since he was appointed. I ask him to seek the funding that is required from the Minister.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): I thank the Deputies for their interesting questions. I concur with what has been said. The school transport scheme in Ireland is one of the best in Europe. We transport 117,000 children twice a day, including almost 13,000 children with special needs, in more than 4,500 vehicles covering 100 million kilometres annually at a total cost of almost €190 million. Parental contributions towards the cost of school transport is €15.4 million and the State carries the rest of the cost. We are currently transporting approximately 24,700 children who are concessionary ticket holders. My current estimate is that 350 children who are ineligible for school transport paid by the deadline date but were still unsuccessful in obtaining concessionary school transport.

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This issue must be explained in detail. The school transport scheme was put in place for eligible children. I did not put the scheme in place. It was introduced by Fianna Fáil and is a very good scheme, so this is not a criticism of Fianna Fáil. The objective of the school transport scheme was to carry every eligible child and every child with special needs to school. Currently, every eligible child is either on a bus or getting the grant for going to school. The scheme that has been presented to me over the past number of years is a scheme for eligible children, not concessionary children, even though the scheme carries 24,700 concessionary children.

Deputy Breathnach made a valuable point about special needs. During the summer recess, I spent two weeks in Dublin dealing with special needs cases, which can be complex. The Government ensures that every child with special educational needs has school transport. Incidentally, half the school transport budget is being used to transport children with special educational needs. I agree with that. The transport of children with special educational needs is a specialised service. The difficulty we have is operating it on an individual door-to-door basis. For example, when an application is received, a vehicle and driver must be procured. A bus escort might have to be hired and, in some instances, we are hiring two escorts for a child. Garda vetting must be carried out. This means it can take weeks after an application has been received before the transport can be provided. The media have reported on some cases where there were unacceptably long delays and I have asked the officials to examine those cases. I was not aware of them. Representatives of Bus Éireann will meet me in the next couple of weeks.

The Deputy asked that the system be changed. I will outline the problem with that. The budget currently stands at €190 million. To increase that budget to consider concessionary children will put us outside the legality of the system and outside the criteria laid down to carry eligible children and children with special needs. I am aware that Deputy Aylward has been to the forefront in raising this issue. If I had my way, I would carry every child. However, every year we have more eligible children, more children with special needs and more concessionary children. The current budget is extraordinary and it has increased year after year. Again, I must point out that the emphasis of the school transport system is to carry eligible children according to the criteria laid down and to carry children with special needs. All of these children are being carried. The difficulties in respect of children with special needs, which I explained, are being worked through. There may be a number of eligible children who were not allocated a place because of late payment. The applications are approved in April and payment must be made by July. Also, the payment can be made in two instalments. The difficulty is that when payments were not received other children were accommodated on the buses. Was I to direct Bus Éireann to not accommodate children who had paid? Deputies opposite would be the first to criticise me if a child who had been given a place on a bus had that place withdrawn three weeks later. This is the difficulty with which I am faced. I have been advised by the Department that to cater for concessionary children who are not eligible for the scheme in the first instance additional buses would be required. If I can secure the funding to accommodate every child this year or next year I would be delighted to do so. In my view, this might be possible in the context of the budget negotiations. If Fianna Fáil is willing to work with me to secure the additional funding, that would make my life easier.

I know that the Deputies mean well and that they are seeking to represent their areas. I do not like to see any child, concessionary or otherwise, without school transport. However, I have been provided with a deck of cards that I have to work with.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: As I said, there are 450 special needs students who have not been accommodated, which is an indictment of the scheme. I also acknowledged that the

scheme was very successful for a time but, as stated by most people on this side of the House, it is now not fit for purpose and it needs to be recalibrated.

Twelve months ago, the Minister of State gave an assurance to the education committee that this problem would not be repeated. I could cite a myriad of examples of people in my constituency, from Dundalk to Drogheda, who are being discommoded but I do not propose to repeat what has been already said by my colleagues. Nationally, 18% of those who are eligible for this scheme are not taking up their places, which indicates the need for a review of the scheme. In rural Ireland, as alluded to by Deputy Aylward and others, because of difficulties with house building it is unsafe for children to be walking the roads, many of whom have to do so because their parents have to go to work.

Deputy Pat Casey: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I would like to comment further on the two schools I mentioned earlier and ask that he engage with me later on the specific issues. First, Coláiste Chill Mhantáin in the village of Redcross opened in 2012 following the amalgamation of two schools from Wicklow town. In terms of distance, Redcross is closer to Coláiste Chill Mhantáin than the designated school. Second, every morning a 51-seat bus travels to Wicklow town via Redcross on which there are 33 students and 18 empty seats. There are 11 children who have been discommoded under the scheme. All we need to do is apply some common sense and allocate these children seats on the school bus to Wicklow town. Some of the children have been attending that school for five years and are now in their leaving certificate year, which is a critical stage in their lives.

On Tinahely, last year additional children were accommodated by way of the provision of a larger bus. The same could be done for the children who are being asked to attend school in a different county rather than a school with which they have always been associated.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: I accept the Minister of State's point that he has to operate within criteria that have been laid out for the scheme. It is our job as legislators and the Minister of State's job as Minister to address problems where they arise. There is a problem in rural Ireland in particular. The demographics of rural Ireland have changed because during the good times more people built in rural areas, such that more children need to be accommodated by the service. The changes that were made between 2010 and 2011 were in response to the financial crisis. We are out of recession, in recovery and *en route* to prosperous times again. The onus is on the Minister of State to review this scheme, as he has promised over the past two years he would do, with a view to the introduction of a scheme that is fit for purpose. As I said, the demographics of rural Ireland have changed. Mothers and fathers now have to work. The day of one parent going out to work and the other remaining in the home is gone. Many people live in rural areas and they depend on the school transport system to get their children to school and we are ignoring this. It is wrong to tell a child of the third generation - in terms of attending a particular school - that he or she must attend a school in an area to which he or she has no connection. It is wrong when his or her connection is to the parish school attended by the child's parents and grandparents. We must take cognisance of this and change the system to suit the needs of students and parents. I ask the Minister of State to take this on board.

Deputy John Halligan: In regard to the particular school mentioned, I have no problem meeting the Deputy to discuss it. On the issue of students not taking up places, the percentage in this regard has increased over the last number of years from 15% to 18%. This is difficult for us. The Department and I are not in a position to question families about whether they intend to seek a place on a bus for their child or children. As Minister of State, I cannot do that and

neither can Bus Éireann or the Department. Families are paying but for some reason or another their child or children are not taking places on the school bus.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: There should be penalties for not doing so.

Deputy John Halligan: That would be difficult. Legally, we are not in a position to question parents about why their children are not taking up places on a bus or to question schools about whether a particular child is attending that school, which would mean they would have to take up a place on the bus. We also are not in a position to question the children. A review is under way in respect of the 18% who are not taking up places, which when completed will help us a lot.

Overall, 117,000 are being transported to and from school on a daily basis, including 13,000 children with special needs. The scheme is successful. I am not suggesting that there are not cracks in the system. Do children fall through the cracks? Yes, of course they do. I admit that emails are overlooked and mistakes are made which should be rectified sooner. I am not suggesting that everything is perfect with the scheme but 99% of those availing of the scheme think it is an excellent scheme. Since becoming Minister of State, I have endeavoured to ensure there has been no increase in the cost of this scheme, at detriment to myself in terms of my budget allocation each year. The independent value for money review showed that the amount paid by families for the school transport scheme would be four times greater if they had to drive their children to school. It is really good value.

My dilemma, and that of all other Ministers and Ministers of State, is that I am given a particular budget for the school transport scheme. The first priority is places on buses for special needs children. The second priority is places for eligible children. We then address the issue of concessionary places. This is not an easy task. As I said, only €15.4 million is paid by parents. The remainder of the cost is met by the State and it is increasing year on year. It was once remarked to me that the €190 million being spent on school transport would be better spent on replacement of prefabs and so on. I disagreed with that remark. I believe the school transport scheme is great. We need to continue to provide school transport for eligible children, including children with special needs. There have been two reviews of the scheme already. I have no problem with another review but it could recommend the provision of additional funding to provide for concessionary places. Currently, children who are not eligible under the scheme are awarded places on a concessionary basis. I will explain how this came about. When we provided buses for a particular village, town or city, and those buses were 15-seat buses but there were only ten eligible children on board, we decided that rather than have the buses operating with empty seats we would allocate the remaining seats on a concessionary basis. We put concessionaries on it. What happened was that concessionaries started at 700 and they are now at 24,700. The scheme is creaking at the edges and it means that every year we have to put millions of euros into the scheme to keep eligible children and children with special needs in it.

Mortgage Book Sales

Deputy Dessie Ellis: As the Minister of State knows, we are in the middle of a major housing and homelessness crisis which the Government is failing to address. In the midst of all of this, the Government is complicit in the sale of mortgages by Permanent TSB. The state is a major shareholder, owning 75% of the bank. The bank was bailed out by taxpayers' money to the tune of €4 billion. Permanent TSB recently sold its Project Glas loan portfolio to Start

Mortgages, an affiliate of the vulture fund, Lone Star. This portfolio contains 10,700 home loans that were originally considered by the bank to be non-performing. Of these 10,700 home loans, 7,400 are owner-occupier mortgages and 3,300 are buy-to-let properties. However, it has since emerged that the portfolio also includes performing loans. We are not talking about people who have mortgages and have not paid them in ten years; we are talking about people who are genuinely paying their mortgages and have painstakingly made prior arrangements with Permanent TSB which they have adhered to.

Sinn Féin was opposed to this sale and we called on the Government and Permanent TSB to stop it. The bank, being 75% State owned as well as having been bailed out by the State, should not use vulture funds to evade its responsibility to these people and nor should the Government, as its primary shareholder. A typical example of these cases, which came to the attention of my constituency office recently, is that of a husband and wife who have resided in their house in Finglas for more than 20 years and who have their four children and a grandchild living with them. One child is disabled. The husband is in full-time secure employment, he has a mortgage of just over €100,000, and he has an agreed amount to pay per month and is currently up to date with his repayments. In fact, the husband has offered to increase his payment from the agreed amount to pay off what he still owes in a shorter time.

If their house is repossessed, a family of seven, including a disabled person, will be made homeless. This individual has had his mortgage sold to this vulture fund and it is causing him and his family great uncertainty and distress. Based on the cases I have received representations on in my constituency office, Permanent TSB has been duplicitous in not adhering to these arrangements by agreeing to sell the mortgages to these vulture funds. The bank said that if a borrower has agreed a restructure or an alternative payment arrangement and that they have consistently made payments in line with the terms of the restructure, then these terms will be honoured by Start Mortgages. What guarantee do we have that Start Mortgages will honour these arrangements made with borrowers and that no one will lose their homes? Additionally, another solution is that Permanent TSB could have looked to the local authorities to put in place a buy-to-rent scheme.

We need answers on this. There is a responsibility on the Minister of State and the Government to address this issue. What has the Minister of State done to address this issue?

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Michael D'Arcy): Since the onset of the financial crisis, progress has been made by the banks in reducing non-performing loans, NPLs, from their peak. NPLs at the banks in which the State has invested have reduced by approximately 70% from €54 billion in 2013 to €16 billion at the end of June 2018. This reduction includes the recently announced sale of a portfolio of NPLs by Permanent TSB, namely Project Glas. A major contributor to this progress has been the number of mortgage restructures the banks have agreed with their customers. At the end of June 2018, almost 136,000 mortgage restructures were in place throughout the system covering private dwelling homes and buy-to-let facilities.

Despite this progress, the NPL ratios of the banks remain at an elevated level and are well above the European average of 4%. Permanent TSB is a particular outlier in this regard with a ratio of 25% before the Project Glas loan sale. Given this position, the banking regulatory authorities have tasked the management and board of each institution with developing and implementing a strategy with the expectation that they will reduce their ratio towards the European average. Given the scale of the reduction required, it is unfortunate but inevitable

that the recently announced loan sale was a necessary action taken by Permanent TSB. The consequences of the failure of this loan sale process would have been exceptionally serious for Permanent TSB.

It is important that I highlight the strong protections in place for borrowers following a sale of their loans to a non-bank. The Minister for Finance has stated on a number of occasions that the protections for borrowers in place before the sale remain unchanged after that sale. In this regard, it is important to note that there are no changes to the rights of a borrower whose loan is sold by a bank. All terms and conditions attached to their mortgage contract remain in place, including the terms of a restructure agreed with the bank before a sale. Permanent TSB has further reinforced this important point and has confirmed that, if a borrower has agreed a restructure or an alternative payment arrangement and they have consistently made payments in line with the terms of the restructure, then these terms will be honoured by Start Mortgages.

In addition, it should be noted that Start Mortgages is a retail credit firm regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland since 2008. When dealing with borrowers, retail credit firms are bound by the same regulations that currently apply to Permanent TSB. Like Permanent TSB, they are required to comply with the consumer protection code and the code of conduct for mortgage arrears when dealing with borrowers who are in arrears. The Minister for Finance has demonstrated his own commitment to strengthening these protections further, including his support for the Bill introduced by Deputy Michael McGrath, which seeks to regulate the purchasers of mortgage loans. In addition, earlier this year, the Minister asked the Central Bank to carry out a review of the code of conduct for mortgage arrears to ensure that it remains effective. He has asked for the report to be completed as soon as possible and the Central Bank has stated that the report will be ready at the end of this month. If, as a result of this review, the code requires amendment, a full public consultation process will be required in line with normal guidelines.

I wish to highlight the recent comments of Mr. Ed Sibley, the deputy governor of the Central Bank of Ireland. He said that there is no evidence that non-banks are being more aggressive in seeking a resolution than banks. In addition, he said that loans sales are a legitimate and necessary approach for banks to address non-performing mortgage loans and, to date, there has been no material difference in the number of legal proceedings issued between banks and non-banks as a percentage of the total number of accounts in arrears.

Separate to a loan sale, I draw the Deputy's attention to the publication of two recent financial stability reports in September by the Central Bank that highlight some key findings in terms of NPL resolution and long-term mortgage arrears. With regard to principal private dwelling houses, the term, "loan cure", is used to describe the return of previously defaulted loan balances to performing loan status, and the research shows that this is the biggest driver of NPL reduction. This reflects the success of the Government's supports that have been put in place over the past number of years to assist those who find themselves in mortgage arrears. Furthermore, the paper shows that loans that go through the mortgage arrears resolution process framework are twice as likely to end up in a lower arrears state six months later, which is a positive indicator of how well this process is working and how important it is for borrowers who find themselves in difficulty to continue to engage with their bank.

The Minister for Finance cannot stop loan sales, even by the banks in which the State has a shareholding. These decisions, including the composition of loans included in any loan sale, are the responsibility of the board and management of the banks, which must run on an independent and commercial basis.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I do not know if the Minister of State heard that this sale included performing loans and Permanent TSB has admitted that. The Minister of State did not give an explanation regarding how these ended up in this portfolio. Why were local authorities and others not given an opportunity to bid on these units?

What contact was there with the Minister? The Minister of State is saying the Minister will not interfere. Surely the Minister must give an opinion. He must call people in and tell them he does not agree with what they are doing, not necessarily to interfere with what has been agreed but to make his point clear that this involves ordinary people. Some of the loans are performing and people could end up homeless or out on the streets as a result of this deal. We have no guarantee that will not happen. We saw this with NAMA when all the properties were sold off.

6 o'clock It was another tragedy. It could have helped solve the housing crisis but rental properties and private houses were sold off in large numbers. PTSB is 75% owned by the State. It is absolutely calamitous. It is wrong and the Minister of State and anyone with a bit of sense knows that this does not make sense. From the sound of it, this is a done deal. It is done and dusted and we are now picking up the pieces. In the future, we will pick up the pieces of some of these people who will be left on the streets. That is what will happen. These vulture funds are not buying these for the good of their health. They are out to make a killing. That is what they are doing. They are getting reduced rates instead of offering it to the people who have these mortgages. The same deal should be offered to them.

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: The Minister for Finance cannot stop loan sales even by the banks in which the State has a shareholding.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Does he not talk to them?

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: No, he cannot. These decisions, including the composition of the loans included in any loan sale, are the responsibility of the board and management of the banks which must run on an independent and commercial basis. The banks' independence is protected by the relationship frameworks, which are legally binding documents that the Minister cannot change unilaterally. I am aware that some performing loans were transferred but there was cross-compliance issues with some of the loans. Unfortunately, if a performing loan is cross-secured with another loan for another property, those loans have to go across or else there would be no security.

The Deputy asked why local authorities did not purchase the loans. The State provides the money for local authorities. Where will we get the billions of euro that are not accounted for? Will we just make the money up? Sinn Féin has Harry Potter-style economics.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: We own 75% of it.

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: It has Harry Potter-style economics. Are we just going to pretend we have the money to purchase all of that loan book from-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: So we do not own 75% of the company.

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: Are we going to pretend we are going to make the money up? Is Sinn Féin just going to vanish the money? Sinn Féin has a history-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister is saying there is any amount of money for housing-----

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: Sinn Féin has a long history of just grabbing money out of no-

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where----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: -----and now the Minister of State is saying he cannot make it up.

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: -----but there is no prospect-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Which is it?

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: There is no prospect-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister is telling us he has no problem with money.

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: We cannot just magic the money. We have a budgetary process that will culminate on this day two weeks. The Deputy just wants to click his fingers and make €2 billion, €3 billion or €5 billion appear like magic.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister is telling us he has any amount of money for housing. Which is it?

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: It is Sinn Féin Harry Potter-style economics.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Is the Minister of State denying that?

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: It is Harry Potter-style economics of just pretending it is going to appear out of nowhere. The Deputy will then be complaining that the State is not building.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Harry Potter-style economics. The Government is selling off these loans with NAMA and with the banks-----

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: It is Harry Potter-style economics.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, it is not Hogwarts we are in. Can we contain ourselves?

Hospital Services

Deputy Mick Wallace: It is an issue that is a real worry for the people where I come from in the south of Wexford because we are in the absolute worst position of all when it comes to the problems around this issue. A few months ago, I submitted a number of questions to the Department of Health on ambulance response times between various hospitals in the south east and St. James's Hospital in Dublin and Cork University Hospital. The questions were devised by a 24-7 cardiac care campaigner, Matt Shanahan, who has done tremendous and intelligent work over the past number of years to highlight the madness of a lack of 24-7 emergency cardiac care in the south east. His aim was to try to establish how many patients in the south east are getting to a cath lab within the 90-minute window recommended in the Herity report. The 2016 Herity report states that the average blue light ambulance journey time between Waterford hospital and Cork is one hour and 20 minutes. The HSE's answers to my parliamentary questions have demolished this claim and made a nonsense of the report.

I appreciate the Department needs to make evidence-based decisions in the provision of health services but how can the Department continue to stand over the Herity report, especially considering its problems in terms of population calculations and the lack of consultation with consultant cardiologists at Wexford General Hospital? The data show that not one of the 37

emergency cardiac transfers from Wexford over the past three years was completed within 90 minutes. In the same three-year period, from the time the ambulance was called, just two patients made it from University Hospital Waterford to Cork in under 90 minutes. The dogs in the street in the south east know this. It is common sense. The Department, the HSE and Dr. Herity all have access to the national ambulance service response times. They must have been aware of the reality of these transfer times. Did the Department look at them and was it aware of the reality of the transfer times?

The Herity report estimates that approximately 175,000 people in the south east are outside the 90-minute window accessing Cork hospital and St. James's. In the real world, the data I received via my parliamentary questions suggest that the population outside the 90-minute window is closer to 0.5 million people, which is almost the whole south-east region. The Herity report uses a 90-minute journey time as its acute coronary syndrome, ACS, standard. This ACS standard does not exist anywhere else. The equivalent standard in the UK is based on 90 minutes from first responder time to balloon time, or when the patient is on the operating table. Elsewhere in the EU, they aspire to a 60-minute transfer time. Meanwhile for people in south Wexford and the south east, the data I received show transfers of closer to two hours. Consultant cardiologist at University Hospital Waterford, Dr. Patrick Owens, told "Prime Time" that people have without doubt died *en route* to Dublin or Cork because they have been unable to access the service in a prompt and timely manner. Does the Minister of State accept that statement as true? Dr. Herity told the Oireachtas committee that 150 STEMI cases per year in the south east was needed to justify 24-7 cardiac care in the region. I have been told that approximately 200 STEMI cases were treated in Waterford hospital in 2017. Professor Daly, who did the 2018 ACS report, gave a figure of 203 STEMI cases to cardiologists at Waterford Hospital as a predicted outcome figure for 2017. The Herity report does not stack up. If one takes on board the extra time, Dr. Herity did not look at the time it takes to get to the patient. He was only counting from the time the ambulance picked the patient up to the minute the patient got on the operating table. We cannot ignore the fact that in Wexford on average it took an ambulance 53 minutes from request and departing Wexford hospital to St. James's or to Cork.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I thank the Deputy for raising the important issue of 24-7 emergency PPI cardiac care at University Hospital Waterford. The Minister, Deputy Harris, met the Deputy and many other Oireachtas Members from the south east last week to discuss the issue. I am happy to provide an update to the House in this regard. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy John Halligan, for his determined efforts on behalf of the people of Waterford on this issue.

The Herity report of 2016 concluded that the needs of the Waterford catchment area could be met by a single cath lab but it recommended that the existing lab be staffed and funded to provide additional sessions. That funding has been provided and I am happy to report that recruitment, which is being progressed by local management and the HSE's national recruitment service, is at an advanced stage.

On the issue of ambulance transfer times, the analysis of emergency patient transfer times between University Hospital Waterford and Cork University Hospital in the period October 2015 to June 2016, undertaken by Dr. Herity, was based on information from the national ambulance service, NAS, on the times of contemporary blue light journeys between the two hospitals. As the Deputy is also aware, a national review of specialised cardiac services is taking place. This review is considering all adult cardiac service needs and their optimal service configuration as a whole. This will take on board not simply geographical location but also

best international practice standards to provide a clinically effective safe service for all adults with cardiac disease. The national review will provide a sound scientific foundation for policy making in this area from 2019 onwards. As the Deputy will be aware from last week's meeting, the provision of 24-7 primary percutaneous coronary intervention, PPCI, services in University Hospital Waterford will be considered in the context of the National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services. The Deputy is also aware that the Minister is eager for a second cath lab to be operational in University Hospital Waterford to address waiting times at the hospital and provide a better service for the people of Waterford and the south east. As confirmed at the meeting with Oireachtas Members from the south east last week, plans for a second cath lab at University Hospital Waterford are now being progressed by the HSE and it will provide Members with updates throughout the process. In conclusion, and as set out in the National Development Plan 2018-2027, investment in cardiac cath labs and other cardiac services infrastructure nationally, and any decision with regard to the provision of 24-7 PPCI services in University Hospital Waterford will be informed by the outcome of the national review of specialist cardiac services, which is expected to be complete by June 2019.

Deputy Mick Wallace: While the new cath lab that is to be built in Waterford is welcome, it will not make any difference in terms of helping emergency cardiac patients outside Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The meeting with the Minister last week was a decent one. He explained to us that he has been trying to get extra hours from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. or 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. That would help but it still leaves a huge window when people can need cardiac help and it is not available within 90 minutes. That is not good enough. He told us that the cardiac review would be finished by the end of June next year. Does the Minister of State think it is fair in particular for the people in Wexford? This is not parish pump politics, it just happens that they are furthest away from care. From the time Wexford General Hospital requests an ambulance to its arrival in St. James' Hospital is an average of two hours and 30 minutes. If someone goes to Wexford General Hospital they automatically go to St. James' Hospital. If they go to another hospital maybe in New Ross, I do not know if people are taken in there but they can end up going to Cork. International best practice is one hour. Ireland is working towards 90 minutes. It is completely unfair that a person in Wexford has to put up with two hours and 30 minutes. The Herity report was not fair from our point of view and it was a bit of a whitewash and now we are waiting for the results of another report. It is not fair that people have to wait for the report. Given what we got in the Herity report, people are a bit dubious about what the next one will say. The Government should be more proactive about anything less than 24-7 care within an hour and a half of the ambulance being first alerted, as that is only fair.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I absolutely take the Deputy's point on Wexford and the south-east area, and his valid criticism. I will tell the Minister, Deputy Harris, about the time of two hours and 30 minutes. I live in Marino and Beaumont Hospital is only ten minutes up the road from my house. I met the consultants with the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, and have heard their cases. I also will tell the Minister that there are 203 cases per year not 150 cases per year. We have to consider that. There is a determination to resolve this issue. It is recommended that the existing cath lab should be staffed and funded to provide for 12 sessions of four hours each every week. That is an extension of 20% in its hours. Certain posts have been appointed. The grade IV administrative campaign is under way and will be filled on a temporary basis by the end of this month via an agency. The porter position that it was not possible to fill as a temporary post on the HSE contract was converted from an agency on 30 July. The senior cardiac physiologist post was expressed to the panel, the senior radiographer has offered his post to the senior panel already in existence and the post has been accepted. The candidate,

however, is on maternity leave but will return to take up the post on 6 November 2018. A staff nurse was appointed on 7 September 2018.

In respect of international best practice and University Hospital Waterford, I am well aware of the issue. It is very important. The people of Wexford and Waterford have the same rights as the rest of us in respect of cardiac services. I will bring all of the Deputy's reasonable and credible points back to the Minister.

Brexit Negotiations: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): The UK's departure from the EU poses a unique and unprecedented challenge for Ireland. The depth and strength of the ties between our islands, across so many areas, means that our relationship is unique. This relationship has only been enhanced and deepened by both countries' membership of the European Union. The complexity of the UK's departure and the scale of the challenge it presents have become even clearer in the course of the Article 50 negotiations which have been ongoing since last year. Negotiations are led by an EU Commission task force, on behalf of the remaining 27 member states, under Michel Barnier. Ireland's goal has always been for the EU and the UK to have the closest possible relationship post Brexit. At the same time, it is important that we remain a member of the EU and that we maintain the integrity of the Single Market and the four freedoms on which it is based, which is the greatest strength of the EU.

The Government continues to work to ensure that Ireland's issues are properly reflected in the negotiations on the withdrawal agreement, including, as a priority, agreement on the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, which will protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts, not least with regard to rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity, and the gains of the peace process. This includes the need to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland and to therefore agree the backstop as part of the Irish protocol. We are also working hard to ensure that Ireland itself is ready for the changes and challenges that Brexit will bring. Negotiations resumed on 16 August and have been ongoing continuously since then. Substantial work has been done, and on many issues, progress has been made. In his most recent update, Michel Barnier has reported that there is a provisional agreement on up to 90% of the text of the withdrawal agreement. However, key, substantial issues remain to be resolved. These include those related to Northern Ireland and the backstop.

Discussions to agree a political declaration on the framework for the future EU-UK relationship have also begun in earnest since the resumption of negotiations. This has been enabled by the UK's White Paper, or the Chequers proposal as we know it, on the future relationship and is being taken forward on the basis of the European Council guidelines agreed last March. Common ground has been found on the future EU-UK security partnerships including in areas of police and judicial co-operation. However, there are fundamental differences on the UK's suggested model for the future economic partnership, which would risk undermining the Single Market. As we enter this final stage of talks, EU and UK negotiators have committed to bringing new energy to the talks, including on Irish-specific issues and the Government welcomes these commitments.

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EU leaders reviewed progress during the informal European Council summit held in Salzburg last week. As President Tusk made clear in his remarks following the summit, all partners were agreed there will be no withdrawal agreement without a solid, operational and legally-binding Irish backstop. Leaders reaffirmed their full support for Michel Barnier in all of his efforts and as leader of the EU task force. On the joint political declaration on the future relationship, the leaders of the EU 27 agreed that the aim is to agree a text that provides as much clarity as possible on the future relations model. However, leaders agreed that, despite positive elements of the UK's Chequers proposal, the suggested framework for economic co-operation could not work given the risks to the Single Market.

The European Council meeting on 18 October remains the target to achieve maximum progress and results in the negotiations. At that meeting, Ireland and our EU partners will then decide if conditions are sufficient to call an extraordinary summit in November to finalise and formalise the deal. Real progress on the backstop will be an essential part of that decision. I welcome that in her statement of last Friday in Downing Street, the Prime Minister promised that the UK will bring forward proposals on the backstop. This needs to be done urgently if progress is to be made by the October European Council, as time is running short. As the Taoiseach said in Salzburg, we need to redouble our efforts over the coming weeks to make sure we can successfully complete negotiations and agree a deal. That is what we are all working towards. Ireland, as a country, wants to avoid a no-deal Brexit. It is important that we can reach an agreement, as all sides will suffer in a no-deal scenario - the UK, the EU and Ireland more than any other member state.

Regarding the backstop, the Tánaiste met Michel Barnier last week on 18 September and discussed progress in the negotiations, and in particular the Irish protocol and the Northern Ireland Border. Mr. Barnier confirmed once again his view that without a backstop there can be no withdrawal agreement. He later briefed myself and my EU colleagues at the General Affairs Article 50 Council. He gave his assessment which was and is that both sides need to work to de-dramatise the protocol and focus on agreeing the workable solutions that it offers at its core. He set out a number of technical suggestions aimed at explaining the nature, location and modality of the controls needed in the event of the backstop being implemented. This would maintain the key principle of the backstop, to maintain the Border as it is today - invisible - and facilitating frictionless cross-Border trade - while also minimising the technical controls needed to protect the EU's Single Market. Ireland fully supports this approach and we have consistently said so.

From the outset of these negotiations, the Government has been clear and consistent in our position that a Border between Ireland and Northern Ireland must be avoided under any circumstances. While our preference would be to see these issues resolved through the future relationship, the backstop must be legally operable and, in the event that it is triggered, it must be in place unless and until another solution is found. It cannot be temporary. The UK has provided guarantees on avoiding a hard border and it was repeated again by Prime Minister May last Friday. The UK is committed to a backstop. Prime Minister May's indication that the UK will now bring forward proposals is welcome. A legally operable backstop which avoids a hard border and protects the integrity of the Single Market is essential for agreeing the withdrawal agreement so as to provide the certainty that no matter what the outcome of the negotiations on the future relationship, there will be no hard border on the island of Ireland. This is of critical importance. The invisible border is the most tangible symbol of the peace process. It has allowed relationships and communities to be rebuilt following years of conflict. I do not have

to tell my colleagues here that it has allowed social, political and commercial relationships to thrive across Ireland, and this cannot be put at risk

It is important that we give communities in Northern Ireland and here in the South certainty that we will resolve this issue as part of the backstop agreement. This cannot be pushed into the negotiations on the future relationship, negotiations that will not begin in detail until after the UK leaves next March and which will not be concluded for at least another two years or more. The draft protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland also importantly addresses the commitment to protecting the Good Friday Agreement in all of its parts, on North-South co-operation and the rights provisions of the Agreement. North-South economic and social co-operation has benefited people across the island and supported the development of an all-island economy. That is something that has benefitted all parts of the community. Protecting these gains is not just about ensuring frictionless trade but also is about facilitating peoples' lives and livelihoods. Similarly the rights and citizenship provisions of the agreement are at the core of the peace process and must be protected. Fundamentally, the draft protocol works to support and protect the peace, reconciliation and prosperity that have been achieved through the Good Friday Agreement. Mr. Barnier is well aware of this and of our position and has been strongly supportive of it throughout these negotiations and we believe he will continue to support us in this manner.

The existence of the common travel area, CTA, between Ireland and Britain also plays an important role in underpinning the Good Friday Agreement in respect of both North-South and east-west co-operation. It also of course facilitates respect for the citizenship provisions in the agreement. Recognition of the continuance of the CTA has been agreed as part of the Article 50 negotiations and it is addressed in the draft protocol. It is a longstanding reciprocal arrangement which predates our membership of the EU. It is valued on both islands and its continuation is a stated objective of both the Irish and UK Governments. The latter has publicly reaffirmed this as recently as 13 September in a technical note. We will continue to move and reside freely in either jurisdiction. Detailed work is ongoing, both at home and bilaterally between Ireland and the UK to ensure that, irrespective of the outcome, all necessary provisions are made in order that there is no reason to expect that a no-deal Brexit - we are working to prevent that - would affect our common travel area at all.

On contingency planning, Brexit will bring real changes for Ireland. We stand to be one of the most affected member states. A total of 15% of Irish exports go to the UK and 11% of our imports come from the UK. Any change to our trading relationship will have an impact on our economy and our businesses. The nature of this will depend on the outcome of the negotiations. We know, however, that any kind of an outcome will entail change and so we are planning accordingly. We believe we have been responsible and measured in this approach. Our contingency and preparedness planning for Brexit has intensified in recent months and is well advanced at this stage. It provides a baseline scenario for the impact of Brexit across all sectors. This includes contingency planning for a no-deal or a worst-case scenario to make sure Ireland is ready. Co-ordination of the whole-of-Government response has been taken forward through the cross-departmental co-ordination structures chaired by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as well as work at home, to help us engage actively with the European Commission's Article 50, or Brexit, task force and its Brexit preparedness unit on areas where the lead policy role lies within the EU.

In respect of contingency planning for a no-deal outcome, last July the Government approved a number of Brexit preparedness measures. This built on the extensive work that has been under way for some time. Last week, the Cabinet approved the latest phase of this pre-

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paredness planning regarding staffing. This included sanction for the first phase of recruitment for up to 1,000 customs and veterinary officers for our ports and airports to deal with the east-west implications. Ministers and their Departments have identified as an early priority work in their respective Departments and this is well advanced. We have focused on the immediate economic, regulatory and operational challenges which could result from such an outcome. It assumes that trading relationships would be based on default World Trade Organization, WTO, rules but we also examine the possible effects on many other areas of concern. Relevant Departments are now working on the roll-out of detailed action plans. This is with a view to advancing, as appropriate, the mitigating measures which they have identified in the areas of their responsibility from the planning to the implementation phase. All of this work is in addition to measures which have already been put in place to get Ireland ready for Brexit.

I will finish up quickly. In dedicated measures we have a €300 million Brexit loan scheme and a €25 million Brexit response loan scheme. I refer also to our capital expenditure of €116 billion under the Project Ireland 2040 plan and we are also providing funding for new diplomatic missions to expand Ireland's global footprint, in line with our trade strategy. We have State agencies working with companies to help them get ready for Brexit. This is now being intensifying with the "Getting Ireland Brexit Ready" campaign which was launched last week by the Tánaiste, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister, Deputy Creed. This is a whole-of-Government communications effort, using online resources and outreach activities to build public awareness of the implications in areas such as goods and services, travel and so on, as well as the practical steps that can be taken to prepare in each case. All of this is to try to build further awareness and to help the various sectoral audiences on the steps that are being taken by the Government, but also to assist them in being prepared.

We did not ask for Brexit. While we respect the democratic will of the British people, we regret the UK's decision to leave. Our priorities remain to ensure that the terms of the departure respect the legacy of the hard-earned peace in Northern Ireland and in taking measures to minimise the impact of Brexit on citizens at home. The challenges I have described today are considerable but we are fully committed to meeting them. We are thankful for the support and advice received from all sides of the House on this issue. We will continue to keep them updated and fully informed of these developments. These issues are far-reaching and have implications for all of us.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: In fairness, the Minister of State read as fast as she could. The next few weeks in the Brexit negotiations are critical. Our citizens, business community, farmers and Members in this House are genuinely concerned that we are not in a better place at this late stage in negotiations. We were supposed to have a withdrawal treaty finalised by 18 October and the backstop issue resolved in order that we could assure the Irish people that there will be no border on this island. Recent events have left a nervous feeling across the board and time is not on our side. We are continuously told about what has been agreed to date but there has been very little movement in recent months. The key issues for Ireland remain unresolved and we appear to be at a stalemate. We need to focus now and do everything we can from an Irish Government perspective to ensure that a deal is reached. The alternative scenario where there is a no-deal Brexit would be catastrophic for Ireland. It is essential at this juncture that calm prevails. The UK leaving the EU without an agreement is not in the interests of any party; it would cause economic harm to all concerned, particularly to Ireland. I assume that we are still working to the 18 October deadline. The Tánaiste said the Irish issues should be resolved by that date, but it seems deadlines in this Brexit process are merely something to be casually stepped

over before we move on to the next so-called deadline, which now appears to be November.

It would be most helpful if the Minister of State could outline to this House, in a serious manner, exactly where we are in these negotiations. What does she expect will be achieved by the October meeting, if anything? What is happening with the Irish backstop? Are the Minister of State and the officials from her Department actually working on this? Are negotiations going on behind the scenes with British officials, or are we simply leaving it to Mrs. Theresa May and her government to solve this issue on its own? I would suggest that is a very risky strategy for Ireland.

Negotiations are at an extremely delicate stage, and I understand that Mr. Michel Barnier is attempting to “de-dramatise” the backstop. That is the buzz-phrase at the moment. The megaphone diplomacy and celebratory tone employed by the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach in the aftermath of the December agreement was a misstep, as I have said on a number of occasions. The comments were ill-judged and premature, and we have been paying for them ever since. “We are where we are” is the phrase used, but it is ten months since we were told that a backstop was agreed, and it is still not agreed. Understandably, all communities in the North and citizens living along the Border are losing faith in the Government’s ability to deliver on backstop to ensure we do not have a border on this island, hard or soft. We are sailing dangerously close to the wind by allowing this issue to remain unresolved as we move towards the final stages of the negotiations. This undoubtedly weakens our position; even if the Minister of State says it does not. I believe it does. The impression was given at our last stakeholder meeting that something was happening on the backstop behind the scenes and that we were more or less there, but in Salzburg that seemed to evaporate in a matter of minutes, with Theresa May saying she did not think the UK would have anything on the backstop by the October meeting. When we, as Opposition spokespersons, attend these meetings we do so in good faith so we can engage with the Tánaiste and the Minister of State, ask questions and get a serious update. However, this side of the House does not feel properly informed or briefed by the Government, and there is little information from those meetings that I cannot read in *The Irish Times*. It is often said that the Government wants and needs the support of the Opposition, but I think it has been given a fair degree of latitude in that respect. That latitude must be reciprocated by the Government’s side, by informing this House what exactly it is doing and where we are with these negotiations. If people are kept in the dark they will inevitably fill in the blanks themselves.

As the Minister of State said, Ireland is the most vulnerable member state in these negotiations. Without a doubt, we stand to be most affected by Brexit, regardless of the type of Brexit that emerges. With in the region of €1 billion of trade weekly between Ireland and the UK, it is by far our largest market and trading partner, and I think some in the Government need to be reminded of this. More than 50% of our beef, more than 70% of our dairy and more than 70% of our timber products go to the UK. These are among a number of sectors that stand to be seriously impacted by Brexit. Even before we deal with additional tariffs - if they apply when the UK becomes a third country - there are the expected delays with new customs procedures and delays at the ports in Dublin, Dover and Calais, all of which impact on the cost of trade. One can image the impact of a delay of two days in the transit of produce if that produce is perishable, for example, mushrooms or cheese. All of a sudden the delivery of those products is called into question. The immediate impact of a no deal or bad deal Brexit would be the fluctuation in currency between the pound and the euro, which we saw when the referendum took place. This can severely impact cashflow overnight. We have to bear all of this in mind when we sit at the Brexit negotiating table.

25 September 2018

I want to acknowledge the fantastic work being done by Enterprise Ireland, which I met with earlier today, in helping Irish companies to prepare for Brexit and to diversify their markets. It is welcome to see that exports to the UK as a percentage of total exports have fallen over the last ten years. We are gradually reducing our dependence on that market, but we will always need and want to trade with our closest neighbour. A good working relationship and the ability to trade as freely as possible with the UK post-Brexit is absolutely essential. Another area of great concern is haulage and the delivery of goods to and from this country. The Irish Haulage Association has outlined its concerns that around 70% of its drivers are from eastern Europe. They are driving Irish trucks, but they will not be covered by the common travel area. Will these workers, who are driving Irish trucks and helping to stock the shelves in our supermarkets and pharmacies across Ireland, need special work permits? What work has been done behind the scenes to deal with that particular issue? In fairness, the issue has been highlighted at length.

In terms of our domestic preparedness, which the Minister of State touched on in her speech, it might surprise her to know that my party submitted a number of freedom of information, FOI, requests to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to try to get some information on the preparations for a no deal or hard Brexit which have been carried out, and about the hiring of inspectors. Those FOI requests were refused. We appealed the refusal, and it was refused again. What kind of approach is that to take? If we are all working together on the same team and the Government wants the support of the Opposition parties, and it is preparing for all eventualities, surely it would want us to know about it. Perhaps the Minister of State can look into that matter and consider whether those records can be released to my party.

The Dutch Government announced at the start of the year that it would hire 750 new customs officers. It completed the hiring of 1,000 new customs officers in early July and is now training those people. We are in the process of hiring around 400 customs officers. Ireland and the Netherlands have similar levels of trade with UK. This is one area where we can do better to prepare. We should be better prepared because Brexit will affect Ireland more than any other member state.

I want to touch on what happened in Salzburg last week. The informal summit revealed that there is still a substantial chasm between the EU and UK negotiation teams, and it was a pity that the summit was used to provoke rather than persuade. It was most regrettable that the whole affair went so badly; it set the negotiations back. It was an informal summit and nobody was expecting a major breakthrough or for Brexit to be solved in its entirety, but equally we were not expecting it to descend into such bitterness. The optics of that summit were not good for Ireland. Our Taoiseach was seen across media in Ireland and the UK strolling side by side with the French President, who gave a considerable kick to Theresa May at that summit. The British Prime Minister, rightly or wrongly, went home feeling as though she had been ambushed, and the British media loudly declared that she had been humiliated by the EU 27 the next day.

In fairness to the Tánaiste, Deputy Coveney, he appeared on the BBC that night in what I believe was a damage limitation exercise. He did quite a good interview, and reminded the British people and the UK Government that we are still neighbours and that we still want to trade and work with them, and that we very much want them to make a deal. That was the correct thing to do, and necessary considering the events in Salzburg that day.

Britain needs our help. It is one thing to enjoy beating England at soccer or other sporting events, but at the end of the day, a triumphalist approach is not going to serve our interests ei-

ther. If the UK crashes out, it will be extremely bad for us, to put it mildly. We need the UK to get a deal. We should be using our influence at that negotiating table to ensure there is a good deal for Ireland, the UK and the EU as a whole.

We need serious focus now on getting a deal delivered for our citizens, North and South, and for citizens across the EU. We need less spinning from Government, less focus on PR and more focus on getting the job done. Not every meeting has to be tweeted or the stage set for every engagement. The Government should be aware of the optics, because they matter; we do not necessarily have to damage relationships between ourselves and the UK. It is extremely important that the relationship, which is under pressure, is worked on. Every Minister in government should be meeting regularly with his or her counterpart in the UK. We need to see some concrete proposals as to what exactly that future engagement is going to look like post-Brexit, and what type of mechanism or system will be in place to ensure we have regular contact with our counterparts across the water.

Brexit was not of our making or of our choosing, and the main focus now must be on protecting Ireland's interests and reaching agreement on the terms of the withdrawal arrangement. We must also reach agreement on the backstop to ensure there is no hard border on this island, which would run contrary to the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process. Cool, calm heads are required. I hope that the Salzburg summit focused minds and provided time for reflection. Both sides must now come to the table to ensure that the most vulnerable in our societies are protected. While nobody wants to see a no deal, crash out Brexit, it is possible, and we may sleepwalk into it if we do not act with a renewed focus in order to get that deal done.

Deputy David Cullinane: We are approaching the end game. In order to judge this Government on what it has achieved we have to go back to almost the start of the process. At the start of the process, this Government and the European Union promised that the Irish issues would be resolved before moving on from phase one of the negotiations. There were a number of elements in that phase, including the divorce agreement and issues around trade, but the Irish issue was crucial. There was a fudge, of course. We moved on from phase one into phase two and the Irish issues have been fudged ever since. We had a political agreement last December that was hailed as a cast-iron guarantee by the Taoiseach and oversold by the Government at the time. We cautioned it not to do so. We were then told we would have a legal text by March. March came and went and there was no legal text. We had a legal text from the European Union. The EU put its position on the table; it was rejected out of hand by the British Government. June was to be the new deadline. June came and went and still no agreement emerged. We were told that October would be the new deadline. Now it seems October will come and go, and we still will not have agreement.

I am a bit perplexed by the Fianna Fáil position. That party seems to want to wrap Prime Minister Theresa May up in cotton wool. It says that if only we were nicer to Theresa May we might have got a better outcome. That is a very naive position. The reality is that this Tory Government forced Brexit on the Irish people. It is the same Tory Government that is ignoring the will of the people in the North who voted to stay in the European Union. It is the same Tory Government that has created chaos around Brexit. It has no plan and no strategy. It did not care one jot about the Irish people before the referendum, during the referendum or, as we have seen, after the referendum. That has been the sad reality of the British Tory Party. It is divided, but it is divided as to its own interests. A war within the Tory Party is being played out and it is having devastating consequences for the Irish people. I am not in any mood to give any protections to a British Prime Minister who has failed in her obligations and her responsibility to come up

with the proposals that she needs to come up with.

There are so many contradictions in this that it is hard to make sense of it and understand what is happening. A British Prime Minister has promised there will be no hard border on the island of Ireland to protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts and to protect citizens' rights. She also says that she does not want a border in the Irish Sea or to divide her country. She is talking about the United Kingdom; I will not go into the irony there. However, in the same breath she says that she will take the North out of the customs union and Single Market. That is going to happen. How can we avoid a border on the island of Ireland and a border in the Irish Sea if Britain and the North leave the customs union and the Single Market? It simply cannot happen and everybody knows it. We have had this fantasy politics, this absolute nonsense from the Tory Party for far too long. At some point the British Government is going to have to put its solutions on the table. It is going to have to explain to people how it will square that circle, having told the Irish people it can avoid a hardening of the Border, protect the Good Friday Agreement and avoid a border in the sea.

What we know is that we had an agreement last December. As a political agreement, it certainly ticked a lot of boxes, with the North staying in the customs union and elements of the Single Market. It was not ideal. It was imperfect and needed to be built on, shaped, nurtured and negotiated in detail to give us a product we could see as a solution for Ireland. It was also meant to be a permanent solution in the event that something better did not come along. That was what the backstop was meant to be.

There are two sets of negotiations. There is the negotiation on the withdrawal agreement, which has to be in place by March. The backstop has to be attached to that. Further to that there is the separate future trading relationship, which will work itself out as part of the implementation period which will be in place for a year. However, the backstop was meant to mean that whatever happened in the future trading relationship talks, at the very least Ireland would have this guarantee. Not for a week, a month or a year; it was to be a permanent solution.

However, this is an evolving situation. The British Government now wants to make that a temporary solution. It obviously wants to keep the DUP on board. It wants whatever is in play for the North to apply to Britain as a whole, but it obviously does not want to be in the position of saying that the North and Britain will stay in the customs union and the Single Market. These games are being played out. There are all sorts of nuances and considerations. I accept that the British Prime Minister has a difficult job in managing her party and bringing some of the hard Brexiteers with her. That is fine, but she has had an awfully long time to do it. We are now coming to the crunch and when we come to the crunch we will need to see product and solutions, but we still have not seen them.

I was always on the optimistic side of this issue. I always believed that we would get a deal. I am still on the optimistic side because we need one. If there is no withdrawal agreement then there is no protocol for Ireland. There is no backstop. If there is no withdrawal agreement the United Kingdom, including the North, will crash out of the European Union. That means a hard border. It means real challenges to the Good Friday Agreement. A no-deal scenario is an absolute disaster for the people of Ireland. I would argue that it is also an absolute disaster for the people of Britain and the European Union. For that reason, logic would say that there has to be a deal. However, we have seen logic thrown out the window so many times on Brexit that it is hard to know. I still believe that there will be some arrangement.

Our fear is that at the eleventh hour something will be put on the table that will be less than what we were promised in December. It might be a time-limited backstop, or one that does not have the provisions we want to protect against a hard border or protect the Good Friday Agreement. The Irish Government will be bounced because neither the British Government nor the European Union will move, and we will end up in a difficult situation. That is what we are trying to avoid. That is why all of this was to be tied up last March, and then in June, and now in October. It is a real worry that all of these dates are coming and going.

We never sought, as some Ministers have said, to make this an orange or green issue. Our position is very clear. The voters in the North must be respected. They voted to stay in the European Union. We are seeking special status for the North so that it can stay in the European Union. We want a deal. We are not planning for a no-deal scenario. Obviously, if it happens, we must have contingency plans but we are not hoping for it. We do not want it. We want a deal. We want a solution because the lack of one will have such a devastating impact on the people we represent on either side of the Border.

If the British Government continues with its strategy of not considering Ireland and not putting solutions in place and if we get to a point in March where there the UK crashes out of the European Union, then from the point of view of everyone who believes in Irish unity or believes that the island of Ireland should stay as a unit in the European Union, it is reasonable to think there should be a Border poll. I do not think that is an unfair proposition. It would be a very fair one. All the opinion polls are showing that in the event of a no-deal scenario, a hard Brexit and a crash more people in the North, including some unionists, will support a united Ireland. I wish to put that on the table.

We have taken some flak for supporting the Government on this, but we never saw it as supporting the Government. We see it as supporting an Irish position. We see it as supporting an Irish outcome and getting the best deal for the people who we all collectively represent, the people of Ireland, North and South. That is our absolute priority. However, the Minister must understand our perspective. There are shifting deadlines, divisions in the Tory Party and contradictory statements coming from Theresa May. Only last week after the Salzburg statement she reiterated that there will be no solution that creates a border in the Irish Sea, as if that is what the people of Ireland are looking for. It is as if we are all jumping up and down, demanding a border in the Irish sea. The only people who will put a border in the Irish Sea are in the British Government. It is not an objective of the Irish Government, the European Union or Sinn Féin. The way to avoid a border in the Irish Sea is for Britain as a whole, not just the North, to stay in the customs union and elements of the Single Market, or for some sort of free trade agreement to be worked out. Such an agreement is being called a “customs arrangement”. There are solutions and there are possibilities. The problem is that we are arriving at the eleventh hour and we have not seen them. That is not a good position for us to be in at this point in time.

Deputy Joan Burton: Approximately a week ago, the UK Labour Party’s spokesperson on Brexit, Mr. Keir Starmer, MP, addressed an all-party meeting in the Oireachtas. He quoted part of what he wrote in an article in *The Irish Times* in which he stated:

More of the same simply will not do.

We need a fresh approach, one that recognises it is only through a combination of a new customs union, a strong single market deal and shared institutions that we find a solution that works for Ireland, the UK and across the EU.

Very few of us would disagree if that were to be the outcome but, to be honest, it is typical of the type of magical thinking that is going on. When we spoke to Mr. Starmer about it, he said that in effect the day after, or some period after, Britain has left, it would immediately sit down with the 27 member states, individually or collectively and collectively would be the desire, to hammer out a deal to provide for the customs union and the Single Market. The magical thinking is that this is what Britain has at present through its membership of the European Union. It found that in a referendum the people said they wanted to leave the Union. In recent days, we have had a lot of evidence that the campaign by various British newspapers for a second referendum to support remaining in the EU has gathered pace. At the British Labour Party conference, a significant proportion of delegates appear to favour this. There certainly has been political movement in the UK as the perception begins to dawn on what it might mean, with some scary scenarios being painted even by Tory-supporting tabloid newspapers that it could mean miles of queues to the ports on the English Channel, a shortage of medicines, which are imported and exported through various countries in the Union, and other impacts.

The fact is that members of the Government have come home from Salzburg with hope in their hearts but their hands are empty. Being involved in a negotiation is a drawn-out process. One does not get the answers all at once. The EU has well-established customs and practices, which mean that as we near the witching hour of having to make a decision, the Heads of State are in the room, and the other Heads of State gather recalcitrant members around to persuade them that in the greater good they have to act in a particular way. Herein lies a genuine problem for Ireland and an enormous problem for the Government. Everybody is apprehensive about any rebuilding or reincarnation of the Border as we knew it. Anything such as this would be very difficult for people in Ireland to swallow and would also put in danger the huge dividends, difficult and all as the earning of those have been, of the Belfast Agreement and the peace process.

Earlier in the summer, and other people in the Chamber may have seen it also, I went to see the film “Munich”, which is based on Robert Harris’s novel about 1938. In it, Chamberlain brought back what was described as “peace in our time”. Clearly, the Taoiseach is trying to bring back a Brexit agreement in our time. As was said about Czechoslovakia and the Sudetenland Germans at the time, it was a faraway country about which people knew little. For many people in Vienna or Berlin, those places feel like the centre of Europe, and geographically they are. Naturally, we in Ireland are the centre of our own world but we have to ask ourselves what exactly is the view of the 27 member states. Excellent diplomatic work has been done to keep the 27 member states together and to negotiate under Mr. Barnier’s direction as a single force but the Government cannot deny that at this point in time, we should have the shape of an agreement. The Taoiseach arrived back in a way that is a reminder of that period in European history, with papers in his hands stating he had a bullet-proof backstop. This part of the conversation has to be about exploring what exactly that now means. The answer, hopefully, is that it could mean an awful lot but, in a negative outturn, it could mean extraordinary difficulties for us.

The meeting last week was attended by many people from the Border counties and several from the North of Ireland. Anybody who knows the Border knows its complexity and its extreme porousness, with hundreds of formal and informal crossings, and knows that just occasionally having a friendly customs official ten miles south or north of Dundalk is not a runner. I plead with the Minister of State to share with us the Government’s concept of what this would look like. The Revenue Commissioners have told us they are ready to take on the required staff. Is there a partial IT-based solution? Of course there would be over a period of three to

five years but the IT has to be developed. Logistics in Ireland are not as developed as they are in many other countries because we are at the end of a long run. If the discussion here is to be of any use, the Minister of State needs to share with us how she and the Government propose to address the issue of the Border.

We must bear in mind that both communities in the North recognise they benefit enormously from the effective disappearance of the Border as it once was, and this is often forgotten. Except for those who take a political view, most people North of the Border, and certainly people in the unionist camp whom I have met, would like the Border to continue as it now. Ports and airports are the easiest way to do this and, of course, ports and airports have an accepted customs and police presence. Will the Minister of State paint a picture of what she anticipates happening? Going back to Keir Starmer's simple and honest remarks about a new customs union, a strong Single Market and shared institutions, the issue for us is how we get these. In a certain sense, a two-year extension which, like everybody else, I assume would work for the full two years, would give us additional time but, nonetheless, we need a legal agreement. Britain has voted. The first day after the result of the referendum I said I would love the British people to have an opportunity to reconsider their position, as we did on several occasions.

There are many ultra-left people in Ireland who do not like the European Union but the Union has been one of the great modernising forces in Ireland in terms of employment, women's rights, disability rights and environmental concerns. I will close by again saying that I am not getting what the Government's suggested solution is to this difficulty. The Minister of State must share her confidence with the House.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I will be sharing time with Deputy Mick-----

Deputy David Cullinane: Barry.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I apologise. It is just as well I am not on the European Union negotiation team. Deputy Burton finished on a point I want to raise. There are two types of Europe and for most ordinary people, the discussion of backstops, a hard border and borders in the sea is quite confusing. Most ordinary people probably think listening to such discussion is like watching paint drying.

Deputy Joan Burton: It was discussed on "Love Island".

Deputy Bríd Smith: Most ordinary people see Europe as positive. It is the Europe that supposedly came together after the Second World War to ensure peace and an end to war, and to ensure that France or Germany would never again create war at the cost of millions of lives. It was to ensure that fascism and authoritarianism would never again take root. They want a Europe that sets standards for the environment, women, workers and measures that could act as a balance to the free market drives across Europe while delivering fairness. It is a Europe that is synonymous with Beethoven's composition, "Ode to Joy". When most people react positively to Europe, it is to that idea of Europe, which is the concept of a commonality cutting across barriers of nationality, removing distinction and giving people the right to travel freely across borders. It is typified in something as simple as the common currency. This idea of Europe - a progressive, liberal and pro-worker Europe - is one I argue is and has always been more of a myth than reality.

If we saw rules and regulations in the past that changed and removed barriers for people or

set standards that were good, it is worth understanding that this was not the purpose of the regulation or the change but rather it was often a by-product of the real aim of the European Union. The Common Market was not necessarily a progressive liberal goal but rather the goal of big business and a corporate Europe that in the 1980s feared the demise of profits and business. It saw that only by pooling markets together could the entities survive and compete in international business and a globalised economy, with one big market able to face up to the United States, Japan or China. That is the motivational force behind European unity, which is, above all, unity of big business and the European round table of industrialists that remains the single most influential force in lobbying Europe and its Commission. With other business groups, it remains the guiding force behind the regulation and rules that govern Europe today.

This European round table has the biggest and most profitable companies, including the chief executives of Volvo, Philips, Nestlé, Nokia, BAE Systems and Airbus. Europe is made and shaped in their interests and not on the instincts or in the interests of ordinary citizens of Europe. If we get the right to travel without borders and with a single currency, it is only because it serves the interests of those businesses and not for any lofty ideals of commonality. It is they who set the benchmark for every policy and goal of competitiveness, fiscal restraint, etc., in what the State can spend. It is why when we debate closures of post offices in Ireland and cuts to bus and health services, as well as the outsourcing of health, it is often the European rules that demand we tender out those services and allow private multinationals to win the awards.

The Europe formed after the Second World War was supposed to be a response to militarism but it has now become one of the leading sources of arms and military hardware across the world. It is a Europe of permanent structured co-operation, PESCO, and military units that can be deployed across the globe for so-called humanitarian missions when in reality it is there to ensure and continue to defend the reach and scope of the interests of former colonial powers. This is a Europe of 30,000 paid lobbyists, the majority of whom are corporate and big business lobbyists who help influence the rules on which the European Parliament votes.

The real Europe is that of the savagery inflicted on the Greek people. The real Europe is that of the savagery inflicted on the Irish people by shoving a bailout of €64 billion of toxic debt from French and German banks down our throats. Despite the catastrophe of the financial crash and the crisis leading from it, that same Europe has not learned its lessons. We want to see a Europe that will never again witness fascism or war but instead we are getting the opposite. We are seeing the rise of fascism across Europe, with fascists knocking on the doors of parliaments and a real confusion about what sort of world in which we want to live.

For us and our Brexit negotiations, the bottom line is there should be no hard border in this country. Therefore, there should be no co-operation with a hard border; for example, there should be no employment of customs officials or gardaí, etc., and we should totally resist the implementation of that hard border in Ireland. It is not the interests of Brussels or London but those of ordinary people across Europe and in Ireland that should come first. The Government should reflect that.

Deputy Mick Barry: One week ago Mrs. Theresa May, the British Prime Minister, arrived in Salzburg with a hardline message for her European Union counterparts. She was sent home with an equally hardline message from the other 27 leaders. Agreement on the terms of a Brexit now seem as far away as ever. Understandably, many in Ireland are fearful of the consequences of Brexit, the possibility of a hard border and the rise of sectarian tensions that may result. They are fearful that the burden of a Tory Brexit may be placed on the shoulders of working people

in the form of job losses, wage cuts, etc.

To understand the meaning of recent events, it is necessary to restate certain truths. The EU is an institution designed to smooth co-operation between Europe's various capitalist and corporate elite in the interests of those elite. It has introduced a series of fiscal rules that write neoliberal policies into law, promote widespread privatisation and engineer a race to the bottom in terms of worker rights and conditions. For example, these rules seriously restrict the ability of the State to address an unprecedented housing crisis without breaking those rules.

The cheerleaders for the European Union, including many in this Chamber, trumpet the supposed benefits of the EU but the impoverished pensioners of Greece know the reality. The railway workers of Britain who have resisted EU-mandated attacks on their terms and conditions and have been to the fore in making a left case for Brexit know this. The Brexit negotiations represent a clash of interests between the rival capitalist elite. There is nobody at the negotiations representing the interests of ordinary working people. That includes the representatives of the Irish Government, including Fine Gael Ministers who have helped rigged the economy against working people and taken no effective action against the housing crisis. Nevertheless, they pose as the people's champions on the international stage.

The organised working class movement must take an independent stance on Brexit. First and foremost, the trade unions must firmly resolve that working people will not be made the whipping boys and girls. There must be strong resistance organised to any threat of redundancies or pay cuts. The working class movement must stand for a completely different type of Europe, a socialist Europe that serves the needs of the many rather than the greed of the few. Precisely because we fight for the rights of all working people, we oppose any hardening of the Border between North and South and the introduction of any infrastructure that impedes freedom of movement. We also oppose any restrictions being brought in between the North and Britain. Both Catholic and Protestant working class people in the North are at one with ordinary people in this State in opposing any hardening of the Border and we stand with them.

In 2017, Mr. Jeremy Corbyn won major support at the polls for left policies, including the ending of tuition fees, the building of 500,000 council homes and the nationalisation of energy, rail and mail, as well as the creation of a state investment bank. Not a single one of these policies could be implemented within the framework of a Single Market or capitalism. There is now a real possibility of Mrs. May's Government collapsing and a general election in the UK this autumn. The Socialist Party and Solidarity would welcome this and the return of a Corbyn-led Labour Government. If Mr. Corbyn forms a Government in the coming months and implements his programme, it would echo right across Europe. It would raise the sights of people that instead of a choice between an anti-democratic, austerity driven EU and a bargain basement Tory exit, a struggle for a socialist Europe could be posed. It could give an impetus to the building of new parties of the working class across Europe as well as the need for working people across Europe to stand together and take joint action against the attacks of big business and its representatives.

It could pose the election of left, socialist governments as part of a struggle for a new, socialist Europe, with working people united in opposition to the big business elites that play with our futures.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: I am sharing time with Deputies Jackie Cahill and Robert Troy.

25 September 2018

The clock is ticking. There are 185 days to go. I am tinged with a certain sadness at the prospect of any reintroduction of a Border, either hard or soft, when it has, for all intents and purposes, been removed. That tinge of sadness also creates a certain madness at the futility of two islands on the periphery of Europe harming each other's economies and people. I have said in this House on a number of occasions that I am old enough to have seen how my county and the Border region fared before the EU. I am also old enough to have seen the benefits of joining the European Union both north and south of the Border. I am old enough to remember when we did have some peace before 1969 and the benefits that accrued from the Good Friday Agreement.

I have also been involved long enough in cross-Border and east-west participation as a public representative in this House to see the futility of putting those relationships that have been created, North-South and east-west, in jeopardy. I come from the smallest county in Ireland but it has had the greatest impact on issues of division and divisiveness. Three members of An Garda Síochána were assassinated in more recent times as part of that division and divisiveness. We all know that any vacuum creates a volatility and uncertainty in the Border region in trade and commerce and in our communities. Although some people describe it as scare-mongering we should be under no illusions. There is a possibility of a return to the bad old days. The extreme paramilitaries are watching closely and hoping for Brexit.

I have had discussions with senior members of An Garda Síochána, as has the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan. The Garda's intelligence shows that it is unprepared. It does not have the ability to man what I would describe as a sieve in the Border region.

The December agreement promised to ensure there would be no hard border, including any infrastructure or related checks and controls and, most importantly, to uphold the Belfast Agreement in all its parts. That agreement went on to outline the backstop arrangements that would allow full alignment between north and south in the future. The news has emerged in the past week that the EU is preparing to accept a frictionless Irish Border using technological solutions. That is alarming. That is maximum facilitation, *max fac*, and has already been rejected by the Government. A lot of businesses do not seem keen on this option because of the higher costs. Deputy Chambers alluded to the Irish Road Haulage Association which clearly described that a one-hour delay in the movement of a truck equates to a cost of €15 per tonne on that truck.

The Government needs to act now and come down hard on any change to December's agreement. While Michel Barnier has never wavered in his position of insisting on a backstop, the practicalities of any proposed technological solution need to be ironed out so that Border checks will be avoided. The Minister of State lives close enough to that Border and is all too aware of the issues. Let us not cod the people because, while they are fed up listening to the word Brexit, if it happens in the form that Theresa May wants, this country and the UK are in for a rude awakening.

Deputy Robert Troy: I want to raise a few points that are pertinent to the area of transport. There is concern among many in the sector that the Government is overly reliant on the fact that a hard Brexit is too big to happen. One hopes that a deal will be done by the 11th hour. A hard Brexit will ensure that trade is governed by the WTO and it will ensure the introduction of tariffs, customs and the reintroduction of administrative supports. I compliment the ports which have carried out the necessary infrastructural improvements to cater for a hard Brexit. Earlier this summer, the Government confirmed that it approved the recruitment process.

Is the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine prepared to carry out all inspections on live animals, foods and plants? I expect a reply to that question. How many posts have been filled as of today? How many posts have been advertised and when will they be filled?

Aviation is a critical sector for a small island nation. We currently have market access through the open skies policy. Earlier this year, Taskforce 50 of the European Commission announced a bare-bones contingency plan for fallout from the open skies policy. Has any flesh been put on the bare-bones contingency plans to avoid flight disruptions post March 2019? What is the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, doing to ensure the third and fourth freedoms codified by the International Civil Aviation Organisation, ICAO, will be invoked to ensure that, post March 2019, travel between the EU 27 and the UK will be maintained?

Safety regulation is sometimes not acknowledged or spoken about, but parts from many Irish aircraft currently come from the UK and they will not be valid if there is a hard Brexit. We need to ensure that there is mutual recognition between our safety standards. If there is not, the parts that keep our aircraft in the skies until the end of March 2019 will not be recognised after that. What work is being done to ensure that there is mutual recognition of safety standards?

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I will make a few points about the agrifood sector. Agriculture is under economic pressure and primary producers are finding it extremely hard to survive. A hard Brexit scenario sends a shiver up the spine. The predictions are that by 2030 if Britain chooses to join the European Economic Area after Brexit, Ireland will lose 15% of its exports to the UK. That number increases to 31% if it falls back on WTO rules.

The beef sector will probably be the hardest-hit sector. Some 35% of our trade will be lost if WTO rules apply. It is impossible to imagine that scenario. If WTO rules apply to the dairy sector, Ireland will lose 40% of its trade. The UK is obviously our nearest customer and we are greatly dependent on it. Think of our processing industry under a hard Brexit. Consider the level of cross-Border trade. Each week 1,500 milk lorries cross the Border to be processed here. There is talk of different food standards operating in Northern Ireland compared with the Twenty-six Counties under a hard Brexit. We must consider the practicalities of how that will work and the economic hardship that they will bring. We have discussed Brexit for some time but the harsh reality of the economic damage is really coming home. It is hard to envisage how the family farm structure as we know it will survive under a hard Brexit.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I now call on Members from the Rural Independent Group. Deputy Michael Collins will share his time with Deputies Michael Healy-Rae and Danny Healy-Rae.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important topic this evening. Brexit will have many implications for Ireland, some of which we can predict and others we cannot. One thing that is sure is that there will be many challenges ahead for Ireland and it is vital that during the Brexit negotiations we steer through these waters with a clear vision of what Brexit will mean to Ireland.

We need to pay particular attention to the agricultural sector. Ireland is greatly dependent on it and exports almost 70% of its agricultural produce to Britain. It is vital that during the Brexit negotiations our agricultural produce being exported to Britain is protected. Britain is a very serious market for Irish agriculture, especially for dairy and beef produce. For export markets

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we need to maintain strong competitive transport links with the rest of the EU in order to secure Ireland's economic future. Some two thirds of Irish exporters use the UK landbridge to access Europe. Brexit will have a huge effect on Ireland's ability to use this route for exports. We need to look now at negotiating transport routes. Coming from west Cork, I know only too well how important our ports are to us and to the export economy. My own constituency has ports such as Bantry Bay, Castletownbere and Kinsale, and their futures need to be secured. I plead with this Government to support these ports through the uncertain times ahead with Brexit on the horizon.

The Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, needs to be protected post-Brexit. We need to look at this and put provisions in place. Our fishermen have suffered very difficult times in recent years. It is vital that we protect their livelihoods. There is serious danger of greater numbers of European boats fishing in Irish waters after Brexit. We need to protect our waters and our fishermen.

The cross-border directive is very important for the people of Ireland. To date, we have sent 14 buses from Cork and Kerry to Belfast with people who have availed of cataract procedures through the cross-border directive. These people could have waited for anything up to five years if they could not have availed of this directive. During the negotiations, we must ensure that our cross-border directive is protected with Northern Ireland and Britain. This also includes agreement for cancer patients travelling from Donegal to Derry and small children travelling from Northern Ireland to Dublin for operations. There are many agreements that must be protected for the future.

Upset constituents have approached me. They fear for their uncertain futures and those of Irish citizens living in the UK. One case is of an Irish citizen living in the UK who married in Ireland almost ten years ago. They lived in Ireland for a year afterwards with their spouse and they now live in the UK. Their spouse is a non-EU citizen who had lived in Ireland for two years prior to their marriage - as well as one year afterwards - but because they had not lived three years' reasonable residence out of the last five years, they will not be able to obtain an Irish passport. This family is frightened that they could be split up as a result of Brexit. This needs to be addressed urgently. No Irish citizen living in the UK should have to live with this fear. We must also ensure that there will be freedom of movement between ourselves and our neighbours.

Our negotiations must also deal with what will happen to Irish students studying in UK colleges. Clearly Brexit will have a huge effect on Ireland and we now need to step up to the challenges that lie ahead for our country and put in place the provisions that will deal with these challenges.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is clear that this is a very delicate moment in the negotiations for the UK's withdrawal from the EU and we are right in the middle of it. It is no exaggeration to say that the two most important international relationships that Ireland has are with the EU and its members and with the United Kingdom. One is the primary partnership we have chosen for our future and the other is our closest neighbour that has picked a different future for itself.

Many British citizens have voted to leave the EU as they believe it will allow them to take better control of their futures. I am not going to comment on whether they are right or wrong but I will say that we in Ireland know that membership of international rule-based organisa-

tions is the best way to build international relationships and for countries to support each other. Maybe we know this to be true more quickly as a small country, that it is a big, complex and volatile world out there and I imagine it can be very cold on one's own. The support we have achieved from our European friends and partners in the negotiations has been unwavering.

The Border presents a paradox and serious challenge and solving it is still urgent. The issues being raised by the various solutions being proposed are core to many people's sense of identity. It looks as though emotions are heightened more than ever. It would be easy to get caught up in who is right or wrong and who said what but at this time we need to put all that aside and remain steadfast in our ambition to come to a good, fair agreement with the United Kingdom that mitigates as much as possible the inevitable damage that will come.

Sometimes it feels as though our fellow British parliamentarians do not fully understand the consequences of some of what they are suggesting for this island so it is important to keep talking and explaining. For example, Keir Starmer, MP, was in Dublin a couple of weeks ago, when he spoke to Members of these Houses and others. He appeared before the committee I chair and we had a very meaningful discussion, of which the Minister of State will be aware. I will not say that his speech today was based on those interactions, but it shows all of us why we must keep talking to one another.

As the competitors at last week's ploughing championships know, when one ploughs a field the most important thing to get right is the first furrow, and to get that straight. A ploughman tracks the wheels into the first furrow. If that first furrow is crooked, there is no fixing it. One could repeat the mistake for the whole field. To find a solution that works for the Border is the first furrow in the withdrawal agreement. I have always found the best thing to do is to pick a fence or tree at the end of the field and keep an eye on it all the way. Do not waver, do not look down or up, do not look left or right but keep going in a straight line.

We are in uncharted waters. On behalf of the joint committee, I remind the Minister of State that we fully support her in the work she has been doing. She has been very workpersonlike in appearing before the committee at all times. She has made herself available and I could not find any fault in how she is carrying out her role, and it is a difficult role at this time. I have said it on record before, and I would not say if it was otherwise, but it is no harm to recognise a person when they are committed to doing the best that they can do. We are all in this together. This debate tonight is important. We need to keep talking and keep the people on the other side of the water talking too, to try to make them understand the complications we face in dealing with the mess that they have made for us.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We are approaching the most crucial, critical time in the State's history in terms of how the people of Ireland will survive or manage if Brexit becomes a reality. I was the first person in this Chamber after the result of the referendum became known to ask the then Taoiseach and Tánaiste to plead with the UK to have another referendum. I am still asking for that and many people around the country hope that at the last minute, they will hold another referendum and that the result would be to remain.

For farmers, particularly in disadvantaged areas, Brexit becoming a reality will have a detrimental effect on so many. Some say that many will be wiped out and that farming as we know it in disadvantaged rural areas will be lost forever. Worry over Brexit has meant that the price of cattle has already fallen. The price of cattle is very bad. Business people are worried about changes in the value of sterling. People with small industries who export to the North of Ireland

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and the United Kingdom are already losing money because of the cost of sterling.

We are worried that the cross-border directive, which we use frequently to bring patients to the North to get cataracts removed from their eyes and thereby prevent them from losing their sight, will cease or will not work for us anymore when Brexit becomes a reality. Many people would have gone blind by this stage if we had not been able to take them to the North on buses over the last 12 or 18 months. The ability to avail of this directive has saved the eyesight of hundreds of people. Many people are going to the North for hip operations and various other procedures. They could not afford to do that, or attempt it at all, if they were not getting their money back under the cross-border directive.

I wonder how the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste got it so wrong before Christmas last year when they said there was going to be no hard Brexit. It is so serious. Mrs. May does not appear to know what she is doing. She is saying one thing one day and saying another thing another day. We will lose many markets to England if Brexit becomes a reality. We are all hoping for another referendum and a different result.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I welcome the opportunity to share some of my reflections on what is happening during the Brexit negotiations, which are so critical for our country, our neighbours and our European Union. Like most of my colleagues in this House, I have spent two years looking at this inside out and upside down. We are no wiser about what will happen in the next six months than we were a year or two years ago. Who would have thought we would be living in a world in which we would hear a speech like that given by the US President today? I am in a state of flabbergast at some of the sentiments that were expressed in his speech. Similarly, who would have thought that the UK political system would be in such a fractured state? It is not just fractured. I was thinking today that if we end up with a simple choice between the Tories going for some kind of Canada-plus deal and the UK Labour Party going for some kind of Norway-plus deal, we could see what side will win. While that is the usual fracture in any political system, we need to look at the fracturing within both parties.

I understand that Prime Minister May today ruled out a Canadian-type trade deal arrangement on the basis that it would inevitably lead to the fracturing of their Union and the introduction of borders in the Irish Sea. It is hard to understand why she is adopting that as her firmest and most trenchant position, given that on 5 December 2017 her Government was willing to sign off on an initial deal which would have provided for exactly that, as previous speakers have said. One wonders whether some of the UK negotiating position is now informed by a desire to use the Irish issue as leverage to try to get some sort of favourable “have your cake and eat it” terms whereby the UK benefits from some of the same flexibilities that the EU has rightly said it will extend to Ireland and - equally rightly - has said it will not extend to the UK. That is only one path or possibility, but others can be followed. I understand the UK Treasury intends to present a paper on Friday of this week which will outline how the costs of certain options favoured by Brexiteers could lead to a fall of 5% or 10% in the gross domestic product, GDP, of the UK, which would be the equivalent of the crash we have just been through. We know what effect that would have on society and on the political system. It is hard to imagine that any political system would inflict such a shock on its own country and economy.

Similarly, one gets a sense that the UK Labour Party is getting accustomed to the idea that the UK might stay within the Single Market or try to stay within the customs union. When one drills down on that, one has to reflect on how those pursuing this option would answer the critics within the UK Labour Party and the Tory Party who would argue that it would involve

the UK leaving the EU but becoming a rule-taker. How would they get that through their own party? If those within the UK Labour Party who are asking to be trusted on the basis that the key thing is to get into government do not have an answer to that question, we are left again in a state of uncertainty.

I think we are in a difficult position. I think Ireland and the EU have been taking the correct diplomatic approach, by and large. This is a time to be united and strong, as the Union has been, and to maintain adherence to the treaties and to our code of law, which is what Michel Barnier is doing in protecting the four freedoms. I know there are always circumstances in which those rules are seen to be moved, if the Union really has to move them. I think the Union has taken the correct approach, by and large, in this instance and the Government and the Dáil have followed suit. I would like to make one criticism, however. I think that in some of our tone and some of our diplomatic language and positioning, we are at risk of unnecessarily creating a division with our neighbours to the east and to the north which we may come to rue.

I will give an example of why I say that. I was at an interesting conference during the week. It dealt with our energy future and where we are going. Anyone who knows anything about our low-carbon energy future knows that we have to move to a huge extent towards the electrification of our transport and heating systems. The power grid is critical in that context. This is at the heart of the new industrial revolution, not just for the energy sector but also for aspects of the digital sector like data centres and other infrastructure. According to the best grid engineers at the conference in question, which was held in the middle of the week, we have to make sure we maintain an all-island approach. They pointed out that we are going to have to run a synchronised system with huge quantities of renewable power on it and argued that it will be incredibly expensive to do this as part of a Twenty-six-County approach. I know there are differing opinions on the issue of North-South interconnection. I strongly adhere to the need for such a connection because my analysis of where we will need to go on energy, which is the critical industrial revolution of our times, and on the digital services that come with it, is that we need to adopt an all-island approach. Regardless of the dealings that are eventually worked out, it would be a terrible failing for us to end up having to reintroduce the previous system on the island of Ireland. It would not be a border in the sense that it would not involve checkpoints. It would not be political in the sense that it would be on wires. If we do not end up with an all-island energy market and co-operative all-island arrangements with regard to energy, it will be one of the tragedies of this whole process. I am not just talking about the North because the scale of the energy transition we need, and the balancing capability we need, will also require an east-west connection with the UK and on into the rest of Europe.

That is my vision of some of the critical things in this context. They might be slightly policy-wonkish, but they actually matter. That is why I was critical of the Tánaiste when I heard him say on Saturday that he has not spoken to Arlene Foster in months. Regardless of what we think of her actions with regard to the renewable heating incentive and the failure to re-establish the Northern Ireland Assembly, it is in our interests to maintain relations with her. It is a concern that we are not talking to the DUP at this time, not just because there are practical issues to be discussed but also because regardless of what comes next, there will be a need to maintain personal relations in a way that reduces some of the concerns the DUP will have. It seems inevitable in my mind that we will go towards some sort of border in the Irish Sea. I know the Taoiseach said last week that we should not describe it as “a border in the Irish Sea”, but the first premise I would come to is that we are not going to go along with borders between counties Monaghan and Tyrone, counties Cavan and Fermanagh or counties Donegal and Derry. We are

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going to have to be careful in negotiations. Maybe some people in the United Kingdom might decide to be really clever by forcing the European Union to impose such a border, or force an Irish Government to impose it. We should hold to the Good Friday Agreement and say we have signed a globally recognised treaty and that we are not introducing a border come what may in this process, and that we may have to have border controls at some of our other ports but will not introduce a border along the Northern counties. If that is to be the case, then it is critical we maintain good relations.

I have a slight fear. Part of this is to do with the UK press and others presenting us in a certain way. I understand we are not in control of that. I believe, however, that we have to be careful in our relations with the UK political system and the Northern Ireland political parties such that, whatever else happens, we will be able to pick up the pieces after the incredibly tense, uncertain next six months and return to a normal working arrangement. I make this point as a former Minister responsible for energy who was able to sit down with Mrs. Arlene Foster and agree we would have the same energy target in the North and South, namely, 40% renewables. We were able to agree that the ESB would purchase the distribution network. We agreed to set up an all-island energy market and a common transmission system. That was all possible because the decision was to a certain extent taken out of the identity politics account and was presented in a beneficial, good-relations account. That is what we need to do. It will not be easy to do in the next while but we should start talking to the DUP and listening. The assembly should also be returned to do the same.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I will conclude by reiterating a couple of points and by trying to address the many points raised by many of the Deputies. Time is running short. We have all agreed on that and acknowledged it. The efforts in the negotiations will, however, be redoubled and intensified in the coming weeks. We need to see the successful completion of negotiations by the end of the period. The October deadline has not changed. The only way that there will be a November summit or an extraordinary meeting is if we have something to meet about. Therefore, if we meet again in October with nothing new on the table, there will be no point to meeting. Therefore, the October deadline is still in place for us and extremely important. To use Deputy Michael Healy-Rae's analogy of ploughing and focusing one's sight on a tree, we have been very clear since the very beginning of this process on what we are trying to do and the outcome: as part of the overall withdrawal agreement, we must include the protection of the Good Friday Agreement and avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. We have not moved on this. Our EU partners, in supporting us as part of the European Union, have not moved on this.

I will address again the issue of having separate or secret negotiations. We believe it would be a strategic mistake to change in this regard. We are not having separate negotiations with the United Kingdom. That is the reason the European Union fully supports us and why we have had its support until now. Our priority for now is to conclude the withdrawal agreement. Again, this includes the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, which, of course, encompasses the backstop. It is imperative, however, that the United Kingdom in these final stages of negotiations engages with the issues that have been identified to achieve the progress by the October Council meeting. It has given these guarantees time and again, not just at Christmas but also in March, in the Chequers paper and at the meeting last week. The United Kingdom has provided these guarantees to avoid a hard border. It has given clear commitments on agreeing a backstop and has indicated it will bring forward its own proposals shortly. Of course, time is of the essence.

Michel Barnier's approach — to de-dramatise the protocol and focus on what is currently in place, what is moving north and south, what goods are moving and where they are coming from, including from east to west, and whether goods go through Ireland before getting to Northern Ireland — is an attempt to find a way forward because to date, the United Kingdom has not agreed with our proposed legal wording on the backstop. It has not agreed with Michel Barnier's approach. Therefore, it must bring forward its solutions. What we saw last week in Salzburg was not a hardening of Irish or EU positions but merely a restating of the position we have always had, that we must have a legally binding and operable backstop in place in the withdrawal agreement for us to move forward. The European Union clearly stated its position that we cannot interrupt or change the integrity of the Single Market or cherry-pick the four freedoms. Were there any view that Ireland had hardened its position against the United Kingdom, I would absolutely disagree because, for us, the United Kingdom will remain a key partner. We want the best possible outcome. We want the United Kingdom and the European Union, including Ireland, to have the best possible relationship moving forward. Our bilateral relationship with the United Kingdom is important. Brexit inevitably puts pressure on it but our Ministers, despite all this, meet regularly and try to discuss a number of areas of mutual interest. We have reached agreement on the common travel area. It will remain in place irrespective of the outcome. The British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference met in July. There are already discussions to determine how the Good Friday Agreement could be used in terms of bilateral relationships after the United Kingdom leaves the Union. This is a relationship that is very important to us. I do not believe anybody here would disagree with that.

Specific issues have been raised. Deputy Eamon Ryan mentioned the single energy market. As part of the European Union, we are working with the United Kingdom to try to ensure these issues are addressed. The issues include the landbridge through the United Kingdom, which is obviously extremely important in terms of the transit of goods between Ireland and the Continent.

Our contingency and preparedness planning has intensified and is well advanced. It will be more visible from now on. Deputy Lisa Chambers raised the issue of freedom of information. Negotiations are at a very difficult stage. Our contingency planning is continuing but we must not endanger it or have it interrupted. I take the Deputy's point on transparency. We encourage individuals and all sectors and industries to get involved in the Getting Ireland Brexit Ready campaign, which will build public awareness and outline the measures that are already in place. We have already approved a number of key Brexit preparedness measures, focusing on east–west trade, including the preparation of our ports and airports to take into account the changes. Deputy Troy asked when this will happen. This was agreed by the Cabinet only last week but these measures have been put in place and we will be hiring staff as quickly as possible.

A number of issues were raised by Deputies across the Chamber. For the past two years, all our Departments and individual Ministers have been asked to identify the various challenges they or industries or representative groups may face. They have been asked to identify possible measures, including legislation, regulation and new funding, that need to be put in place. Since the summer, they have been asked to put in place an action plan. All the issues raised today have been identified not only by the Departments but also by the Commission.

We do not know the full nature and extent of the change Brexit will bring. Obviously, this depends on the outcome of the negotiations. I assure Members that the Government will be ready to meet that challenge.

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On Deputy Burton's question on Ireland and the Border, our plan in this regard is the Irish backstop. Negotiations have still not finished. The withdrawal agreement is 90% complete. The United Kingdom has said it will bring forward proposals. Therefore, we need to see those proposals. Ireland, as a member of the European Union, is ready to work with them, and we believe there is still time. I thank the Deputies again for their support in all this.

Markets in Financial Instruments Bill 2018: Order for Report Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Michael D'Arcy): I move: "That Report Stage be taken now."

Question put and agreed to.

Markets in Financial Instruments Bill 2018: Report and Final Stages

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The amendments have been ruled out of order. They are not relevant to the provisions of the Bill.

Bill received for final consideration and passed.

Sitting suspended at 7.50 p.m. and resumed at 8 p.m.

Confidence in the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

noting that:

— Fine Gael have been in office for seven years and during that time homelessness has increased to unprecedented levels, house prices and rents have spiralled out of control, and tens of thousands of households are unable to access secure and affordable homes;

— the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness has been in place for two years, and has clearly failed to address the causes of our housing crisis, and its underinvestment in social and affordable housing and over-reliance on the private sector has exacerbated the crisis; and

— Deputy Eoghan Murphy has been Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government for 15 months, and on his watch, homelessness has increased by 25 per cent, child homelessness has increased by 34 per cent, pensioner homelessness has

increased by 40 per cent, rents have increased by 7 per cent and house prices by 6 per cent, delivery of social housing remains glacial, not a single affordable home has been delivered by any central Government scheme, private sector output in the main is overpriced and unaffordable, and vacant housing stock remains higher than the norm in other comparable countries;

has no confidence in the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and calls for him to be removed from office;

and calls on the Government to:

— accept that the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness has failed; and

— urgently introduce a new housing plan that will meet social and affordable housing need through an ambitious programme of public housing provision, and tackle homelessness through a greater focus on prevention and reduction of the length of time adults and children spend in emergency accommodation.

I will share time with Deputy McDonald.

When Deputy Eoghan Murphy was appointed Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government 15 months ago I said I wanted him to succeed. I told the House that if he implemented the right policies I would commend him, but I also said I would hold him to account if he pursued the wrong options. Fifteen months later, it is clear that both Deputy Eoghan Murphy, as Minister, and his housing policy, Rebuilding Ireland, have failed. Since the plan was published over two years ago homelessness has increased by 60%, child homelessness has increased by 77% and pensioner homelessness has increased by an unimaginable 80%. Can any of us imagine if it was our mother or father living in emergency accommodation, not knowing where he or she was going to sleep tonight, moving from hostel to hostel, scared, anxious and confused? This is the reality of Rebuilding Ireland. Behind every statistic is somebody's brother, sister, mother or father. Every one of the more than 10,000 homeless people, including the 4,000 children who will sleep tonight in emergency accommodation, is being failed by Deputy Eoghan Murphy and his housing plan.

The reasons for this are very clear. The Government continues to underinvest in social and affordable housing. It continues to rely on the private sector to meet social and affordable housing need. That approach failed when last tried by Fianna Fáil in government, and it is failing now. This year, fewer social homes owned by local authorities and approved housing bodies will be delivered by the Government than last year. Just 5,869 real social homes will be added to the social housing stock if the Government meets its targets. Meanwhile, more than 20,000 families will be pushed into subsidised private rental accommodation. Some 78% of so-called social housing need tenancies will be provided through expensive and insecure private sector tenancies. This is bad for tenants and our housing system and it is definitely bad for the taxpayer.

What about people who are not eligible for social housing? Rents are up 22% since 2016 and house prices are up 18% in the same period. Tens of thousands of working families are simply unable to rent or buy, yet not a single affordable home has been delivered by the Government this year or last year and probably will not be delivered next year either. The Government's much hyped Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme has delivered just 134 mortgages

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since February. Developments on public land such as on the Grange site in my constituency could have genuinely affordable homes to rent and buy, but the Minister refuses to intervene. Instead the houses will be for sale for between €320,000 and €500,000. How is any working family to afford a home at those prices?

Meanwhile tens of thousands of vacant homes lie empty in our cities and towns. We were promised 1,600 vacant homes for the homeless to be delivered by the Housing Agency. Despite 3,967 such homes being offered to the Government over two years, a paltry 529 have been bought. The buy and renew scheme promised 500 homes to be brought back into stock, but has delivered just 70. The repair and lease scheme promised 800 homes but has delivered just 15 so far. The Taoiseach's proposal on the appointment of the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, of a vacant property tax has been quietly dropped.

The Minister and his colleagues will say in their defence that the numbers of planning permissions and house completions are up. That is correct. However, overpriced student accommodation at €1,000 per month and unaffordable family homes from €320,000 upwards will not solve the crisis. The Minister knows Rebuilding Ireland is fundamentally flawed. It is failing and is making the problem worse. A good and courageous Minister would go to the Cabinet and say the plan is not working and that it must change. The fact that the Minister cannot even see the failure in front of him demonstrates why he must go. His blind defence of Rebuilding Ireland is proof of how out of touch and out of his depth he is. It confirms beyond doubt that he is now an obstacle to addressing the real causes of the crisis.

The Minister claims that this motion is a personal attack on him. Nothing could be further from the truth. He is the Minister and the buck stops with him. His plan is failing and it is time he and his colleagues took responsibility for that. He said that the housing crisis cannot be solved overnight. He is correct. However, Fine Gael has been in government for seven long years, and this is its housing and homelessness crisis as much as it is Fianna Fáil's.

The Minister also claims that the Opposition has no policy alternatives and that we are devoid of solutions. Again, this is simply not true. We have produced fully costed budgets and a raft of policy proposals and Bills that the Minister has chosen to ignore. We have proposed a doubling of capital investment in social and affordable housing. We have urged the Government to take advantage of finance from the credit unions, the Housing Finance Agency and the European Investment Bank. We have published detailed proposals on how to accelerate the delivery of much-needed public housing. We have tabled legislation to provide real security of tenure, halt rent hikes and improve standards in the private rental sector. We have proposed an emergency three-year rent freeze and a tax relief of a full month's rent to help make renting affordable. We tabled the Focus Ireland amendment which would have prevented hundreds of families losing their homes. We introduced legislation to ensure all families at risk of homelessness would have homelessness prevention plans in place at least 60 days before losing their homes. We also proposed detailed regulations for the short-term letting sector and offered comprehensive proposals for improving building standards and addressing the legacy of latent defects.

Unfortunately, time after time Fianna Fáil has lined up with Fine Gael to block these proposals. Deputy Micheál Martin's party refused to support our Bill that would have enshrined the right to housing in the Constitution. He blocked his Deputies from supporting the Focus Ireland amendment which would have prevented hundreds of families from becoming homeless. What Fianna Fáil has proposed instead is more tax breaks for developers. It clearly has not learned

from its mistakes in the past. It will be the same tonight.

Deputy Micheál Martin is so weak that he is not willing to stand up to the Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar. He is so scared of an election that he is willing to allow a failing Minister and his failed housing plan to remain in place. It is time that party stopped speaking out of both sides of its mouth on housing. It cannot criticise the Government's housing plan and its failing Minister on one day and then support the Government's housing budgets and the same failing Minister the next. It is time for Deputy Micheál Martin, who is absent, to put up or shut up.

Passing this motion tonight would send a clear signal to the Government that its housing policy must change. It would ensure that budget 2019 would be a housing budget. It could be a turning point in our housing and homelessness crisis. However, if Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will not listen to the Opposition they will have to listen to the people. Across the country frustration with the housing crisis is turning into anger. Take Back the City is giving a voice to a locked-out generation. The Raise the Roof rally at 12.30 p.m. on 3 October outside the Dáil will be even bigger. This will be the largest civil society coalition demanding change since Together for Yes and the marriage equality movement. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions and all its members, the National Women's Council of Ireland, the Union of Students in Ireland and a raft of homeless non-governmental organisations, NGOs, and grassroots housing campaign groups will be speaking with one voice to demand a radical change in policy and real ambitious investment in social and affordable housing.

Rebuilding Ireland has failed. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, has failed and it is time for both to go. I commend this motion to the House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Ba mhaith liom an rún atá os ár gcomhair anocht a mholadh agus ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Teachta Ó Broin as ucht é a chur faoi bhráid na Dála.

We are in the midst of an unprecedented housing crisis in this State. We face a housing emergency. It is a crisis that has worsened every passing day this Government has been in office and a crisis that continues to spiral out of control. We all know the statistics. God knows, they are daily intoned and recorded on our broadcasting media and in the pages of our newspapers. We know also, however, that whatever the statistics there is no way to quantify the social and human cost of a crisis that now permeates every facet of Irish life. Homelessness and the housing crisis is not now a niche concern or a concern simply for one sector of Irish society or for any one class. It affects the entirety of our society. Families who in years gone by would never have been considered vulnerable now live in fear that a hike in their rent might push them into homelessness. People, including couples in their 20s and 30s, unlike their parents before them have no real prospect of ever being able to afford their own home. Tens of thousands of low and middle-income families once able to secure a decent council house or an affordable home now languish on waiting lists that will never be cleared. Thousands of children go to bed in emergency accommodation tonight, deprived of a basic right that should not be considered a luxury in childhood, namely, somewhere for them to call home.

What about those living in overcrowded substandard accommodation? In the midst of this crisis and emergency, they are very often forgotten, left to one side. Behind every outworking of this crisis there are real lives and real people, very many of whom took to the streets last weekend and many more of whom will increasingly come out to vent their utter frustration and

anger.

The crisis we face has one root cause: a lack of homes. Despite this fact, we have a Government that continues to abdicate its responsibility and refuses to build homes in sufficient numbers to house our citizens. Building social and affordable housing is the only long-term policy solution that can properly address the housing crisis yet we have a Government and a Minister that turn their faces away from this reality. We can house those in need of homes who cannot afford a home from their own means. Doing so would reduce homelessness and the number of families and citizens in need of rent supplement and the housing assistance payment, HAP. It would also increase the number of rental properties available and reduce rent inflation and, in turn, rents. Reducing rents increases the ability of people to save to buy their own homes. More people with the means to buy their own homes means more homes being built. It is simple economics, which this Government refuses to grasp because it would rather safeguard the profits of landlords than deliver for ordinary citizens. What has the Government delivered? Some 6,268 real social homes were delivered last year which is a drop in the ocean. No affordable housing was delivered by the Government over the past three years, rents are up 22% in two years and house prices continue to spiral owing to a lack of supply. This is the Government's failure. It is a litany of failure and the record of the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy.

The housing crisis is dire but there are solutions. Solving it may well present one of the biggest challenges to a Government or a Minister but it is not impossible. We can bring the housing crisis under control. The State can build homes. We can house our citizens and we can deliver. This will only happen if there is the political will to do so at every level, starting at the top with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government. Nobody expects the Minister to perform miracles. It is important to say that. In the midst of a crisis what people do expect and deserve is vision and leadership. They also expect accountability, which is what tonight's motion is about. It is not about playing the man or the Minister but about holding the Government and the Minister to account.

We need a radical change of direction and a radical change of policy. Dismissing those who highlight the extent of the housing crisis and the Government's failure is not the answer. Normalising homelessness, as the Government has done, is not the answer and doing nothing and sitting on one's hands, as Fianna Fáil is doing, is not the answer. We need bold and urgent action. We propose the following: doubling investment in social and affordable housing to deliver homes; the introduction of a temporary tax relief for renters alongside a three-year emergency rent freeze; the introduction of legislation to prevent buy-to-let landlords from seeking vacant possession; the introduction of legislation requiring local authorities to have a homeless prevention plan for all those at risk of losing their homes or tenancies; and, crucially, enshrining the right to housing in our Constitution and basic law. These are just some of the measures and approaches that are required to tackle this crisis. These are bold, meaningful actions but they require courage, vision and real leadership, all of which have been lacking in the Government and in the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy.

At the weekend, those citizens that came onto the streets each had their own stories. Some of them were students who desperately sought accommodation and told stories of having second thoughts about going to university or college owing to the cost and lack of availability of accommodation. Others were people who have been on social housing waiting lists for years and years, many of them single citizens and some of them families. Margaret Cash was at the Garden of Remembrance with her beautiful children. The Ceann Comhairle will recall that she is the mother who along with her children spent the night in Tallaght Garda station. This image,

above all else, crystalised in the public mind just how deep this crisis is and how desperately low Government standards have fallen. Margaret Cash addressed the crowd at the Garden of Remembrance, where she said something very simple but very profound. She said, I am a mother. I am a Traveller citizen. I do not expect anything for nothing but I do demand respect for myself and my family. I should not sleep in Tallaght Garda station. No citizen, no mother and her small children, should sleep in any Garda station. We ought to have a Government that is serious about delivering, not one that sits smugly on the sidelines and dismisses people and the reality of people's experiences.

We bring this motion not as a stunt or as a personalised action but because now is the moment to draw a line in the sand and to say "Enough is enough". Now is the time for all of us, on behalf of the people we represent, to demand a new approach and to demand policies that work. For that to happen the Minister must be held to account and the Taoiseach must lead Government and relieve the Minister of his duties. It is time to call a halt to inaction. I encourage and urge every Teachta Dála to support our motion before the Dáil tonight. The emergency we face demands nothing less than that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. I understand the Minister is sharing time with Deputies Donohoe, Harris, Bruton and Heydon.

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): That is correct. I had the privilege recently of meeting with a young mother with a young child who were homeless. She told me her own personal story through tears because she felt ashamed about the situation she was in and I apologised to her because she had to spend three weeks in a hotel. She should never have been in that hotel. We were talking in the hub that she is now in and she was finding that difficult but I was able to tell her that she would be in a home soon. I was able to tell her that because every family who had gone into that hub since it had been opened less than a year ago had gone into a home and none had come back into homelessness. She was brave, bright and hopeful for the future and I tried to give her some confidence because I know that we have helped thousands of families like hers up and down this country.

In 2017, 2,000 families left hotels, the majority of them going into homes. In the past 12 months, 5,000 households have exited homelessness. Thousands of homes are being built up and down the country by local authorities, housing bodies and private builders. Housing supply is going up but families will unfortunately and tragically continue to present to homeless services because we do not yet have enough homes. We are still catching up but we are catching up and until we have caught up we will put every support and every care that is necessary in place for any family or individual at risk of entering emergency accommodation or who actually does enter emergency accommodation.

I am the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and I am responsible for fixing this crisis piece by piece and it is complex. Not everything has worked out like we hoped it would, such as the repair and lease scheme for example, but other initiatives have worked out better, such as our fast-track planning process. Progress will not always be linear and we will face setbacks. However, real, tangible progress is being made in terms of homes being built, otherwise we would not have been able to find homes for all of those families that I have mentioned. We would not have local authorities building on their own land up and down the country, or big plans for development in front of those same local authorities which are being opposed by some parties in this House. Neither would we have private homes being opened up on sites in their thousands every quarter and thousands of homes being completed as well.

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More new homes will be provided this year than in any year in the past decade. More than 20,000 new places to live in will be delivered and still we have more to do. My job as Minister is to get it done but I will not be distracted by populist nonsense that contributes nothing to the challenges that we face and I will not be hounded out of office by personalised advertising campaigns and attacks against me. I know that people are hurting but if we ignore the progress that has been made for political gain or to try and feed some public outrage for our own political benefit then we risk making the mistakes of the past. We risk throwing out the good and replacing it with the failed policies that did not work before, such as building giant social housing estates that only served to divide communities rather than unite and support them. I will not be responsible for that. I will not be responsible for damning another generation by making populist, short-term decisions.

Some people want to believe that this Government caused this crisis. We did not but we will fix it. Some people want people to believe that this crisis, which is more than a decade in the making, could have been solved in the 16 months since I came into office. They want people to believe that if they were in government this crisis would be solved overnight. That is dishonest and wrong and if they worked on this crisis every single day, meeting all of the people who have been so badly hurt by it and if they were the ones responsible for fixing it they would not be so deceitful to the people.

We have a plan. It is working, it can be improved and anyone in this Oireachtas is free to come forward and present alternatives for debate and agreement. This was Sinn Féin's great opportunity to bring forward its housing plan and to show the people in this Republic the positive contribution it has made but in the motion it has written and in the shallow soundbites it has given tonight, it has not done that. The public, this crisis and this Dáil deserve better than that and the Government is opposing this motion.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I entirely reject the motion of no confidence that has been placed in the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, and instead express my full confidence in him. All that has been on display this evening is the repugnant attitude of Sinn Féin that would have it think that it is the only party that cares about homeless people, people who are worried about how they will make their next rent payment and people who are worried about their future and if they will have a roof over their head. No party in Dáil Éireann has a monopoly on compassion. No party in Dáil Éireann has a right to claim that it is the only party that understands the needs of those who are most vulnerable.

What the Minister has done in his time in office is to steadily address a complex issue that has searing social and personal consequences for citizens. As a result of his actions we are seeing more homes being built and more planning permission being given. We are seeing housing hubs being delivered and we are seeing those who would face the trauma of being homeless being offered solutions that can make a difference to their lives. Under his leadership in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government we are seeing him deliver a plan which can and is making a difference.

Of course the Minister and all of us on the Government benches acknowledge that more needs to be done and of course we hear the cries of those who worry about their future. However, the way we will respond to that is the same way that this Government responded to the economic crisis and the same way we have responded to many difficulties that Sinn Féin claimed were impractical and that no progress could ever be made on. We will make progress

on them step by step and week by week and in so doing we will offer real solutions to citizens as opposed to insulting them, using their anxiety and using their worries about their futures for political gain. All that Sinn Féin cares about in this motion is Sinn Féin. All that the Minister and the Government think about in our efforts is to try to provide homes, to deal with the scourge of homelessness and ensure that the citizens who need help and support are given it.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The lack of housing supply is clearly the deepest scar left in our society from a dark and painful economic recession. It is real, difficult and upsetting and fixing it is a priority for the whole of the Government and the whole of this country. However, one thing is for sure, and that is that the Minister did not cause the housing crisis, despite personalised, nasty attacks from some on the Opposition benches who endeavour to imply just that. The truth is that the housing crisis stems from failed policies of greed and mismanagement throughout Celtic tiger Ireland. We must now rebuild our entire housing sector while not repeating the mistakes of the past and the devastation that those mistakes created for so many. I have watched the Minister over the last 16 months and his energy and determination to fix this situation are second to none but there is no silver bullet, magic wand or one measure to fix it. This is a hard slog and a real challenge that we all need to involve ourselves in.

Week in and week out the Minister is bringing forward proposals to rebuild our housing sector, to demand more action from all stakeholders locally and nationally, to increase supply and to reduce rough sleeping. He and the Government are more than willing to work with the Opposition on addressing this major challenge. In fact, there is an onus on all of us to work together on this and I acknowledge that some in opposition want to do that. Others prefer to call names and engage in procedural stunts such as this ridiculous motion, knowing that it will not build one home or house one family. It is a real case of the worst type of politics, that nasty divisive politics that saw the rise of Trump and Brexit, suggesting that there is only one valid ideology and that nobody else gives a damn. The Minister cares about his responsibilities. He takes them seriously. It is a pity Sinn Féin does not take its responsibilities in the House seriously. As I said, the Minister did not cause this crisis but there is nobody better fixed to solve it. He will work day and night to ease and solve it and we will stand shoulder to shoulder supporting him and opposing Sinn Féin's ridiculous stunt.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I will say brutally honestly that the solution to this problem will take five years. We said that at the outset.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Another five years. The Government has had seven.

Deputy Richard Bruton: We have never had a more innovative Minister than Deputy Eoghan Murphy tackling this issue. I have seen Sinn Féin behave like this before. When I declared we would create 100,000 jobs, Sinn Féin ridiculed us every step of the way and relentlessly opposed every measure we introduced. It pretended to lament unemployment and emigration but offered only hollow solutions. It ignored enterprise and market realities and offered people solutions that could not be sustained.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is a protest party.

Deputy Richard Bruton: We now have a programme that will deliver for people and Sinn Féin wants to undermine it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There are 10,000 people in emergency accommodation.

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Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister should have a bit of humility.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Richard Bruton: The truth is the failure of our housing strategy was caused by the debt-fuelled model that is not sustainable. It has to be rebuilt from scratch as the Minister is doing.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister should have a bit of humility.

Deputy Richard Bruton: That is what he is doing and I am four-square behind him.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Shame on you.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Shame on you.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is unbelievable.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we restore a little order? My apologies to Deputy Heydon but the time has elapsed for the Government. Deputy Darragh O'Brien is sharing with Deputies Casey and Cassells.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The one thing on which we can all agree is that Ireland is in the middle of a fundamental housing crisis. Homelessness is scarring our towns and cities. Tenants are struggling to make ends meet and keep roofs over their heads. Young couples see the dream of home ownership slip further and further away. The crisis touches every family in the State in one way or another. The question today is not about the scale of the crisis or the impact it is having across the country. Fianna Fáil fully appreciates and understands its scale and depth. We see it in our constituencies every day of the week but the question today is a different one. The question being asked is, at its heart, a simple one. Should Dáil Éireann bring down the Government?

Deputy Mick Barry: Yes.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Thanks Mick. No surprise there. Ultimately, my party and believe it would be a deeply irresponsible action to collapse the Government weeks before the budget in the middle of delicate Brexit negotiations.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies should address their remarks to the Chair and Sinn Féin Deputies should try to restrain themselves a little.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: They should try. As I was saying, collapsing the Government weeks before the budget-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: The Government Deputies might restrain themselves as well.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: People watching proceedings will see this type of behaviour so maybe we should try to address the issues and come forward with some alternatives.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Bring down the Government.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: In negotiations where the future of our island is at stake, any satisfaction and media headlines drawn from a dramatic vote would soon be replaced by uncertainty and instability. Our long-term future would be jeopardised for the sake of short-term party gain. All the while not a single additional house would be built while political parties played political games. We should instead take a more difficult but responsible path. That means providing stability during fragile Brexit negotiations and using the upcoming budget to put housing front and centre. Our party is focused on the business of practical steps to tackle the crisis. Given the depth of the crisis and the intensity of citizens' feelings on it, this debate is welcome. The Government is accountable to the Dáil and each Deputy has a responsibility to ensure it does its job. In the fragmented political landscape which emerged in the last election we also have an obligation to work for a stable Government for our people. It means holding Ministers to account but also putting forward viable solutions and working to make sure they are implemented. The same old political game-playing will not cut it any more.

I will use the few minutes I have to outline areas where the Government has failed and also what needs to be done to fix it. There is, at the heart of Government housing policy, a core addiction to spin and announcements over hard work and delivery. Since 2011, six separate housing plans have been announced and countless sub-plans re-announced. That is more than the number of houses built in the 16 local authorities where not a single new social housing unit has been built so far this year. Rapid-build units were hailed as a quick-fix solution until we found out they cost much more and take as long, if not longer, to complete than other houses. Repair and lease, as the Minister alluded to, has delivered just 15 units out of a promised 800. Affordable rental units were promised as far back as 2015 but not a brick has been laid yet. Some 7,000 units were identified by the National Asset Management Agency for social housing but fewer than 2,500 were transferred. Capital spending on social housing is still at only 84% of its 2008 level. Only €20 million was allocated to an affordable scheme this year with a target of just 500 units and none has been delivered. It is a story of overhype and underdelivery. It is clearly time for the Government to recognise the gap between PR appearance and bricks-and-mortar reality. People are interested in solutions, not political grandstanding. The key question, therefore, is what can be done. First and foremost, housing must be placed at the heart of the next budget. People are extremely angry and frustrated, as was demonstrated by the recent marches. They should not be condemned for protesting, as they have been by some, including the Taoiseach. We need to realise that people want solutions, which are available to us. We can quantify the problem. Therefore, we can fix it.

In May, Fianna Fáil put forward a comprehensive motion setting out the need for an affordable housing scheme.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: How much would that cost?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Government, Sinn Féin, the Labour Party and Solidarity banded together-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There were no numbers and no costings.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, please.

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Deputy Darragh O'Brien: He cannot help himself.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is very hard.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Government, Sinn Féin, the Labour Party and Solidarity voted to defeat-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There was not even a number or a cost for it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputy Doherty allow Members to contribute?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am sorry.

An Ceann Comhairle: He will have his time.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We showed respect for Sinn Féin contributions. A little courtesy may be too much to expect from some Members in that party. The Government, Sinn Féin, the Labour Party and Solidarity joined together to defeat a motion that would have provided affordable housing for working people. The facts scream out that intervention in providing affordable homes is needed. House prices have risen by 90% since 2012. Household incomes have only risen by 7% in that same period. The average house price in the capital now stands at nearly €370,000 or 6.5 times the average household income. A comprehensive, fully funded affordable housing scheme must be put in place in this budget to start delivering affordable units next year. We must open up home ownership to a generation struggling to own their own places. The State has a central role to play in that and budget 2019 must show real action on the issue. The State now needs to lead and show an example. The market will not solve this problem. The State needs to intervene.

The social housing budget must be increased to well above 2008 levels. The Rebuilding Ireland direct build targets for 2019 need to be expanded and a housing first approach to tackling homelessness and addressing waiting lists needs to be prioritised. Stabilising rents and ensuring there is a sufficient flow of rental units available are vital to a functioning rental sector. Attracting and retaining landlords in the market must involve a fair taxation system. The budget should allow reasonable expenses to be deductible and incentivise long-term leases that provide certainty to tenants. A rental tax credit to alleviate the costs of meeting the monthly bill would go a long way for struggling tenants. A residential tenancies Bill must strengthen tenants' rights and also expand supports to students. Away from the budget there are a number of legislative and policy steps we should take. Fianna Fáil has published ten Bills specifically addressing the housing crisis, which is more than any other party. The Government must fully engage on these issues. In the areas of social housing, the rental sector and home ownership there are further policy steps that should be adapted to get to grips with the crisis.

We need to end homelessness and give hope to the 10,000 people and 4,000 kids who are homeless. It is a national scandal and it cannot be allowed to continue. That is why I and Fianna Fáil have called for the establishment of a time-bound, focused task force to tackle child and family homelessness. The Government should get the stakeholders together and deliver solutions. For social housing, additional resources to assist homeless families must be put in place. Local authorities should be equipped to deliver housing. We must consider the landholdings the State owns: more than 3,000 ha of zoned serviced land that could deliver 114,000 houses.

The new Land Development Agency is a step in that direction but we need that to be expedited. In the rental sector, regulating such accommodation platforms such as Airbnb and *booking.com* would open up more units while maintaining the character of residential areas. The cost rental model should be expedited and rolled out across Ireland. A national deposit scheme and quality accommodation certificate should be fully implemented. In the private sector, a rolling affordable housing scheme should be used to build tens of thousands of homes for families and young couples to own their first home. We want funding set aside in this year's budget to establish such a scheme and to build on it year on year. A new special savings incentive account, SSIA, type of savings scheme for first-time buyers to help them save a deposit for a house should also be implemented.

These are some of the ideas that can help get homes built, take vulnerable families out of hotel rooms, and give a generation back the dream of home ownership. We have to be honest and say that motions like this do not build homes. Viable policies backed up by financial commitment over years will address the housing crisis. That demands responsible politics. Fianna Fáil is committed to responsible politics. Now is not the time for bringing down the Government and causing a general election. I think all Deputies know that deep down. Let us work to address the issues we have identified in this debate and show a real political commitment to action, not grandstanding. There is common ground on what actions are needed to resolve this crisis. Let us get on with it and show that the Dáil and the people's representatives have the wherewithal, competence and ability to work together on what is the major crisis of our generation for the good of the people and our country.

Deputy Pat Casey: There are aspects of our worsening housing crisis and the political management of this crisis that need to be called out in this debate. I sincerely ask those whose job it is to report on this debate, and indeed whose responsibility is to bring to public attention the truth about the housing crisis, to reflect on what is said here. The statistics on housing and homelessness are grim and they are stated so many times that, sometimes, I think that people are fatigued about the numbers. Behind every statistic is a homeless person, a family in a hotel room, or a trauma that will cause scars that will take years to heal.

We need to call out the deeply cynical and negative politics around our housing crisis. By that I mean the political drama of this confidence motion which exists for one purpose only, namely, to exploit the real hurt to families caused by the lack of housing for the benefit of political parties who want to gain votes by feeding the politics of anger, despair, and continual crisis.

We only have to look at the ongoing destruction of democratic politics in the United Kingdom and the United States to see how the politics of crisis and fear are frustrating what is the purpose of mature representative politics. The speeches and the drama in this debate are all about who gets the political blame and who garners votes from an angry electorate. The politics of housing that are on display in this debate are an example of what is wrong with politics and only contribute to increasing disillusionment with politicians and the political system. That is not to say that the political system is working - far from it - but this debate will not build a single home, provide a single policy idea, nor offer hope to people who deserve it. This debate is a failed tactic, a cynical ploy and represents everything I despise about politics.

I sit on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government on which members work together painstakingly through all the different aspects of the housing issue, from the chronic lack of social and affordable homes to the dysfunctional rental sector to problems with planning and construction delays caused by bureaucratic systems that are out of

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control. In the two years I have sat on the committee I have been impressed by colleagues of all parties and none in their commitment to working through these issues. The purpose of mature democratic politics is to provide solutions to our problems. These solutions will involve trial and error, inevitably they will involve compromise on deeply held principles, and often they will involve radical abandonment of sacred cows.

Our housing crisis is solvable. I agree that it will not be fixed overnight, but I disagree strongly that this Government is getting to grips with it. Personalised confidence motions and Trump-style outrage with slick tweets designed to feed the news cycles where the most colourful language is guaranteed coverage are not solving our systemic problems in housing. The adults in the room in this debate need to call out this travesty. It is the upcoming budget that will reveal if this Government is capable of meeting the dramatic policy shift that is needed on housing. Whatever occurs over the next few months, the reality of the lack of housing and homelessness for thousands of families and our fellow citizens will grind on. The people elected everyone to this House to be the adults in the room. The people expect us to hammer out solutions. They demand that politics works for the people, not for the cynical manipulation of voter sentiment. The keyboard warriors who hammer out hate towards so many of us will never build the policies that will solve our political problems. It is time for all of us who care about our society to call out the politics of witch hunts, blame games and eternal crisis.

Our State with all its power and resources can provide housing for all our people. There are many worthy ideas from all sides of this House that merit debate and implementation. Policy solutions are why I am here. Let us get back to the people's work.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I welcome the opportunity to speak with my colleagues on the issue that is dominating the public forums of debate in this country. What strikes me most from those discussions is that what should unite us is a real desire among us all to deal with this issue because no matter what political badge we might wear on election day, the reality of homelessness, the pressure of renting, and the pressure on young, middle-income families who cannot purchase a home due to the problems in the private housing market is something we all face daily in our constituencies. Our senior spokesperson on housing, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has brought forward proposals on an affordable house purchase scheme, because while discussions surrounding the construction of social homes has dominated much of the debate, I know from the people calling into my office that a proper affordable home scheme could make a real difference in this debate.

On the issue of social homes, or in good old plain English, county council estates, shortly after my election to my local authority, almost 20 years ago, with the Minister of State, Deputy English, we both saw the extensive construction of council homes in our town, Navan, and in many sections of Meath. I mean real construction of estates with several hundred homes being constructed. I disagree with what the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, said about his philosophy and these estates because they were planned properly by the then Minister, Noel Dempsey, ensuring funding was provided to build community centres in the heart of these council estates which today house many services, new swimming pools, schools, roads and infrastructure. It was a comprehensive package whereby there was a philosophy that drove our house building programme. It was not just building homes, which did happen, but building communities. Somewhere along the way that philosophy has been lost at national and local level. We need to see this Government deal with that, not just the national Government but local government too.

Last Thursday at the Committee of Public Accounts we heard some revealing and shocking statistics from the chief executive officer of the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, Brendan McDonagh, who said in a housing report that it had offered 7,000 social homes to local authorities yet only 2,700 were availed of, meaning some 60% were not taken up. That is shocking. When further probed on this Mr. McDonagh revealed that it was the Housing Agency that acted as the conduit, saying the councils were not taking up homes because they did not want what he termed an over-concentration of social homes in one area. I can only speak for my county, but when we have more than 4,000 people on a waiting list, it is simply not good enough to hear that coming back from local authorities. It is not on that 4,300 homes could just be let pass.

On the supply of private housing, the regional spatial and economic strategy which followed on from the national framework plan is going to have a devastating impact on counties outside Dublin, including Meath, Kildare, Westmeath, Longford and Offaly where population caps will come into force and thwart the housing market, in particular the private housing market, even further. It will also lead to social housing problems.

Listening to the debate on housing this afternoon during Leader's Questions, I could not but help hear the cheap political dig by Deputy Mary Lou MacDonald of Sinn Féin. She accused Fianna Fáil of sniping from the ditches. I smiled because in County Meath the only fellow sniping from the ditches is Sinn Féin's Deputy Peadar Tóibín, who has form. Three weeks ago, in my constituency, we were all invited to the opening of 43 new council homes in Trim and Athboy, where my constituency office is based. We were in Athboy where the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, was on hand to open 32 homes in a fine scheme on Connaught Street. It was a great day for the families who received the keys to their new home and it was a privilege to join them on the day. Where was Deputy Peadar Tóibín during this moment of positive action? He was not in the estate.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Where was-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Shane Cassells: I will tell Members where he and members of the Sinn Féin Party were. I travelled 200 yards around the corner and there he was with a bundle of leaflets on the street in Athboy, handing out Sinn Féin's diatribes and propaganda. He could not walk the 200 yards to meet the 32 families who were given the keys to their new homes that morning. I find it rich that Sinn Féin Members come in here to talk about the housing crisis when one of its own Deputies could not be bothered to walk 200 yards to see 32 homes being opened.

(Interruptions).

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

Deputy Shane Cassells: The party does spin like it is going out of fashion. It does not have any sense of conviction. The example of Deputy Peadar Tóibín handing out propaganda on the street, while families were being given homes, sums it up and shows that the party is not fit to be represented in this Chamber.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Alan Kelly: I enjoyed that. The Labour Party will not be supporting the Minister tonight; rather, we will be supporting the motion for ideological reasons. We believe there is need for a change in ideology in how the housing crisis is being dealt with by the Minister. It is nothing personal. In fact, I found some of the personal commentary on the Minister extremely distasteful and unworthy of Members of this House. My party will have nothing to do with it. Many who speak in this House on this issue do so without going through what they would do, their new proposals and challenges. I refer to the contribution made earlier. I would like to address it and bring forward some proposals that we have to make that are very different. I am not saying the Minister's job is easy, but I think that, fundamentally, even with a good work ethic, ideological change is necessary to put in place pathways to deal with the issues that we all know we face as a country when it comes to housing provision.

My party has different proposals to make on a model of delivery of affordable housing over five years. It has been fully costed and would deliver 80,000 units. We would create a national housing development bank, with regional housing executives. It would be given extensive powers, money, land and expertise, as well as resources from the Housing Agency, Home Building Finance Ireland and NAMA. We have outlined our proposals in great detail. It would also create a differentiation between delivery and policy, the part with which I am very familiar. It is something that needs to happen. The figure of €16 billion that we have proposed, or €3.2 billion a year, is what is ultimately necessary to address the scale of the issues with which we are dealing. I urge the Minister to think about it.

Another issue with which I am very familiar and which also needs to be addressed - it needed to be addressed a number of years ago; I am speaking from experience - is rent inflation. Our proposal which was brought forward on the floor of the House not so long ago involved linking rent inflation with the consumer price index, CPI. I do not think the current model of managing rent inflation and rent pressure zones is feasible or will work because the entire country is under pressure. It was brought forward with the best of intentions, but it is not working. The linking of rent inflation with the CPI which should have happened a number of years ago would have had an impact by now. This issue about which we are talking will go on for a number of years. Every year that passes without this being done will make the problem worse. It is very much being opposed for ideological reasons by the Minister's party and the Government.

I will address a number of other issues. We have to change the legislation on evictions. The process by which people are evicted from their houses by a landlord or a receiver needs to change. It could be done with a small number of items of legislation which should be brought forward as a priority. There are solutions whereby tenants who find themselves in this situation could be left in premises, even where they were being sold.

There is a serious ideological issue. It was an issue for the House even before I was born. It concerns the non-implementation of the Kenny report on land and land values. The Government that eventually bites that bullet and deals with the principles outlined in that good report dating from 1973 will do the State a serious service. The boom-bust cycle and the bubble that created the crisis a decade ago, elements of which we can now see again, were the result of the report not being implemented in the first place. I also believe powers to enable restructured local authorities to use compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, to purchase lands are necessary. This could be done wholesale or in a limited way to facilitate local authorities that have infrastructure and the capacity to build more houses but which are not in a position to quickly acquire lands. It could be done in even a limited way. Local authorities could be given limited powers to do a limited amount where it would make sense and where there were economies of scale.

I could think of them myself from my time in that role and it would have a significant impact.

In the limited time I have left I want to deal with a couple of other issues. People ask about short-term leases and their impact on the crisis. We have to address the issue of short-term letting. If I was to stress one point for the Minister in the coming weeks, it would be this. We all talk about Airbnb, but it is not about that because people could call it something else the following week. We need to deal with the issue in the way it is being dealt with in Barcelona and differently in Berlin and other jurisdictions. We will have to deal with the issue because it is creating downward pressures and resulting in a lack of capacity in urban areas, in particular, which will only elevate the crisis. The return for owners from short-term letting are not going to change but increase. There are ways we could do it through the planning laws. There is a need for specific planning provisions to deal with short-term lettings. They are, however, not enforced. There are very quick ways by which they could be regulated. I seriously encourage the bringing forward of regulations in this city and others across the country to address this issue to create greater capacity.

There are a number of other issues that I would like to deal with, but I do not have time to talk about them. The cost of building needs to be examined. I say this coming from a different ideological background, but I encourage the Minister to look at it in a sensible manner as a short-term mechanism to ensure more private housing can be delivered across the jurisdiction.

9 o'clock There is a crisis for builders in getting loans to build private housing across the country. It needs decisions to be taken very quickly. There has also been a considerable number of announcements of various schemes. I went through many of the schemes that were proposed a number of years ago in places such as Wicklow, Fingal, Kilkenny, Laois, south Dublin, Westmeath and Wexford. They included developments of 50, 39, 36, 28 and 26 units.

This is from an answer to a parliamentary question I asked; I had to ask for the answer for two months. These schemes have all fallen by the wayside in terms of provision by local authorities once funding is given. There are too many schemes which, for different reasons, have not materialised. The failures of those schemes must be explained. There are too many of them. After all that effort and having gone through the planning process, they fall through, whether the schemes are connected to housing agencies or local authorities. We need an explanation.

Deputy Mick Barry: Whatever this House decides tonight, many people in this country have already passed judgment on the Minister and his policies. He need only look at the level of public support for the Take Back the City initiative to understand the level of public alienation from the Minister, the Government and its policies on this issue. The Taoiseach is no doubt aware, as he contemplates rolling the dice and calling a snap general election, that housing may emerge as the top issue with the potential to undermine his Government severely at the polls.

It is little over a year since the Minister was appointed to his post. Since his appointment, in my city, Cork, and the wider south-west region, the number of homeless people in emergency accommodation has increased by 37%. The number of homeless children has increased by a stunning 55%. I would say that I am amazed, but I am not. The Minister criticised large social housing estates. I would prefer to live in a large social housing estate than in bed and breakfast accommodation, and so would many other people.

On the Minister's watch, house prices have increased by over 6% and rent rates nationally have increased by 12.6%. Some 500,000 young adults live at home with their parents, unable

to buy or rent. They are the locked-out generation. Of course, there is good news for some. Only yesterday, Goodbody Stockbrokers forecast that Ireland's largest corporate landlord, Ires REIT, will harvest €39.5 million this year in rental income. Ires REIT doubled its profits for the first six months of this year, compared with the same period last year, and Goodbody's forecast that its rental income would increase by a further 14% next year. I could go on and give similar examples about housing assistance payment, HAP, landlords and developer profits if I had the time. The wealthy few benefit on the Minister's watch at the expense of the many.

I must say a few words about the Fianna Fáil position. Some 500,000 people voted for Fianna Fáil at the last general election. I suspect that more than one or two will not be impressed by seeing those Deputies vote to keep the Minister in office. Of course, replacing the Minister with one of his co-thinkers would make no difference whatsoever. We have no confidence in the Minister, his Government or the housing-for-profit model, also known as the market, which was supported by past Governments which included Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party and the Green Party. We need a different policy. We need public homes to be built on public land. There is enough public land in the control of NAMA and the local authorities which is already zoned residential to build 114,000 homes. We need housing for people, not for profit.

The Minister's failure could hardly be more complete. It is time for him to step aside, and those toxic, neo-liberal housing policies must go as well.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This is not about the Minister or the Taoiseach. It is not personal. It is about the failure of the Government to break from a disastrously failing policy that is wreaking havoc on the lives of tens of thousands of our citizens. It is personal for those people. Our feelings and our political differences are irrelevant compared with the hardship and suffering those people are experiencing.

In the AV Room today two mothers burst into tears during the showing of a film they participated in about their experience, and the experience of their children, in emergency hotel and hub accommodation. Every Monday and Friday in my clinic and in many other clinics, mothers, children, fathers, families and individuals come streaming in, traumatised, suffering, afraid, anxious and fearful because they face eviction, because they have nowhere to live, because they have no prospect of getting a council house after waiting 15 or 20 years. The list of suffering, hardship and anxiety just goes on.

That is not an accident. It is the result of a policy the Minister has pursued. The policy has led us to a situation where we now have 144,000 families on housing lists or transfer lists, when there were 96,000 on that list when Fianna Fáil was last in power - and that was bad - in 2011. The number of families in homeless accommodation has trebled in the seven years that Fine Gael has been in power. We have 70,000 people in serious mortgage arrears who face the prospect of their homes being repossessed. Students and young workers are paying extortionate rents to profiteering vulture funds and landlords. A whole generation of young people have no prospect of ever owning their own homes or even having secure or affordable roofs over their head. If a government cannot deliver the most elementary thing - a secure roof over the heads of its citizens - it does not deserve to be in office.

Do we have alternatives? We have repeated the alternatives *ad nauseam* for the last seven years. Build council houses and affordable houses on public land. Stop evictions into homelessness. Use NAMA and its vast resources and land assets to provide public and affordable housing. Introduce rent control so that there can be no profiteering renting. Insert the right to

housing into the Constitution as a basic human right. The Government has resisted those things because successive Ministers have pandered to the vulture funds and to the corporate landlords.

A headline from last weekend concerning one of the biggest residential developments planned in this State read: “U.S. investment firm poised to sell Cherrywood land”. It goes on to say that US investment firm, Hines, which acquired a 412 acre site in Cherrywood in south Dublin four years ago for €240 million is preparing to sell off large residential plots from that portfolio capable of delivering 2,500 homes. It is flipping land, and it is making a fortune. The Government has let it happen. It put public money into providing the infrastructure. The company bought the land from NAMA for a song. It was invited in by Michael Noonan. The Government has allowed this to happen. The company is walking away with profits of hundreds of millions of euro, and not a sod has been turned, or a single house of any description delivered, never mind affordable or social housing. That is what is going on. A small number of people, facilitated by the Government, are profiting from the human misery being experienced by hundreds of thousands of our citizens. That is not acceptable. I appeal to the public to come out on the streets next Wednesday, outside the Dáil, when this issue will be raised again.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Two weeks ago, Mr. Niall Cussen, from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, said at the Dublin economics workshop that the State will not be building social housing at scale because it has failed in the past. The Minister has not said that in the House. I do not know what people are saying to each other, but there is a serious lack of honesty in how this crisis is being dealt with. I do not believe anyone is trying to pretend that this problem is easy to fix. It is not. As I have repeatedly stated, however, the Minister is listening to the wrong people. He is listening to those with a vested interest in things remaining the way they are. Whatever pressure he is under from officials in the Department or from people with a lot more money than most, I do not for the life of me understand why he has not looked at a different avenue.

I pointed out to the Taoiseach today that the Government’s Land Development Agency and NAMA’s financing of developers and funds is presenting housing at a cost of €100,000 more per unit than would be the case if the Government were providing it. The Minister has no faith in local authorities, but why has he not got the wherewithal to fix what is wrong? Why does he not address the fact that we are always going to have a major issue with affordability until Government actually deals with it? We introduced a tax of 25% to be imposed on landbanking, but I do not believe the Government has an appetite for it. The Government has to change the way it looks at this, particularly as it owes as much to the people of Ireland.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have less than two minutes, so I will not take a breath. I will not support any personal comments about the Minister, but I have no hesitation in supporting this motion. I have been here for just over two and a half years, and I have listened to three successive Ministers. Deputy Kelly was holding the fort when I arrived in the Dáil and was followed into the job by Deputy Coveney and, now, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. All three have one thing in common; they relied utterly on the market to provide. The Minister has tinkered with that market and made matters much worse. We have repeatedly presented positive solutions in the House. Significantly, almost a year ago I took part in a debate on a motion tabled by Deputy Healy and begging the Government to recognise that there was an emergency, that business as usual was not working and that it should do something different.

I am appalled that the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, would talk about social housing or big projects as “failed”. That is not my experience. I am proud to be the product of a local

authority estate. Leaving aside my own personal feelings, I am absolutely appalled that the Minister would make such a comment to justify his appalling policy of relying on a market that looks on a home as a commodity, something for profit.

There are solutions. Recognise housing as a basic human right; a right to dignity, a right to a home. Enshrine it in our Constitution. Use public land to build public housing. Have the State play a fundamental role in the market. Give the market a role, but balance that. Stop insulting people and he should stop the insults to Sinn Féin. Whatever the Minister's personal view of that party, there is a serious emergency and we require a serious solution that he is not giving us.

Deputy Joan Collins: A short film, "Through the Cracks" was shown in the AV room earlier. It shows the effect this scandalous situation has on children and their mothers. I could not make it to the showing because I was at a committee meeting, but my parliamentary assistant went and was very much affected by the film. He said that every single Deputy on the opposite side of the House, namely, those in Fine Gael and the Independent Alliance, should watch the film. It really exposes the impact the housing crisis is having on families. We can call what is happening a crisis or an emergency; I call it an absolute scandal. Regardless of how we look at the figures and at what is or is not happening, it is obvious that the situation is simply scandalous. There are 180,000 houses vacant nationwide. Speculators are sitting on development land. Local authorities and State companies are holding 70% of all zoned land, which would be sufficient for building more than 110,000 dwellings overall and 70,000 in Dublin city alone. Young workers are spending up to 70% of their incomes on rent. Accommodation for students is completely unaffordable. More than 3,000 children are in emergency accommodation, a figure that is rising year on year, month on month and week on week. I can have no confidence in the Minister. He has failed to grasp the nettle and radically change policy.

Let us be clear, however. The Minister did not create this crisis. He inherited it from his predecessor, Deputy Coveney, who inherited it from Deputy Kelly, who inherited it from Fianna Fáil. The problem in this area has obtained for the past 20 or 30 years. The policy of abandoning local authority housing, adopted by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour when in government, lies at the root of the problem. Local authorities dominated by the same parties must share the blame. They were happy to offload what they viewed as a burden. There is a solution; public housing on public land and a mix of local authority housing and cost-rental units with affordable rents and security of tenure. Until such a policy is adopted, financed and implemented, this scandal will continue to obtain.

Deputy Clare Daly: The housing crisis is now of catastrophic proportions. I have been a public representative for 20 years and I have never had to present people with the responses and the lack of hope we are obliged to present them with now. Council staff are utterly demoralised. The Taoiseach indicated this morning that the Minister is delivering houses. What sort of houses is he delivering? More houses are being delivered in this city for €700,000 than for €300,000. Whatever chance two hospital consultants might have of getting together to buy one of those houses, people on the average industrial wage certainly cannot do so. Revenue tells us that 8% of people have incomes that would allow them to buy an average semi-detached home in Dublin on the basis of current lending criteria. For whom is the Minister building these houses? Where is the affordability? Is it the affordability for vulture funds of selling or renting them back to people at extortionate levels? The situation is absolutely critical. The Minister has commodified the right to shelter and I have no confidence in any member of the Government.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: As the Minister is aware, something of the order of 5,000 in-

dividuals and families in the Dublin Bay North constituency I represent are on the city council's housing list and a further 2,500 are on the transfer list. When the Fingal part of our constituency is added - I see the Minister of Education and Skills, Deputy Bruton, is in attendance - we have by far the worst housing list in the country, higher than any other county, the whole of Fingal or the whole of south Dublin. In fact, as the Minister knows, this year Dublin City Council has only delivered 330 new tenancies in respect of a housing list of 26,000. The painfully slow and feeble steps taken by the Minister and his predecessor have done absolutely nothing to alleviate the suffering in my own constituency over the past two years. He is still putting families with children into cramped hotel rooms nearly 18 months after Deputy Coveney promised us faithfully that he would end this practice. The Minister is still putting them into hotel rooms despite the damaging impact on children's development, nutrition and well-being, matters about which we know from so many studies. He has forced families into hubs. There was supposed to be a six-week turnaround. That has not happened. He refuses to adopt any of the suggestions from this side of the House, including declaring a housing emergency, freezing rents, having a real affordable housing scheme and doing something drastic about the situation in Dublin in particular. The Minister has failed and he should go. I am of the view that those in Fine Gael and their predecessors, namely, their counterparts in Fianna Fáil who embarked on this disastrous housing policy, should be banished from Government for at least a generation.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Broughan has always been very constructive. Fair play to him.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the motion regarding confidence in the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government. I have pleaded with the Minister time and time again and informed him that immediate action is needed to tackle the housing problem. The majority of those who are becoming homeless are from the private rental sector. We are all too aware that rents are rising to unsustainable levels. It has nearly come to the point where renting is more expensive than making monthly mortgage repayments. An endless list of my constituents from Kinsale to Goleen are unable to get on the property ladder and have to resort to paying huge rents.

I am aware of several shovel-ready projects in bigger towns in west Cork where planning permission has been given but where the green light has not been given to the people involved, who are willing to sell to the council. Meanwhile, they are still looking for sites in these towns where planning permission must still be sought. There are a lot of political shenanigans going on in west Cork that need to be looked at. I am looking at them.

During negotiations on the programme for Government, we spoke about a rural resettlement scheme. Depopulation is a worrying trend in rural communities. Eight businesses have been closed in the past three weeks in my constituency. Communities do not stand still. They either develop or decline. As the housing crisis in our towns and cities worsens, there was never a better time to actively promote the concept of rural resettlement. This scheme has been rolled out in County Clare. When can we see it applied to west Cork? This is not my first time asking this question. A plan needs to be put in place to source and build affordable housing in rural communities to enable urban-based families to move to rural areas through a rural resettlement scheme. Rural resettlement needs to be explored and promoted. It is time this Government listened and took real action. If I saw real action being taken on rural resettlement, I might be able to stand here with some degree of confidence in the Minister. Action needs to be taken to protect rural Ireland and those living there. In the past two weeks, Cork County Council passed a vote of no confidence in the Minister. This was not personal but any honest politician could

not stand for what is happening today. I will support the council by supporting this motion.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am glad to be able to speak on the motion. I am not being personal about the Minister but we are sick and tired of Ministers with responsibility for housing. The Minister is the sixth person in the position in the past eight or nine years. We have had announcement after announcement but nothing happens. The Minister was in Clonmel, County Tipperary, last Thursday where he turned the sod for 26 units in Glenconnor. The same sod had been turned by the previous Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, two years ago. How many times must the sod be turned? He should get out and do the job and let people have houses.

That day I asked the builder, whom I know quite well, from Semiton, which is a good company, when he will start work. He is waiting for the letter of offer. I wonder how long he will wait for it. This is the game being played by the Government. It is playing games with people's lives and it is very sad. In the upcoming budget it would be prudent if the Government taxed and put manners on the vulture funds and removed the punitive charges on people in shops in towns and villages who want to change them back to living accommodation but face a 50% or 60% charge between council charges and VAT.

During the talks on a programme for Government we asked the then Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, to do something about VAT but he said a reduction could not be given to the builders. I asked why it could not be given to people building their own homes. Dozens of people want to build houses in rural Tipperary. Young couples who have the wherewithal and a site cannot get planning permission. It is a dog in the manger job. The Government will not build but it will not allow people to build either. I do not know what is driving it or what philosophy is behind it but the Government does not want to build houses.

There is way too much spinning for anybody to bear. More than 3,000 people are on the housing list in Tipperary and thousands more are trying to get onto it but the houses are not there. The Government must allow ordinary small builders to get out there and force the banks to give them cash. It is blocking community banking being offered in post offices. Small builders who would do the work cannot get cash. They are not rip-off merchants or big developers. Ordinary people who have houses or sites and want to build their own houses are regulated out of all proportion. We have regulation and red tape but no tangible supports for people to allow them to do the simple things we need to do. I do not mean huge plans such as Rebuilding Ireland, which has been a failure, but ordinary simple measures. The Government can do this through the budget and the negotiations on a renewed confidence and supply agreement, which will be conducted after the budget.

I am delighted to see that yesterday, a company in my area, Horizon Offsite Limited, announced job increases. It is a steel frame company that is building thousands of houses in England but cannot get accreditation here. I believe it has almost got it now. These people want to work here and can do so. They are entrepreneurs and should be left to do the work. Remove all of the red tape and allow them to work here. I am not saying we should slash regulations. I am saying we have too much red tape and it takes too long for the Department to approve local authority projects. The Government blames local councils and councils blame the Department. For years I have asked that all county managers meet the Minister to have it out with regard to who is blaming who. Get it sorted and let the people have houses. The Government has the budget to do it now.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak again on housing.

I will not blackguard the Minister or be personal in my contribution. Unfortunately, the Government blames the local authorities and wrongly so. A total of €62.5 million was promised in 2015 to Kerry, not by the Minister but by his predecessor, in what was practically the same Government. The Government did not say how long it would take for all of the money to come but I can guarantee that not much of it has come yet. The Department is slowing down local authorities with too many hurdles. In Kerry, ten rural cottages are to be built between 2016 and 2021. People are providing their own sites. Councillor Johnny Healy-Rae received a reply in a notice of motion at a council meeting the other day and I also received it. People who begin to look for a rural cottage now will have to wait three years before somebody will come out to them because the funding is not there. That is wrong.

Demountable homes are all over Kerry for single farmers who finish up in a house that is not good enough to live in but we cannot get any more of them. The Taoiseach did not know what I was speaking about when I mentioned demountable homes.

The Government will not allow the local authority to zone enough land, and what is happening is that one piece of land is developed and that developer has the monopoly to charge what he or she likes for the houses built on it. There should be competition. Zoning does not really matter. The planning authority can decide how many houses will be granted but it is wrong to grant them all on one side of a town and to allow one developer to have a monopoly.

With regard to the tenant purchase scheme, which was parked for a number of years, many people who have paid rent for their houses for 30 or 40 years are not allowed to buy them just because they are on a pension. That is very unfair after they have paid rent for 30 or 40 years. They have the savings but they are not being allowed to buy the houses because they are on social welfare and someone has to be working to qualify for the tenant purchase scheme.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: There is no need in the world for repossessions. During negotiations on a programme for Government, and at other times, I asked that local authorities be allowed to purchase these houses and rent them back to people for fair rent.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up, Deputy, please.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Perhaps they would get on their feet and have enough to buy out the houses.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Project Ireland 2040 states planning in rural areas will be granted if it will not detract from urban centres. That is very unfair and hurtful to people in rural Ireland.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to resume his seat, please.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will share time with Deputies Catherine Murphy, Fitzmaurice and Healy.

We support the motion because our solutions to the housing crisis are better than the Minister's solutions. It is as simple as that. We want a site value tax to bring development back into the core, the Minister is following an old-fashioned sprawl development model. We want bet-

ter building regulations, the Minister has been lowering apartment standards. We want a cost rental model to bring the price of rental properties down, the Minister is just pouring billions into the housing assistance payment every year, which is a subsidy to developers. We want tight vacant and derelict site charges, the Minister wants to give back the city and not take it back. We want Part V to be strengthened, the Minister wants to sell State land to private developers. We fundamentally disagree politically and that is what this vote is about.

We do not trust the Minister's numbers. Today, the Taoiseach said the numbers do not lie. I will give one example. Part V figures show the number of houses built supposedly jumped from 37 in 2016 to 522 in 2017 but of those, 55 were second-hand homes in Dublin City Council's area that were never built but bought off the market. Another 148 were long-term leases under Part V which were not actually built. We do not trust the Minister's figures and we do not like the solutions he proposes. He stands for the *status quo* and we want change.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I listened to the Minister on "Morning Ireland" today when he dismissed legitimate criticism as a stunt and repeatedly claimed he was making progress. I believe the numbers do not lie but I do not accept the Minister's numbers. The numbers tell the real and harrowing story of four families a day becoming homeless. The Minister speaks about needing to solve the housing crisis and his predecessors all said that it takes time. We have been listening to this for years.

This problem stretches way back but something that has made it much worse, and I remember the night it was introduced, is the housing assistance payment legislation. It was an attempt to outsource responsibility and reduce housing waiting lists by removing people from them. The €900 million we spend annually subsidising landlords and homelessness services is projected to increase to €1.7 billion by 2022. This is not a sustainable solution.

I listened to the Minister's numbers. We disputed in the Chamber the use of the number of ESB connections to compile housing completion figures. It is now accepted that these are not reliable. Even if half the number of social housing units relayed by the Minister were being delivered, we would see him or the Minister of State on the news every night handing out keys to families. We are not seeing those pictures because we are not seeing delivery of those houses. It has taken a long time for the penny to drop, particularly with sections of the media, that much of what has happened here is pure spin.

This is not just down to the Minister, and I agree that this matter should not be personalised. However, not only do I not have confidence in the Minister, I do not have confidence in this Government and its approach to resolving the problem. It will not listen to alternative approaches, of which there have been many in this Chamber over recent years.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I support the motion. The Minister should go, and he should take this Government with him. Housing is a fundamental human right and it should be enshrined in our Constitution. Families need a stable and secure long-term housing position to live, grow and develop. A Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats Government handed over the public house building programme to the private market, and that failed policy has been continued by successive governments, including the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government and this Government of Fine Gael supported by the Independent Alliance, despite its absolute failure. It has failed miserably and it has been a disaster for families.

Fine Gael has had seven years to tackle the housing crisis but the only result is that hous-

ing in all its aspects has been made a commodity by successive governments. It has become a commodity in an uncontrolled private commercial market. The current Government and this Minister have made things worse. We have 10,000 people homeless, including 3,500 children, and there are 100,000 families on local authority housing waiting lists. There are 30,000 families on the despicable housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme, thousands of people couch surfing or living with relatives and friends, and thousands of others caught between a rock and a hard place because they are over the limit for a local authority house but do not have enough income to be approved for a mortgage. Rents are still spiralling outrageously and house prices are still soaring, despite mortgage rates being twice the European Union average.

Would Deputies believe that the Minister has claimed that the Government's policies are working? This is not only an example of reality denial but is an insult to the victims of this so-called success, the homeless. The Minister should go, and he should take this Government with him.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: This is not personal, but the reality is there is chaos in every aspect of housing currently. In fairness, no Minister can click his or her fingers and build houses overnight. Sadly, the figures that have come out over the past two years have been lies and damned lies. I have a problem with the people who gave the Minister those figures because they have felt no repercussions for those false figures relating to house builds, especially social houses. Anyone who checked those numbers knows there are major discrepancies. Figures and words were twisted, including those relating to turnkey properties. There are words like "brownfield" and "greenfield", but at the end of the day it is about what has been built and how many families have gone into those houses.

We can speak of affordable housing, social housing, low-cost renting and people trying to buy council houses or get a loan from councils. Unfortunately, the process has been a shambles from beginning to end. The Minister has advisers, so where are they in all of this? The person at the top must call the shots and no one should keep getting a salary if there is no result. These people gave the Minister those figures and statistics, which have basically embarrassed him through the years. The captain of the ship must replace some staff if they are not pulling their weight. Unfortunately, these people are getting the same wages regardless of whether houses are built. Throughout this country and especially in the cities, people are crying out for houses. As I said, the houses will not come overnight, but unless the Minister changes the system inside, the cover-ups and false statistics, he will be in real trouble.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, said that no one on these benches had a monopoly on compassion or empathy, and I agree completely. No one on these benches believes we have that monopoly. The Government does not have a monopoly on solutions either, however, and there are solutions being suggested right across the Chamber. The Government seems to think it has a monopoly on solutions, which is half of the problem.

We need to stop people entering into homelessness as well as having policies and building programmes to take people out of homelessness. One of the reasons people are becoming homeless, according to the evidence I see in my office, is people renting privately, especially those in the HAP scheme, receiving eviction notices. These notices are served on the basis that major refurbishment is to be carried out or there is a plan to sell the property within three months of it being vacated. The reality, from my experience in Cork city, is that the majority of cases involve landlords using these loopholes to evict tenants. They have no intention of selling the property or having family members moving in, for example. They have no intention of

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carrying out major refurbishment and are using such schemes to get around the so-called rent controls. They are hiking rents to astronomical levels and people are being turfed out on the street as a result. If the Minister is serious about addressing the reasons people are entering homelessness, he should tackle these loopholes that are used by landlords to evict people and make them homeless.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: “Ireland’s housing market is clearly not functioning at present.” That is a quote from IBEC, and it, along with other organisations, has a major concern that this is affecting our ability to attract foreign direct investment. Not only has this Government’s housing plan failed, it has made the problem worse. The housing crisis is not an emergency that fell out of the sky and the current position arose from choices. The Fine Gael Party has been a part of the Government for seven years. Fianna Fáil made choices to benefit the wealthy few at the expense of many. The choices in question include a failure to build council and affordable houses, the consent for mortgages to be sold to vulture funds, the refusal to put in place a rent freeze, and the continued belief that the plan is working. There has been a sheer disregard for people in homelessness.

Since the Minister took office, homelessness in Limerick has risen from 278 people to 307, while rent prices have increased by over 21% in one year and 71% in the past five years. If Fine Gael, or Fianna Fáil for that matter, really wanted to help the thousands of citizens who remain homeless, they would prioritise these people over tax cuts in next month’s budget. Neither of the parties will do that. It is the same choice they made last year, and money comes first while people come second.

I wrote to the Minister on 19 July and I have not yet received a reply. My query came about because I was informed by Limerick’s council on numerous occasions that it was awaiting funding approval from the Department to provide houses.

Deputy Tom Neville: That has been done.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I estimate there are 70 council houses or properties in Limerick that are either vacant or boarded up. I have details of more than 40 in a list before me. For example, 55 Shanabooly Road, Ballynanty, was allocated to a family in February but they cannot move in, while 60 Canon Breen Park in Thomondgate was allocated to a family and they cannot move in because the property is not ready. There is a property at 13 Lee Estate that has been boarded up for two years, and 65 Scanlon Park at Castleconnell village has been boarded up for a year. These properties are in areas where families would love to live. I know this because I meet those families all the time. There are vacant homes in Limerick but there are also 85 families in the mid-west, the bulk of them in emergency accommodation in the city.

It gives me no satisfaction to seek the removal of any Minister, but as the real Opposition party in the Dáil, I am proud to call out this appalling failure and stand up for the interests of the people, especially those in Limerick in desperate need of secure housing.

Deputy Martin Kenny: There is a housing crisis not only in Dublin but throughout the entire country. We see it every day in my constituency of Sligo-Leitrim and across the entire western region. Here in Dublin, we meet it at its most extreme. Earlier today, I heard the Minister say houses are being built, cranes are up, people are working and building is happening. Building of a certain type of housing is happening, namely, housing for the very wealthy. There is no housing for the people who cannot afford that. There are blocks of accommodation for

students with rents of €1,000 a month, which they cannot afford. That is the kind of housing that is being built. It is not the type of housing that we need to provide homes and shelter for ordinary working people who go out every day and try to get on in life.

A motion of no confidence in a Minister is a long-established process used in this House and every parliament in the world. It is a means of highlighting an issue and holding a Minister to account, not a stunt. It has been used by the Minister's party and every other party in this Chamber for years. To call it a stunt is a disgrace.

The private market, the way the Minister wants to go, will only provide for social need in the most extreme circumstances. It does not normally provide for social need, as I have seen in my area recently. This problem affects rural and urban areas. The Minister has failed to such an extent that it is time for him to face up to reality and step aside.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. In the past, housing was seen as a basic social need. Between 1932 and 1950, between one third and half of all housing built was social housing. In the bleak 1930s, more than 38,000 houses were built. In the hungry 1950s, 52,000 houses were built. In the 1970s, when the economy was not exactly booming because of the oil crisis and everything else, nearly 62,000 social houses were built. All that building occurred in the context of a smaller population and less money being available to the State. We do not have a programme in place to get houses built quickly. The process is moving at a snail's pace.

As I have stated to the Minister inside and outside the Chamber previously, the four approval stages for the construction of local authority housing are part of the problem because they include at a total of 19 different stages. Stage 11 requires scheme design drawings to be supplied. The Minister came to County Laois to open 34 houses in Conniberry Way. Those 34 houses are welcome but, as part of that scheme, 120 drawings were exchanged between the Minister's Department and Laois County Council before approval was given to move to stage 12. I want the Minister to leave office and his successor to go over to the Custom House and sort out that issue. That is what the Government needs to do because it is slowing up the whole process.

There are 1,701 households on the housing waiting list in County Offaly and 1,575 in County Laois. Furthermore, 260 people have presented as homeless in Laois so far this year. Rents in the county have increased by 13.1% in the past year. In Offaly, they have increased by 11.9%. A street cleaner with Laois or Offaly County Council with a large family cannot get on the housing waiting list because the threshold is too low. The cut-off point is a weekly income of €500 or an annual income of €29,000 for a family with four children. Sinn Féin has put forward alternatives, such as doubling capital investment, introducing a rent freeze, increasing the availability of affordable housing and providing tax relief for renters. Those are the types of measures that are needed and the Minister has not implemented them.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Is it any wonder the Minister - and, by extension, the Government - is facing a vote of no confidence? The Government, with the collaboration of Fianna Fáil, has been in power for nearly three years and Fine Gael was in power with the Labour Party from 2011 to 2016. Fianna Fáil was the architect of this crisis. It is no surprise that its Deputies will abstain in the vote on this motion of no confidence. Fianna Fáil is equally complicit in this housing and homeless crisis. Through the so-called confidence and supply arrangement, it remains fully committed to this Government's failed policies, going as far as not supporting

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a motion which would have declared a housing emergency. Fianna Fáil has no credibility and oozes hypocrisy when it comes to housing.

The Minister cannot use the excuse of being in the job for 18 months or ask us to give him a chance. The Government has had its chance for years and it has failed. The Minister is the continuation of this failure and neglect. Under his watch, the homeless and housing crisis has worsened. He has failed to meet his own targets and commitments. He has failed to deliver affordable and social housing. He has stood over massive rent increases and unsustainable house prices. How can he justify 100,000 people being on the housing waiting lists, 10,000 people being homeless and 4,000 homeless children living in hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation? The number of families becoming homeless has increased by 24% since July 2017. One in three of those in emergency accommodation is a child. This homeless crisis is creating a lost generation. Children are being traumatised daily. This is one of the hidden costs of homelessness and the housing crisis. The human cost of the Minister's failures has been enormous.

How can the Minister justify the delays in redevelopment schemes? We have been waiting for 15 years for the redevelopment of O'Devaney Gardens, 12 years for the redevelopment of Dominick Street, five years for the redevelopment of North King Street and ten years for the redevelopment of Croke Villas. Public-private partnerships have been promised but are still on the shelf. Behind all these failures and statistics are families and children facing an uncertain and dysfunctional future. The Minister's failed policies do not only destroy futures, they destroy families and lives.

The Minister revealed his hand when he said he was opposed to the building of social housing. I come from social housing on a large-scale housing estate, as do some members of the Minister's party. The vast majority of people were born in social housing. The Minister should cop on and realise the only answer is to build more social and affordable housing.

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I am pleased to express full confidence in the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. Sinn Féin, with characteristic hypocrisy, seeks to personalise a highly complex problem, the causes of which are well known to everybody. The goal this evening is to inflict maximum political damage and feed a myth that one person alone can either solve or create a crisis. As always with Sinn Féin, the rhetoric of their spokespersons at national level is contradicted by the actions of their foot soldiers at local level where they have a history of opposing housing proposals.

Given the personalised attack on the Minister, I want to state on the record that I know Deputy Eoghan Murphy very well. I can attest to his incredible work ethic and his 24/7 commitment to resolving the housing crisis. In his actions to seek a resolution, the Minister takes a multifaceted, strategic approach that is already steadily yielding dividends. I strongly support his responsible approach to long-term planning.

I represent County Laois and can speak with some authority about the consequences of poorly thought out housing policies. During the Celtic tiger years, thousands of houses were built all over Laois, including on flood plains and at the edges of villages. Fields of houses appeared everywhere and the county did not have the infrastructure to cope. Deputy Stanley knows this better than anyone.

When the economy went over the cliff, thanks to Fianna Fáil, my county was littered with

ghost estates. We are still playing catch-up with school places, hospital beds and other vital services. I applaud the Minister for visiting my county on numerous occasions. He is well aware of the terrible mistakes of the past. I was a Member of this House during the years of the Celtic tiger and I remember the crazy policies that Fianna Fáil introduced. I remember the high price we paid for populism and chaos. We owe it to the people of Ireland to learn from the mistakes of the past and the Minister absorbs the lessons well.

The housing problem demands a constructive approach and engagement from everybody in this House, from all sides. It does not need cynical political opportunism of the type we are seeing from Sinn Féin. I reject the cynical motion.

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The empty vessels of Sinn Féin have spent months attacking the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. They have personalised their housing attack on the Minister and consistently threatened the stunt we are witnessing tonight in the motion of no confidence. They rolled out this old chestnut every time there was a slow news week. Tonight we see the hypocrisy of Sinn Féin in action. Sinn Féin has no solutions. The motion has no alternatives to rebuild Ireland. It calls only for the introduction of a new housing plan. Where is Sinn Féin's plan? We are still waiting. We know that Sinn Féin has no plan here because it had no plan when it was in government in the North of Ireland. Those in Sinn Féin continually namecheck and get incorrect - which is not unusual for Sinn Féin - the numbers on the actual housing waiting list in the Republic. I say this only to show the sheer hypocrisy of the people to my left. The population of the Republic of Ireland is 4.8 million. Yes, we have 80,000 people on our housing list and that is too high.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is 80,000 families, not people.

Deputy Regina Doherty: Yes, we have 10,000 people who are homeless and it is too high. However, in Northern Ireland there are 49,500 people on the waiting list for a population of 1.8 million.

Deputy David Stanton: What are they doing about that?

Deputy Regina Doherty: There are 11,889 men women and children homeless in the North where Sinn Féin ran from power.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister is embarrassing herself now.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, I must insist that the Sinn Féin Deputies allow the Minister to speak without interruption.

Deputy Regina Doherty: It is the truth. When Fianna Fáil was acting responsibly in 2016 in supporting the minority Government that was established, Sinn Féin went to the cinema because it had no plan. Their hypocrisy knows no bounds.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We set up a housing and homelessness committee that sat for weeks.

Deputy Regina Doherty: Sinn Féin has no policy except hypocrisy. They call for houses to be built as though they had magic beans. Their magic beans did not work in Northern Ireland and their hypocrisy and policy of spin will not work down here, lads and ladies.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Lads and ladies?

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Deputy Regina Doherty: They should get their act together and bring forward a policy and a plan that would potentially be an objective to what we are in instead of the stunts we are used to - hauling everyone into the Dáil or the time Mary Lou put everyone out of here for hours. It is wasteful, needless time when we have work to do. They are pathetic.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we proceed any further, I ask if the Ministers responding to the debate would address the Chair. They are provoking the Sinn Féin Deputies by speaking directly to them. As a proper parliamentary tactic, they should please address the Chair. I ask the Sinn Féin Deputies again to behave responsibly.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): On a point of order-----

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no point of order. The Minister of State should resume his seat.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Two minutes were wasted-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State will resume his seat.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: There were ten minutes-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State should resume his seat. I call the Minister, Deputy Michael Ring.

Deputy Michael Ring: I will try not to upset them on this side of the House because I know they are very sensitive and they do not like to be criticised. I stand here tonight as someone who came from a social house. I came from a place called Fr. Angelus Park and am very proud of it. I was the first child born in it. There were 40 houses in that estate, out of which came the finest quality of people.

I came here tonight to support the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. They tell us that he does not support social housing. Yes, he does and he has.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: He said here earlier that he does not support large scale social housing. He said that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ellis-----

Deputy Michael Ring: Dessie, we will have no bullying now from you.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy please show some respect? Minister, please. The Deputy will show some respect for the Dáil.

Deputy Michael Ring: Sinn Féin has an answer for everything but no solutions. They collapsed their Government in Northern Ireland. They would not go into government in the South. They will not represent the people who want them to represent them in the House of Commons regarding Brexit. What are they elected for at all? They do not want to take part in any conversation. They do not want to take part in government. The Minister, Deputy Murphy, has taken part in this Government. Remember two years ago, this side of the House could have formed a Government but it cannot take part and be out there protesting against everything which is what this side of the House does all the time: protest, protest, protest. This Minister is providing solutions. As far as I am concerned, I see how the Minister works at Cabinet. He is interested

in the problem, he is working on the problem and he will solve the problem. It is not easy. It is difficult. There are many people hurting tonight, and a lot of people homeless. This motion has been put down by Sinn Féin to get rid of a good man who is doing the best job possible when its only answer was to walk out of Government in the North, it walked out of Government in the South and it will not represent us in the House of Commons where we need them most in relation to Brexit. If it does not have a solution, Sinn Féin may keep their mouths shut because protest will not build one house in this country.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I hope that additional time will be added because of the interruptions from the Opposition.

An Ceann Comhairle: Well, no, the Minister of State could take the time he has got, please.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: It clearly is personal when so many members of the Opposition say it is not. We all know it is personally directed at the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy.

I concur with my colleagues on these benches about the efforts being made to resolve this huge crisis. At least we are rising to address this challenge unlike the people over there. Sometimes I wonder whether it is this Parliament or that in Westminster from which it abstains because its contribution to both is equally useless. In this State's history, it has never built a home, it has only pulled them apart. That is all it has ever done on homes in this State.

I welcome that Sinn Féin is taking the parliamentary avenue in trying to take out an opponent but this is a political stunt. It will do nothing to help the people who we are supposed to be helping, those who are seeking homes and those who are in emergency accommodation. They are doing nothing as an Opposition to help. They are being purely political. If they cared about the people they are supposed to care for, they would not turn on Deputy Eoghan Murphy now. They turned away from Government in 2016 because obviously the housing crisis was not as important as its own political interests at that time. It is the same in Northern Ireland. The figures there are shocking. They have shamelessly turned their backs on those people too.

Sinn Féin wants us to believe that it can take 10,000 out of homelessness, yet it could not even manage to get 10,000 signatures out of Antrim. That is what we are dealing with. Now they are after a head. It is in their nature to go after a head. They have gone after the head of the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, the hardest working politician I have come across since I entered the gates of this House almost eight years ago. It is completely political and it is shameless. We have heard many statistics tonight. There is one stands out most - Sinn Féin's 14% rating with RedC. It is the one statistic that Deputy Mary Lou McDonald obsesses about. After only a few short months, she is a huge disappointment. Panic is starting to set in and the response to that panic is this shameless motion.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister of State is only embarrassing himself.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The pressures of Government obviously would not suit Sinn Féin if this is the way that they respond to the pressure of an abysmal poll rating.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: We are determined to solve this problem. Let us get on with it and let the time wasters be found out.

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An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you very much. Deputy Seán Crowe is next, sharing with Deputies Martin Ferris, Pearse Doherty and David Cullinane.

Deputy Seán Crowe: There has been a lot of talk about this being personal. For me, the housing crisis is personal. I know people who are sleeping in cars, who are living in sheds. I have come across people I know who are sleeping in doorways. I know people who committed suicide when they lost their home. Three days ago, I received a letter from a woman who said she was going to commit suicide. The Minister received the same letter, as did the people in Pieta House. Therefore, for me, it is personal. It is personal, I do want solutions and we have put solutions forward. Only a fool would suggest that the Minister's measures are working. I can go through the statistics, and everyone has done that tonight. The figures are there. We have a broken system. We are not delivering for people. We are not delivering for those on housing lists or for those who are in rental accommodation who have their rents go up; it is not sustainable. People who would almost have been guaranteed to be able to afford a home, the likes of gardaí, nurses and teachers, cannot afford a home. Who are we building the homes for? Are they for landlords, for vulture funds? The system is not working, and that is what we are saying. There are solutions but the Minister is not delivering them.

10 o'clock

Today, I received a letter from a councillor in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, not my area. He said that the Minister is blaming the councils but he says that the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown council put forward a proposal for 540 new social and affordable housing units on a site in Shanganagh Castle, the old prison site. It is eight months since that local authority applied to the Department for one stage of approval.

Eight months on, that approval has not been granted even though it is the biggest council-led housing scheme in the State and is being backed by 40 councillors. There is a problem in this regard. The Minister is not delivering on this. He was talking about hubs. We have hubs in our area. The problem is that people are going into the hubs and hotels, but they are not moving out of them.

Deputy Damien English: That is not true.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Housing is not being delivered on the ground.

Deputy Damien English: That is not true.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I do not know what people are telling the Minister of State. I do not think the people sitting behind him are gobshites or fools. They know what is going on. If they do not know what is going on, there is something wrong. There is something wrong if they do not realise what is going on in their communities and in this country. We are all affected. The Minister is affected, I am affected and everyone else in this House is affected. We have to come up with solutions. The Minister is not delivering and that is why this motion has been put before the House.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Martin Ferris: As we sit comfortably in this building, 145 of my constituents - 109 adults and 36 children - are sleeping in hostels and bed and breakfasts. Sixteen families are in emergency accommodation because they cannot find homes, and another 13 families cannot find rental accommodation because they are in transition properties. A total of 3,687 people

have applied for social housing in County Kerry and a further 1,000 people are on the transfer list. A total of 517 new social housing applications were made between January and June of this year. By the end of this year, there could be more than 4,000 applicants on Kerry County Council's housing list. These figures do not include the rental accommodation scheme or leasing schemes. The Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, attacked us across the floor. He is aware of the housing list in County Kerry. He is aware of the circumstances in the county. He has tried to tell this Chamber in this debate that the Government is dealing with the problem.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: This circus is doing nothing to help.

Deputy Martin Ferris: Will the Minister of State tell me how many houses Kerry County Council built last year?

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The Deputy is wasting time.

Deputy Martin Ferris: It built five houses.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The Deputy is turning his back on the people who are most in need.

Deputy Martin Ferris: Five houses were built in County Kerry at a time when there are 4,000 people on the housing list.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: This is a circus.

Deputy Martin Ferris: The Minister of State has attacked Sinn Féin for tabling a motion against the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, and the Government.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The Deputy and his colleagues have not built any houses.

Deputy Martin Ferris: The Government has failed the ordinary people of this country, including the 4,000 people on the housing list in County Kerry.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Not one house.

Deputy Martin Ferris: They have failed the 100,000 people on the housing list in the country as a whole. Instead, the Minister of State has come in to this Chamber with his garbage.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Not one house.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I listened to Deputy Cassells. He was talking about a photocopy, but his gob was on the front page of the paper. He castigated Deputy Tóibín for not being present to get his photograph in the newspaper. Instead, Deputy Tóibín was out helping a constituent who is in mortgage difficulties. He was doing the right thing.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Martin Ferris: He was not worried about getting his puss on the front page of a newspaper.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Sinn Féin ran away from government instead of building houses.

Deputy Martin Ferris: The Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, is attacking us for doing the right thing. I would much prefer to be standing here in opposition attacking the Minister and

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holding him to account because that is what must be done. The Government has to be held to account. Fianna Fáil is propping it up and is continuing to prop it up. Fianna Fáil is a disgrace, but it is no different from what it ever was. That is all it ever was. It is the very fecking same.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Fair play to the Deputy. He has a great track record. He has a great past.

Deputy David Cullinane: The stock response from the Minister and all of the Fine Gael speakers has been to ask those of us on this side of the House how we can dare hold them to account for their failures.

Deputy Damien English: The Sinn Féin Deputies are looking for headlines.

Deputy David Cullinane: How dare we speak for children who are stuck in homeless accommodation, for families who cannot afford to buy a home and for families who are stuck paying high rents? The Minister may not like it, but Sinn Féin is the main Opposition party. Our job is to hold him to account because Fianna Fáil certainly will not do it.

The housing crisis did not happen by accident. We have high rents because the Minister failed to intervene in the market. People cannot get social houses because the Government is not building enough social houses. People cannot get affordable homes and cannot afford to buy homes in Dublin or elsewhere because the Government is not building affordable homes. The Minister needs to take responsibility rather than blaming Sinn Féin or engaging in name-calling.

We were accused of personalising the debate. Then we were accused of being hypocrites, performing stunts, playing political games and being cynical. In fact, the people on the Government side of the House are cynical. They are playing political games. The Minister said we have no solutions. The social housing document produced by Deputy Eoin Ó Broin is a solution. We have produced policies on reforming the private rented sector, reviewing the tenant purchase scheme, creating a vacant homes strategy, and assessing the true level of homelessness.

Deputy John Lahart: The documents in question are flimsy looking.

Deputy David Cullinane: We have looked at the regulation of short-term letting. We produced a capital plan for housing in our alternative budget last year.

Deputy John Lahart: The capital plan was three pages long.

Deputy David Cullinane: More important, the report of the all-party Committee on Housing and Homelessness, which was established at the behest of Sinn Féin, is based on the evidence of the experts who came before the committee and spent many hours talking to politicians about solutions. The Government cannot even implement a report that was agreed by committee members of all parties.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: We are implementing the Rebuilding Ireland plan.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government has a brass neck when he says that we should not do our job. He is being kept in his position because of Fianna Fáil, which is the developers' party.

Deputy John Lahart: What about Priory Hall?

Deputy David Cullinane: His party represents a cosseted and privileged class. I am proud to be a member of a party that represents ordinary working people. Those people are the victims of the Government's housing policies, which have failed many of them.

Deputy Michael D'Arcy: What about the Sinn Féin victims?

Deputy David Cullinane: Of course the Minister should resign.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Before I came into the Chamber, I watched a little programme that is available online. The Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, should watch it. It is about a number of families who have been in homelessness. I was struck by the story of three young children - Emily, Alannah and Glenn - who are about the same ages as my own children. They spoke about their desire to have a house. The programme showed that their mothers and fathers are working all the hours they can get. We saw how their landlords increased their rents and they had no option other than to leave their accommodation. As rents elsewhere were skyrocketing, they had to become homeless. In another case, a landlord sold the house and evicted a family who became homeless. As we sit here at 10 p.m., we must be mindful that 4,000 children are being tucked into bed and put to sleep in emergency accommodation. There are 10,000 people in total in such accommodation tonight. That is what this is about. It is a motion of no confidence in the Minister, but it is about people like Emily, Alannah and Glenn and thousands of others who are like them.

This crisis did not happen by accident. It was not caused by Mother Nature. It is a direct consequence of policy decisions that have been taken by the Government in recent years. It is very simple. If a Government decides not to invest in social and affordable housing and if it does not meet demand, it will have a housing crisis and children like Emily, Alannah and Glenn, and thousands of others, will be without homes. They will not have a roof over their heads and they will have to endure emergency accommodation. We have heard about the social impact and the long-term impact it will have on those children. The social contract is broken because these people have done nothing wrong. Their parents have done nothing wrong. They have tried to better themselves. They have tried to do the best for their children, as any parent would do. They have tried to protect their children from the ravages the world can throw at them.

The Government and its Fianna Fáil partners have let them down time and again by deciding budget after budget not to prioritise investment in social and affordable housing. Instead, it has given tax breaks to banks.

An Ceann Comhairle: Tá an t-am caite.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It has given tax cuts to the elite and the highest earners in society. That is what has happened. We have given the Government policy after policy. We have proposed that investment in social and affordable housing be doubled. We ask the Government to implement the Focus Ireland amendment. Why would anyone in Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael not support an amendment that would stop landlords who have benefited from State tax breaks evicting families and children and sending them into homelessness? That is what they have done. That is why I have no confidence in the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. That is why my party has no confidence in him. It is why the people have no confidence in him. He should

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do the right thing and resign. Fianna Fáil Deputies should not sit on their hands on this one. They should stand up and be counted on this issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes our debate on the confidence motion.

Question put.

The Dáil divided by electronic means.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The substantial number of Deputies on the “staon” list need to be given a special chance to reflect again. Therefore, I propose that the vote be taken by other than electronic means.

Deputy Regina Doherty: Stunt.

An Ceann Comhairle: A manual vote will now proceed.

Question again put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 49; Níl, 59; Staon, 29.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Adams, Gerry.</i>	<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>
<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	<i>Brassil, John.</i>
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Breen, Pat.</i>	<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>
<i>Burton, Joan.</i>	<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>
<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>
<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Gallagher, Pat The Cope.</i>
<i>Daly, Clare.</i>	<i>D’Arcy, Michael.</i>	<i>Harty, Michael.</i>
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Deasy, John.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>
<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>
<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>
<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Murphy O’Mahony, Margaret.</i>
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>	<i>O’Brien, Darragh.</i>

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<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>
<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Halligan, John.</i>	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>	<i>Kenny, Enda.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	<i>Murphy, Dara.</i>	
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	
<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>	<i>Noonan, Michael.</i>	
	<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	
	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
	<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	
	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	
	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	
	<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
	<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>	
	<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>	

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

Question declared lost.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.40 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 26 September 2018.