



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 11 Deireadh Fómhair 2018

Thursday, 11 October 2018

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Beef Environmental Efficiency Scheme Pilot

1. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to commence the process of working towards a €200 annual payment for suckler cows under the rural development programme to ensure the sustainability of the national herd; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41646/18]

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I ask the Minister for an update on the beef environmental efficiency pilot scheme announced in the budget. What are his plans to commence the process of working towards a €200 annual payment for suckler cows? Can the Minister make a commitment to further progress following the welcome commencement of the measure announced in the budget?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department is examining all appropriate measures to support the different agrifood sectors, including the suckler sector, in preparation for the next iteration of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. The measures adopted will be informed by stakeholder consultation on the needs of the sector to develop in an economically and environmentally sustainable way, as well as the relevant research and the available budget and structure of the new CAP when it is finalised.

I was pleased to secure an allocation of €20 million in the 2019 budget this week for a new pilot scheme for suckler farmers, specifically aimed at further improving the carbon efficiency of beef production. The scheme will target the weaning efficiency of suckler cows and calves, measuring the live weight of the calf at weaning as a percentage of the cow's live weight. The

data will be used to target improvements on a herd basis by giving the farmer detailed feedback on the performance of individual animals. The data collected will also be a valuable addition to Ireland's impressive database on cattle genomics. Details of the scheme will be announced in due course.

I am also confident that suckler farmers will be significant beneficiaries of the additional €23 million in funding announced for the areas of natural constraint, ANC, scheme.

The beef data and genomics programme, BDGP, is currently the main support specifically targeted for the suckler sector, which provides beef farmers with some €300 million in funding over the current rural development programme, RDP. This scheme is an agri-environmental measure to improve the environmental sustainability of the national suckler herd by increasing genetic merit of the herd.

My Department has rolled out a range of schemes as part of the €4 billion Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. In addition to the BDGP, other supports which are available for suckler and sheep farmers under Pillar II of the CAP include the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, ANCs and knowledge transfer groups. Suckler farmers also benefit from the basic payment scheme and greening payments under CAP Pillar I.

I am conscious that this has been a difficult year for the sector in terms of weather and the range of challenges associated with it. At the recent meeting of the beef round table on 3 October, I highlighted the need for stakeholders to recognise their interdependency. I urged processors to engage positively with their farmer suppliers to build the sustainability of the sector as a whole and to ensure a reasonable return for the farmers upon whom the sector relies for its development. It is essential that the position of the primary producer in the supply chain be secured if we are to build a sector for the future.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The beef round table also included discussions on the potential for producer organisations and the development of new technologies as ways of adding value along the entire supply chain, all tools to build resilience in the sector. Producer organisations would allow farmers to engage collectively with processors, with the aim of strengthening farmers' bargaining power. Additionally, I have asked Bord Bia to conduct a detailed examination of market dynamics, with the co-operation of the industry, taking into account sales of particular cuts into particular segments of the market to improve price transparency.

One of the unique strengths of the agrifood sector is our shared vision for the sustainable development of the sector in Food Wise 2025. I hope that this positive engagement will continue.

I am strongly of the view that this new provision announced in this week's budget and the existing range of supports available to suckler farmers, together with ensuring access to as many markets as possible, both for live animals and beef exports, are appropriate supports for the continued development of the sector. According to national farm survey, suckler farmers receive support equivalent to approximately €500 per suckler cow on average.

I will continue to argue for as strong a CAP budget as possible, post 2020. In particular, I am committed to ensuring that suckler farmers continue to receive strong support in the next CAP. Such payments should support and encourage suckler farmers to make the best decisions to improve the profitability, and the economic and environmental efficiency, of their farming

system. The beef environmental efficiency pilot is a positive step in that direction.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I welcome the introduction of new beef environmental efficiency pilot. It is a start in the process of delivering a proper payment to the suckler sector to ensure it is sustainable and that there is a margin and income for the farmers who are working so hard and underpinning our beef sector.

It has been a difficult process to get to additional payments made towards it. As the Minister will be aware, a number of months ago Fianna Fáil introduced a Dáil motion which the Government voted against. That motion mapped out a pathway towards the payment of €200 per suckler cow. The Minister previously set his stall against introducing a payment that would be coupled in some way to the suckler cow. However, this particular payment is a coupled coupled payment in that it is tied to both the suckler cow and calf and paid on the cow. It is important and will contribute to improved data collection.

It is vital that it be straightforward, simple and easy to operate for farmers. They must not see the money slip away through costs associated with the scheme. Will the scheme be open to all suckler farmers? When will the scheme open for applications? Will the Department provide assistance to ensure that those farmers without access to weighing scales can be provided with them to ensure there is no cost implication for them?

Deputy Michael Creed: I confirm that the scheme will be open to all farmers and not just current participants in BDGP. It is consistent with every utterance I have made in the context of the suckler sector; it is not a coupled payment. A coupled payment would run contrary to everything the industry has been striving to achieve over recent years, which is improving the quality of the herd. That is the direction of this initiative and it is compatible with the objectives of the BDGP, where currently minimal data are being collected on the weanling efficiency, that is the relative weight of the weanling to the suckler cow. It is not a coupled payment. I fundamentally believe that a coupled payment would be the wrong direction in which to travel. That is the reason there will not be a coupled element to this scheme. As I said, it is open to all farmers. I appreciate the Deputy's observations about not everybody having access to a weighing scales. That is the detail we need to work through with stakeholders, including the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation, ICBF, with which I have had some preliminary conversations. I am satisfied we can get to a situation where the majority of the payment will be to the farmers. There will be some costs insofar as they will have to access weighing scales but I believe we can do that in a very cost-efficient manner.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is crucial that the drive to improve the payments being made continues. This is a decent start. We would have liked to have seen more but I acknowledge and welcome it as a good start. I have been clear with the Minister that, from a Fianna Fáil perspective, we would be flexible regarding the way in which the payment would be delivered to the suckler cow sector, the key point being that the payment is forthcoming and that we see not only a message going out but a demonstration in terms of funds that there is an understanding of the pressure the sector is under and that it would be supported.

Can the Minister confirm today that the funding for this scheme will not be taken from other unspent funds in the rural development programme, RDP, and that it will be additional funding? Will he commit today that he has seen the light and will work towards the achievement of a €200 annual payment per suckler cow? He indicated he was not willing to do it in this budget and that he would seek to provide for it in the future and in the next CAP. It is great we have

got to the stage where he has come around to introducing this scheme and starting off this process here today? Will he commit that this is his policy and that this work will continue in the context of the next budget and future ones towards the achievement of a €200 annual payment per suckler cow? Fianna Fáil will be driving forward to achieve that. I acknowledge the strong support and campaigning for this from the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, and the *Irish Farmers Journal*, which have highlighted the need for this support in the budget. It is important that work continues and that additional progress is made.

Deputy Michael Creed: The commitment of the Government to the suckler cow sector, which underpins the beef industry, was never in question. We are the only member state that has a specifically focused initiative in our rural development programme for the suckler sector in the context of the beef data and genomics programme, which is delivering €300 million to the suckler cow sector. I have always said that in the context of supports it would have to be compatible with the objective of improving the genetic merit of the herd. That is compatible with our objectives in respect of climate change to make sure that the industry is as carbon efficient as possible. Much of that effort in terms of carbon efficiency leads to profitability for the farming sector also. The refrain the Deputy and I would have often heard at public meetings is that the cost of keeping a suckler cow for a 12-month period can be €700 to €800 and if she is quite an inefficient cow the cost could run over €1,000. The objective of the BDGP, and this scheme, is to accelerate a situation where the genetic merit of that herd delivers a smaller suckler cow, a bigger weanling, a cow that is in calf every year, that has an easy calving, that has sufficient milk to deliver a quality suckler cow and, in achieving all of those, improves profitability and drives down the carbon footprint. That is the direction of travel to which I have been committed from day one. I am glad that others now see the merit of going along the direction of a measure that is compatible with the BDGP rather than a coupled payment.

Agriculture Schemes

2. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which he plans to tackle the crisis in the beef and suckler sector. [41466/18]

Deputy Martin Kenny: I welcome the scheme. It is a move in the right direction. I mentioned to the Minister at a committee meeting a few weeks ago that we needed to come up with something outside the box and that it needed to be related to the calf. That, by and large, is what has happened. I understand an action must be involved in it. There is some concern about the cost of the weigh-in and the way that will work out. Perhaps the Minister will give more detail on how farmers will manage that, particularly in areas where traditionally there would not have been the use of a weighing scales except when farmers went to the mart which is the only time they would have seen the use of a scales. That is a problem for farmers in many areas. The bigger issue for the suckler and beef sector is the price the farmer gets. That must be dealt with. Currently prices are very low for beef when it goes to the factory and that has a knock-on effect all the way back down to the weanling in the market.

Deputy Michael Creed: My Department is examining all appropriate measures to support the different agrifood sectors, including the suckler sector, in preparation for the next iteration of the CAP. The measures adopted will be informed by stakeholder consultation on the needs of the sector to develop in an economically and environmentally sustainable way, as well as the relevant research and the available budget and structure of the new CAP when it is finalised.

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I was pleased to secure in the budget this week an allocation of €20 million in 2019 for a new pilot scheme for suckler farmers, the beef environmental efficiency programme. The data collected on this will also be a valuable addition to Ireland's already impressive database on cattle genomics. Details of the scheme will be announced in due course.

The BDGP is currently the main support specifically targeted for the suckler beef sector, which provides Irish beef farmers with some €300 million in funding over the current rural development programme period. This scheme is an agri-environmental measure to improve the environmental sustainability of the national suckler herd by increasing the genetic merit within the herd.

My Department has rolled out a range of schemes as part of the €4 billion rural development programme. In addition to the BDGP, other supports include GLAS, ANCs and knowledge transfer groups. Suckler farmers also benefit from the basic payment scheme and the greening payments under CAP Pillar I.

I am conscious this has been a difficult year for the sector in terms of weather and the range of challenges associated with it. At the recent meeting of the beef round table on 3 October, I highlighted the need for stakeholders to recognise their interdependency. I urged processors to engage positively with their farmer suppliers. It is essential that the position of the primary producer in the supply chain be secured if we are to build a sector for the future.

The beef round table also included discussions on the potential for producer organisations and the development of new technologies as ways of adding value along the whole supply chain, all tools to build resilience in the sector. Producer organisations would allow farmers to engage collectively with processors, with the aim of strengthening farmers' bargaining power. Additionally, I have asked Bord Bia to conduct a detailed examination of market dynamics, with the co-operation of the industry, taking into account sales of particular cuts into particular segments of the market in order to improve price transparency.

One of the unique strengths the agrifood sector has is our shared vision for the sustainable development of the sector in Food Wise 2025. I hope that this positive engagement will continue.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

I am strongly of the view that this new provision announced in this week's budget and the existing range of supports available to suckler farmers, together with ensuring access to as many markets as possible, both for live animals and beef exports, are appropriate supports for the continued development of the sector. According to national farm survey already suckler farmers receive support equivalent to approximately €500 per suckler cow on average.

I will continue to argue for as strong a CAP budget as possible, post-2020. In particular, I am committed to ensuring that suckler farmers continue to receive strong support in the next CAP. My view is that such payments should support and encourage suckler farmers to make the best decisions possible to improve the profitability, and the economic and environmental efficiency, of their farming system. The beef environmental efficiency pilot is a positive step in that direction.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister spoke about producer organisations being one of the answers to this issue, and perhaps they are. Additional supports are provided for producer or-

ganisations. However, in the past, most emphasis was placed on reducing the cost to the farmer of producing the product. That emphasis needs to switch towards improving the price for the farmer. I strongly believe we need to get that right. As I have said umpteen times, and I know the Minister agrees with me, we produce an excellent quality product. Irish beef is grass-fed, free-roaming, traceable from farm to fork, and comes from family farms, all of the elements the European consumer wants, yet we consistently find that the price returned to the Irish farmer is little or no better than that returned to the average European farmer. That is not right and should not be the case. Something needs to be done to ensure the Irish farmer gets a premium price for what is recognised worldwide as a premium product. In that context the beef forum has failed Irish farmers in securing an enhanced price. That is where we are at on this issue. While I understand marketing is under way and we are talking about getting into new markets in Kuwait and other countries around the world, farmers are not seeing an increased value for their product when they go to the mart in Leitrim or in Cavan to sell their weanlings or when they fatten their animals and bring them to marts in the other end of the country. We need to see something happening.

Deputy Michael Creed: If the yardstick by which the Deputy measures the success or failure of the beef forum is in its capacity to deliver price, it is inevitable it will fail because the forum is not a price-fixing mechanism. By law we are specifically excluded from considering price. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission has advised the Department that it has no function in that regard. However, there are many other things that forum can do and achieve, one of which is building such a collaborative approach. I look forward to a day when all the stakeholders will engage in that context. The problem currently, on which the Deputy has touched, is the position of the beef farmer in terms of being a price taker as a stand-alone supplier. The benefit which producer organisations can bring is to give the supplier more power. It will make the supplier more efficient in the case of groups which are purchasing inputs etc. and it will also give him or her power when negotiating specification and supply on the basis of prices. That is missing from the architecture but it is very much part of the architecture of other countries.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I understand that. I am not talking about price fixing but enhancing the industry in order that a better price is returned to the primary producer. There is quite an irony in the Minister stating the rules set it up for the big processors to do very well but not for the farmer to do well. That needs to be examined.

We need to look at specification and supply. When I go to buy a piece of roast or some mince, there is nothing on the packaging to state whether it comes from a U grade or an O grade or whether the animal was aged 30 months or 35 months. The rules and regulations curtail the price that is returned to the farmer and this needs to be re-examined quickly.

The new scheme is meant to be a pilot scheme. Is it intended to make it a permanent scheme, one that will be in place in the long term? People are a bit nervous about pilot schemes because they come and go. We want a scheme that is sustainable into the long term. In the budget, the Government found another €1 billion. In that context, a little more could be done to return a better supply of money to the agricultural sector.

Deputy Michael Creed: I share the Deputy's concern that farmers should get the best possible return for their endeavours because without their commitment to producing a quality product, the edifice that is the Irish beef industry would collapse, domestically and internationally. I have said *ad nauseam* that processors also need to be aware of the symbiotic relationship

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that exists and I asked that they engage in the beef forum, bilaterally if not directly, which they agreed to do.

A pilot scheme is followed by evaluation and I am confident that the data which will be collected and fed into the process will be significant and will ensure the initiative is mainstreamed. Until we see the data, however, and see how successful it has been it would be premature to say it will definitely be mainstreamed. If it is not a success and does not help us accelerate the improvement of the beef herd's genetic content, we would have to consider other initiatives but I am confident that it will achieve its aims and that it will be mainstreamed subsequently.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy McConalogue has kindly agreed to let Deputy Mattie McGrath put his Question No. 4 before Deputy McConalogue's Question No. 3, as Deputy McGrath has another engagement in the House.

Fodder Crisis

4. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures he is taking for the fodder crisis; the measures he is taking to import high-concentrate foods to make up for fodder shortages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41636/18]

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank Deputy McConalogue for facilitating me. I have to attend a meeting of the Business Committee at 10.30 a.m. My question is about the fodder crisis, which is having a severe impact in Tipperary, east Waterford, south Kilkenny and east Cork, as well as other parts of the country. I want to know what measures the Minister is putting in place. I asked in July and he was devoid of answers on how to help distressed farmers.

Deputy Michael Creed: I am grateful to have the opportunity to inform the House of the actions I have undertaken in seeking to ensure sufficient supplies of fodder for the coming winter and spring of 2019. A survey of fodder supplies in September, conducted on my behalf by Teagasc, indicated that the potential national fodder deficit had reduced from 18% earlier this summer to 11% at that time. Further reductions are anticipated since this survey was conducted as farmers continue to harvest fodder in what has been a productive autumn period on Irish farms.

My priority is to support the conservation of as much fodder for the coming winter as possible from own resources, and to supplement this with necessary imports as required. To achieve this I introduced a number of targeted measures. I introduced a €2.75 million fodder production incentive for tillage farmers to encourage tillage growers to actively engage in the fodder market and there has been very positive uptake of this measure - in the region of 20,000 ha.

I further announced a €4.25 million fodder import support measure for autumn 2018. The measure seeks to reduce the cost to farmers of imported forage. While the measure will operate through the co-operatives and registered importers, the actual beneficiaries will be farmers who need supplies of fodder.

Additionally, I secured agreement from the European Commissioner, Phil Hogan, to pay higher advance Pillar 1 and 2 payments, which will be increased to 70% and 85%, respectively, resulting in €260 million in additional cashflow for farmers at a vital time of the year. Furthermore, following consultation with the European Commission, my Department made some tem-

porary adjustments to the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, for this year and, in consultation with my ministerial colleague, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, a two-week extension of the closed period for the spreading of chemical and organic fertilisers was announced and has allowed farmers capitalise on autumn grass growth for fodder production.

I am confident that the range of measures introduced by me to date, taken together and targeted at producing as much fodder as possible from our own land, is the most effective response to ensuring adequate supplies ahead of the coming winter. I do not propose to introduce measures to support the importation of concentrate feed. However I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to closely monitor and engage on this significant challenge during the coming period.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Animal welfare and sustenance is the most important thing to any farmer, along with crops. Our farmers are excellent at animal husbandry but they are worried and fearful. I note that the Minister has revised the deficit down from 20% to 18%. It is going down every day.

Deputy Michael Creed: It has now got down to 11%. The Deputy needs to get his facts right.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Two weeks ago the Minister said it was 20% but it is 11% now. I do not know who is providing his figures or where he is getting them from but this is not the real situation on the ground.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: Grass is growing.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The reality on the ground is somewhat different. Thankfully, we have had a fortuitous year in terms of growth and I welcome the initiatives for cash crops, as well as the tinkering that there has been with the slurry and so on. Such matters should be based on weather anyway and not tied to calendar dates. As the Minister should know, the weather is all important. He used to be a farmer but he is now totally removed from agriculture. There has been inaction throughout spring and summer.

Deputy Michael Creed: In all the Deputy's contributions I have not heard a single positive suggestion, which is a continuation of a theme.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister is in charge.

Deputy Michael Creed: We had this discussion prior to the summer recess and the Deputy's contribution was equally unfocused and lacking in specifics. On the other hand, I have had positive engagement with all the stakeholders, which include farm organisations. All the initiatives Deputy Mattie McGrath denigrates, which have achieved substantial progress for farmers, came from the stakeholder forum. In denigrating the things we have delivered, he denigrates all the stakeholders as well.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I do not denigrate any measures but welcome them, small as they are. I was denigrating the Minister on account of his slowness to take action. I represent farmers in Tipperary and in the whole community. I mentioned the south of the county but up in Cloughjordan, in the north of the county, they were completely burned by the drought. The Minister has made no real efforts to address this. I would love to know what inducements he is giving to stakeholders to come up with the figures he has given us. The situation on the ground

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is very different and many farmers have huge issues with not having enough fodder and no way of getting funding. The banks effectively are not working and the money announced in last year's budget was not drawn down, while this year's budget was a damp squib for agriculture. Suckler herds are on their knees and farmers in that sector wanted €200 per cow but the Minister gave them €40 but one must weigh calves and their mothers, meaning the farmers must spend €50 to get €40. The Minister's treatment of farmers is farcical.

The west has not been badly affected and it may be possible to get fodder from there, in a reversal of what normally happens. The Minister's inaction is disgraceful and whoever is manipulating them for him, his figures are not real.

Deputy Michael Creed: The Deputy should reflect seriously on the accusation he has made against Teagasc to the effect that it has manipulated figures. It conducted a national fodder survey, the veracity of which has been accepted by all stakeholders. I accept that within the national deficit of 11%, there are individual holdings where it is higher. The best outcome from the stakeholder forum was the advice from the advisory services, namely, Teagasc, private advisers or co-operatives. The Deputy should reflect on his charge that a State organisation has manipulated figures.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It has questions to answer.

Deputy Michael Creed: The Deputy is seeking a cheap headline. It is rather unfortunate to try to make a cheap political point on the backs of farmers, who have had an extremely difficult year.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The farmers have sleepless nights. Certain others do not.

Deputy Michael Creed: It is a hit-and-run effort by Deputy Mattie McGrath. He will not even stay for the rest of Question Time.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister does not even run or hit.

Beef Industry

3. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the price beef farmers are receiving for their produce from factories; the details of the discussions at the recent beef forum meeting; the actions and deadlines agreed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41647/18]

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I wish to ask the Minister to discuss the price of beef farmers are receiving currently from the factories, to give an overview of discussions at the recent beef forum meeting and to give an update on the actions and deadlines agreed at it. As the Minister is aware, beef farmers are under immense pressure at present due to the factories taking advantage of them. Farmers have to release additional cattle into the system. As a result, we are seeing pressure on prices at a time that farmers cannot afford to bear it. We need an update from the Minister on actions taken to address this, particularly actions agreed at the beef forum.

Deputy Michael Creed: As the Deputy will be aware and as I have mentioned to Deputy Martin Kenny, in accordance with competition law neither I nor my Department have any role in determining market prices for any commodity, nor can I intervene in this process. I am con-

scious that this has been a difficult year for the sector due to weather and the range of challenges associated with it. We have to acknowledge that input costs at farm level will be unexpectedly high this year as a result of fodder shortages.

At the recent meeting of the beef round table on 3 October, I highlighted the need for stakeholders to recognise their interdependency. I urged processors to engage positively with their farmer suppliers to build the sustainability of the sector as a whole and to ensure a reasonable return for the farmers upon whom the sector relies for its development. It is essential that the position of the primary producer in the supply chain be improved if the industry wishes to build a sustainable future for itself. The beef round table also included discussions on the potential for producer organisations and the development of new technologies as a way of adding value along the whole supply chain through increased engagement in the bioeconomy. These discussions were aimed at highlighting available tools to build resilience in the sector.

I noted that a commitment was made at the beef round table in 2015 to legislate for the recognition of producer organisations, POs, in the beef sector. This initiative was supported by all sectoral stakeholders and in February 2016, a statutory instrument was signed into law to give a legal basis for my Department to maintain a register of recognised POs in the beef sector. The recognition of POs will encourage primary beef producers to form producer organisations and allow farmers to engage collectively with processors. The ultimate aim is to ensure the viable development of production by strengthening farmers' bargaining power with downstream operators. At the round table on 3 October, I also asked Bord Bia to conduct a detailed examination of market dynamics with the co-operation of the industry, taking into account sales of particular cuts into particular segments of the market, to improve price transparency.

One of the unique strengths of the agricultural sector is our shared vision for the sustainable development of the sector in the Food Wise 2025 strategy. I hope that this positive engagement will continue.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

In regard to the beef sector more generally, I was pleased to secure €20 million in the recent budget for a new pilot scheme targeted at suckler farmers and specifically aimed at further improving the carbon efficiency of beef production. The pilot will build on existing work in this area and inform the development of future policy direction.

My Department is examining all appropriate measures to support the different agrifood sectors, including the suckler sector, in preparation for the next iteration of the CAP. I will continue to argue for as strong a CAP budget as possible post 2020. In particular, I am committed to ensuring that suckler farmers continue to receive strong support in the next CAP. My view is that such payments should support and encourage suckler farmers to make the best decisions possible to improve the profitability and economic and environmental efficiency of their farming system.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Minister for his response. The unfortunate reality is that he has allowed the beef forum to become little more than a talking shop. That is reflected by the fact that instead of being at the beef forum, around the table with the Minister and the factories, the farming organisations were outside protesting at how they are being squeezed, pressurised and taken advantage of through the price they are getting at the factory. While prices have increased across the Irish Sea in recent weeks, they have been decreasing here,

to the extent that prices are now dropping below €3.80 and €3.75 per kilogram, with further downward pressure on them. That is simply unacceptable. The last time this beef forum met was in February 2017. The Minister was not planning on having the meeting until the end of this month. Three weeks ago, I called for it to be brought forward and dealt with immediately. Thankfully, the Minister decided to do that it was but too late. Why did the Minister not meet representatives of the meat factories during the summer drought to ensure they would not take advantage of it? Unfortunately we have seen talks, discussions and considerations but no real action or delivery for the farmers. I ask the Minister to clarify the particular actions that were agreed. Moreover, how did he hold the factories to account for the fact that they are offering lower prices to farmers at a time when they simply cannot afford it?

Deputy Michael Creed: I find it slightly confusing that the Deputy says the beef forum is only a talking shop on one hand, and on the other makes great play of calling for that talking shop to convene. I repeat what I said to Deputy Martin Kenny. By law, neither I nor the forum has any role in respect of price. I have taken initiatives to give the primary producer, the beef and suckler farmers whom we discussed earlier, greater clout. We have tried to promote producer organisations to avoid a situation where a farmer drives up and delivers cattle as a price taker. Through organisation, a large number of farmers are able to engage with the processing sector from a position of strength. That is the advantage of producer organisations. In other big beef economies such as France, producer organisations are a key part of the architecture and enable farmers to engage from a position of greater strength than they can as single farmers. We need to develop that further. We have the legislative framework for them. We have approved facilitators which have not yet been activated. There is a role there that needs to be exploited. As for price, the Deputy knows there is nothing the forum can do about price.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We understand that the Minister cannot dictate the price. It is not something that a Government can control or decide, but what the Minister can do is hold the meat factories to account. He can also ensure that there is transparency in the pricing system and the price that farmers are getting. Unfortunately he has been doing neither of those things. He is simply throwing his hands in the air, not using his position to maximum capacity by holding the meat factories to account and ensuring a light is shone on their treatment of farmers and the prices they offer. Why is there a significant price gap with the UK which has been increasing in recent months? Why is it that in recent weeks, the gap between European prices and Irish prices has diverged so much? These are issues on which the Minister has failed to hold the factories to account. When the drought was impacting during the summer, the Minister failed to maximise his influence to tell the factories that under no circumstances could they take advantage of farmers and profiteer on the pressure they were under. It is time for the Minister to take more control of this interaction and ensure transparency. In light of the explanations he has been given, what has he decided to do and what actions will he take in his engagement with the factories in the coming weeks?

Deputy Michael Creed: The engagement at the forum was quite useful in addressing all the factors that influence the market, such as the impact of the weather, as I discussed with Deputy Mattie McGrath. The weather phenomenon had an impact right across Europe. On any analysis of the number of cattle slaughtered, the weather resulted in a downward pressure on price because of the increase in slaughter. For example, we would normally have a market for cow beef in Scandinavian countries during the summer, particularly in Sweden. That did not materialise to any great extent this year because of significant cattle slaughter in that country due to fodder issues.

The market is complex and dynamic. We engaged on this at the forum. As I repeated earlier, neither I nor the forum has a role in telling the factories that they must pay a certain price. I did encourage them to engage. The forum is usually a place where farm organisations and factories engage intensively on these matters. At the forum, processors made a commitment to be open to further engagement, whether at the forum or bilaterally between farm organisations and meat processors.

Brexit Issues

5. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his contingency plans both short and long-term in the context of a Brexit both with and without a backstop in view of well established and highly integrated Ireland and UK supply chains; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41575/18]

Deputy Catherine Murphy: This questions relates to contingency planning for Brexit, with or without a backstop. The agrifood sector is exposed to risks and geography plays a part in the fresh food industry. Will the Minister give an indication of the scenario where there is a deal and of the scenario in which we will rely on the backstop?

Deputy Michael Creed: In line with the Government decisions of 18 July and 18 September, my Department has been working closely with other Departments on Brexit preparedness. The primary focus has been on the staffing, infrastructural and IT requirements that will arise in the context of the implementation of import controls at ports and airports on an east-west basis.

Depending on the shape of the final deal, these requirements are likely to be significant and will arise in respect of the import of live animals, plants and products of animal and plant origin from the UK into Ireland and the EU once the UK has become a third country. There are also likely to be significant export certification requirements for the export of such products to the UK, although this is a matter for the UK authorities.

Accordingly, I have made provision in my Department's Estimate for 2019 for the commencement of a phased process of recruitment of additional staff to carry out the greatly increased volumes of import controls and export certification arising from Brexit. A sum of €4 million has been set aside for this purpose, with a further initial provision in 2019 of just over €3 million to address ICT hardware and software requirements. Further expenditure is planned in these areas in 2020 and 2021, with full-year staffing costs from 2021 estimated to be €28 million.

My Department is also continuing to engage intensively with the Office of Public Works and other Departments on the additional infrastructure that will be required at ports and airports, in accordance with the Government decision of 18 September 2018.

Together with my colleagues, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, and the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Heather Humphreys, I recently launched a new Government communications campaign on Brexit preparedness. This will provide information to stakeholders on our planning activities, and includes a series of so-called "Brexp0" events during the month of October.

Additionally, the Government has introduced a range of measures to deal with the short-

term impacts of Brexit. To deal with competitiveness issues, my Department introduced a €150 million low-cost loan scheme, new agri-taxation measures and increased funding under the rural development and seafood development programmes in the 2017 budget. In budget 2018, I provided €25 million to underpin a €300 million Brexit loan scheme to provide affordable flexible financing to Irish businesses, at least 40% of which will be available to food businesses. This scheme will be rolled out in 2019.

Under market diversification, my Department is supporting Bord Bia in its investment in market insight through its The Thinking House, and in market prioritisation initiatives aimed at identifying and developing potential diversification opportunities. I have increased funding to Bord Bia by 60% since 2014.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House.

As regards product diversification, I am supporting Teagasc in the development of a new national food innovation hub in Fermoy and will provide €6 million for this purpose in 2019.

I also announced further measures worth €78 million in this week's budget, which are aimed at helping farmers, fishermen, food SMEs and my Department navigate the many challenges associated with Brexit.

I assure the Deputy that the Government remains focused on supporting the agrifood industry through the challenges ahead. The Government will be firm in arguing that any agreement reached between the EU and the UK must take account of the serious challenges presented by Brexit for the sector, particularly given the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland and the importance of our economic relationship with the UK. Of course, ultimately, Ireland's objective in the negotiations is to have a trading relationship with the UK which is as close as possible to the current arrangements.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The short-term impacts for some, particularly smaller producers, will be on their survival and the flexibility of a loan scheme will be important. The smaller the producer, the less expertise they will have available to them. It will probably be about keeping the show on the road for small niche producers. The requirement for proximity to the market for fresh food producers means there is a high dependency on the UK. Has the Minister evaluated the flexibility of the loan scheme and examined its availability or the uptake of it by smaller suppliers in the sector? We all understand there are likely to be controls and checks at borders, and this infrastructure must be put in place, but looking at it from a producer's perspective, what contingency plans are in place for the survival of smaller producers?

Deputy Michael Creed: I thank the Deputy. The agrifood sector has exposure to the UK market, which accounts for almost 40% of our exports, and if smaller and artisan producers want to put their toe in the water to export, the UK is the logical and obvious place to go. They are particularly challenged, and very often they do not have in-house expertise or resources to navigate all of the challenges. This is why considerable effort has been made by State agencies, including Bord Bia and Enterprise Ireland, to, in a way, handhold, reach out and assist these industries to prepare, to look at market diversification opportunities and to look at how they can navigate the challenges in their supply chain logistics, particularly because the sterling impact will be immediate. This is detailed work, which has been informed by the stakeholder consultation. The responses of agencies such as Bord Bia has been to tailor products to meet the specific needs of individual companies.

On the loan scheme, 40% of the existing €300 million working capital scheme is ring-fenced for small and medium-sized agrifood enterprises, including artisan food producers, because of the Department's contribution. It has only been on the market since earlier in the year and the drawdown is beginning to accelerate. It will be available over a number of years. I am anxious that awareness and access will improve in the coming weeks.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: What are the stakeholder meetings telling the Minister about the flexibility of the loan scheme? Is he listening to the stakeholders? Is he taking initiatives to change the nature of the scheme? Hand holding is fine to point people in directions but it may well be that systems are required to link suppliers as opposed to individuals trying to get a loan through the loan scheme and trying to navigate it themselves. It may well be that a collaborative approach is required and State intervention might be needed to assist.

Deputy Michael Creed: The range of assistance is significant and some of it takes the form of loans. Loans are not always what are needed so in this year's budget the Department has a €13 million loan fund for small and medium-sized enterprises to assist with innovating new products. It will also assist companies with a product that was specifically targeted to the UK market to diversify and tweak the product for a different market. There is capital grant assistance and assistance for product innovation through further investment in the food innovation hub in Moorepark and the prepared consumer food facility at Ashtown. There is a range of incentives. The €300 million loan scheme is for working capital for a sector that has proved it is Brexit exposed. The consultation also identified a need for access to loans at competitive rates for capital investment. We will bring to market a further €300 million loan fund specifically geared for longer-term low-interest finance for capital investment in plant or facilities that will assist companies to navigate the Brexit challenge.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Common Agricultural Policy Reform

6. **Deputy Tom Neville** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position with regard to discussions on the next CAP reform; and his priorities for the next CAP. [41294/18]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Permission has been given to Deputy McLoughlin to take the question tabled by Deputy Neville.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: On behalf of my colleague, Deputy Neville, who cannot be here this morning, I want to ask the Minister about the position on discussions on the next CAP reform and his priorities for it. I ask the Minister to outline this.

Deputy Michael Creed: Proposals for new regulations for the CAP for 2021 to 2027 were published on Friday, 1 June 2018 by the Commissioner, Mr. Hogan. The proposals as drafted involve significant changes, including on governance, the distribution of direct payments among farmers and the increasing environmental conditionality attaching to such payments. There will be some additional discretion for member states in configuring the measures available, within parameters laid down in Council regulations. Risk management measures, and

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measures to support young farmers and new entrants will be mandatory, and there will be a significant emphasis on education and technology adoption. At least 5% of rural development funds will be ring-fenced for the LEADER programme.

The Commission's objective is to have the proposals adopted by the co-legislators in spring 2019, prior to European Parliament elections in May that year. Preliminary discussions of the draft proposal took place at the informal Council meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria, and Agriculture Ministers discussed the proposals in more detail at the recent agri-fish Councils. Further discussions will take place in Luxembourg on 15 October. In general, member states have expressed concerns about the level of the budget and the different nature and additional complexity for reasons stated.

The Austrian Presidency has implemented an intensive programme of working party meetings to discuss specific aspects of the CAP proposals. Meetings commenced in July and have continued into September and October, where up to ten additional working party meetings have been scheduled. To date, the special committee of agriculture has been provided with three separate updates on the state of play of the working party meetings. A progress report on CAP post-2020 discussions was presented at the special committee on 8 October in preparation for the upcoming Agriculture and Fisheries Council in October.

I am pleased to see the continued commitment in the new proposals to direct payments. They are a crucial component of the family farm income and their value cannot be underestimated. They provide income support, help prevent land abandonment and contribute towards economic growth in rural areas, as well as contributing towards the public goods that are delivered by farmers across Ireland and the European Union. This emphasises the need to continue to seek to secure an adequate and appropriate budget for CAP post-2020.

Another key feature is the increased environmental conditionality of CAP post-2020. A minimum of 40% of the CAP budget for each member state must be devoted to the environment and climate change. This increased conditionality recognises the role agriculture has to play in helping us meet our climate objectives. All European countries, including Ireland, have commitments under the Paris accord. I have always been clear that protecting the environment and maintaining our agrifood sector go hand in hand, and one cannot have one without the other. I want to see a future CAP playing a major role in supporting the farm sector in contributing to climate change mitigation and improved water quality and biodiversity.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

My officials and I are working constructively on the CAP proposals. My Department has engaged in a consultative process with all stakeholders involved. In February this year, I launched my Department's public consultation process. As part of that process, both the Minister of State, Deputy Doyle, and I participated in six public meetings held to discuss the future of the CAP in various locations around the country. The public consultation was followed by a consultative conference with stakeholders in July. The outcome of the public consultation process and the stakeholder conference is feeding into the Department's analysis and consideration of Ireland's position on key issues in the proposals.

The CAP proposals are intrinsically linked to the proposals for the overall EU budget, the multi-annual financial framework, MFF. The MFF proposes a 5% cut to the overall CAP budget. While decisions on this are a matter for Heads of State and Ministers for Finance, I have

worked with my colleagues in the Agriculture and Fisheries Council to gain agreement on the need to protect the CAP budget. In May this year I, along with my EU ministerial colleagues from France, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Finland, signed a joint memorandum seeking the retention of the CAP budget at current levels. The memorandum was presented at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in Luxembourg on 18 June, and up to 20 other EU Ministers have signalled their support to this proposal. At the Council on 16 July 2018, France and Germany presented a joint declaration that included a rejection of the cuts proposed. This paper was supported by other member states, including Croatia, Romania, Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, Belgium and Ireland. The retention of a sufficient budget for CAP is an essential requirement for Ireland. This is even more important against the background of Brexit.

We are engaged in the negotiation process but many aspects remain to be clarified so it is by no means certain what the final outcome of the proposals will be. I reassure the Deputy that I am committed to securing the best possible outcome for Ireland in the continuing negotiations.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I thank the Minister. Some people have expressed concern about the level of the budget and the direct payments. We have spoken in the past couple of days about the amount of funding to tackle climate change, and that is uppermost in people's minds here. Will the Minister elaborate on these matters?

Deputy Michael Creed: The concern is that the budget as presented by Commissioner Phil Hogan is inadequate. We should bear in mind that the Commission can only spend the money member states give them, and we must acknowledge that Europe has other big challenges, including migration, security etc. We have always argued that member states should contribute more, and that must be done by unanimous agreement. We have indicated as a Government a willingness to contribute more to the European project, and the other challenges I alluded to are not a reason to raid the CAP budget.

The first hurdle we must clear is to get an adequate budget for the CAP because it guarantees high quality food and because of the environmental benefits it brings. There is a clear indication that the citizens of Europe have said they are prepared to support that, provided there is a greater degree of environmental ambition. This brings me to the clear content of the proposal published in early June by Commissioner Hogan, which is that there will be greater conditionality on the payments that farmers currently get. They will have to prove they are acting in a way that provides further benefit to the environment in terms of water quality, biodiversity etc. Most farmers acknowledge that.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: The biggest concern is the budget, particularly the funding this country puts into it and what we get out of it. Climate has also been mentioned and it is a major concern for everybody in this country. Will the Minister elaborate on those matters?

Deputy Michael Creed: When we seek more funds from the CAP, it should not be misinterpreted as us with the bowl out looking for more from Europe. We pay in more to the European Union than we get out in net terms. We are a net contributor to the European Union budget. The CAP is of such importance not just to farmers or the rural community but to the citizens of Europe as a whole, as well as citizens of the world because we are a net food exporting region. This is in the context of climate change, the high standards of production we have and the growing global population. CAP is as crucial now as it ever was, and our asking for more funding should therefore be seen in such a context.

It is inevitable that there will be greater conditionality and the timelines are extremely challenging. The Commission remains hell-bent on trying to agree a position before the European Parliament elections where the Parliament and the Council of Ministers would also have an agreed position. Trilogues will be entered into at this stage; there is much jargon around this but essentially this involves three parties sitting around a table in order to get a final deal. This will be very challenging as the premise is that the incoming Parliament would accept or be bound by the positions taken by the previous Parliament. Even if that were the case, the timeline is very challenging in the context of everything else that must be concluded with respect to Brexit etc.

Agriculture Schemes

7. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to introduce a new low-cost loan scheme to help farmers as debts and costs mount. [41474/18]

Deputy Jackie Cahill: We had the budget on Tuesday and there was extreme disappointment because there was no new low-cost loan scheme for farmers. There is a serious cash flow crisis and large merchant debt is building up. The co-ops and private merchants cannot afford to carry this merchant debt. Farm families are under extreme financial pressure. What plans does the Minister have to introduce a new low-cost loan scheme?

Deputy Michael Creed: In his budget speech, my colleague, the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, formally announced progress in the development of a key Government Brexit response, the future growth loan scheme for small and medium enterprise, including the primary agriculture and seafood sectors. This is a long-awaited source of finance for young and new entrant farmers, especially the cohort that does not have high levels of security. It will also serve smaller scale farmers, who often do not have the leverage to negotiate for more favourable terms with their banking institution. Food companies have identified long-term investment finance of up to ten years as a critical need currently unavailable in Ireland. I am pleased that the Government has been able to deliver this product and its effects will be felt all along the food production chain.

My Department is providing 40% of the funding so an overall agrifood package of €120 million will be available. However, unlike previous schemes, this can be reviewed and adjusted according to demand. Further details will be provided in the coming months. The scheme is expected to be in place in early 2019 and will run for three years from its launch date. The funding required to prime this measure will be paid by my Department in 2018.

With respect to cash flow pressures arising from the effects of the weather on grazing and fodder stocks, the agreement I secured from Commissioner Phil Hogan to make higher advance payments this autumn will result in a very substantial €260 million in additional cash flow for farmers shortly. I have had ongoing engagement with the banks in this regard. I am pleased to see that this engagement and the delivery of last year's agriculture cash flow loan scheme has acted as a catalyst to encourage financial institutions to improve and develop new products for the sector. A recently announced initiative by one of the main banks mirrors the scheme in offering a discounted interest rate with extended and flexible repayment terms. All three main banks have dedicated offerings in response to the current position and co-ops have introduced recent initiatives on credit facilities for their suppliers. A spending review of the agriculture cash flow loan scheme, published with the budget, concluded that this was one of the main impacts of the scheme. In the context of these new and improved supports in this area,

the focus of the Government has been to address market gaps, the most critical of which has been identified as unsecured longer term investment finance.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I thank the Minister for his response but he is missing the point I am making. To renege on his responsibility in the area and give it to the banks is not satisfactory. The people who want this money the worst will not get it from the banks. Two years ago a loan scheme was introduced in the budget that was most welcome but again on that round, the people under the most financial pressure did not get the loans from the banks. The banks offered the loans to their better customers. We might think the banks will step in and help the people under the most pressure but unfortunately that will not happen.

One of the milk co-ops introduced a flexible milk loan scheme a month or six weeks ago and the demand was phenomenal. Unfortunately, the appetite or need for credit among farmers is absolutely immense. We had one of the longest winters on record, with major costs, and a summer that saw large costs being incurred as well. Unfortunately, this winter will see a significant increase in the level of costs on farms also. Farmers, whether they are involved with pigs, beef, dairy or tillage, have a huge demand for short-term credit. A section of farmers have also invested very heavily in their businesses and are under extreme pressure to meet repayments. A short-term fix is required and the banks will not solve this matter. The Minister cannot renege on his responsibility to the various sectors.

Short-term credit at low cost must be provided if these sectors are to be kept sustainable.

Deputy Michael Creed: When the State is putting in money, the challenge is whether it is getting value for that money. The report published with the budget on the €150 million low-interest loan working capital scheme clearly showed that it was value for money but that it had also delivered in terms of generating other competition in the finance sector for working capital. This raises the question of getting value for money in further initiatives with taxpayers' money. I believe it would be a mistake to repeat that kind of scheme when the market is already delivering a similar type of product in terms of working capital. The gap in the market that now exists is not for working capital because all the indications are that this is available. The gap in the market is for longer-term solutions, by which I mean those over seven years, so it would provide money over eight to ten years in the form of unsecured borrowing at interest rates that are very competitive. The product we are bringing out will meet all of those challenges in terms of unsecured borrowing at less than 5% over eight to ten years for capital investment. The working capital side has been addressed by the €150 million scheme but, more importantly, it has also generated further competition in that area.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I will not knock the initiatives introduced by the Minister as they are all welcome but there are a significant number of farmers who cannot get access to the credit they need. That is the factual situation. Many farmers have a very significant tax bill at the end of this month and the cashflow is just not there to do it so there is a problem.

Another issue in the budget was the lack of any attempt to address volatility and swings in farmers' income, the significant problem caused by tax bills in a year when income is down very substantially and the fact that farmers must pay tax for a previous year where income was far higher. There was grave disappointment on the part of all the farming organisations that there was no attempt in the budget to address those problems, which are significant problems for farm families involving as they do volatility and high income tax bills that can arise in a year such as this when incomes and costs are running very high. There is a problem with regard to

short-term credit and volatility and, unfortunately, the budget did not deliver on either of these two key issues. There are farmers who cannot get access to credit and they are the ones who need it most.

Deputy Michael Creed: I must disagree with the Deputy. The tax measures in the budget will benefit farmers with income difficulties caused by volatility because the income averaging arrangement has been further tweaked to allow those farmers with an off-farm income or whose spouses have an off-farm income to be able to avail of the opt out. This will benefit a substantial cohort of farmers who are currently excluded from that income averaging, the purpose of which is to address volatility issues, so it is not the case that there was no acknowledgement of the challenges around income averaging.

With regard to financial products, I do not think the Deputy and I will ever agree on this. The challenge for us is that if we have some money to spend, are we replicating something with taxpayers' money that is already in the market and, therefore, in a way, not delivering something new because the product will not be delivered? Farmers will not apply to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for this working capital; they will apply to the pillar banks. If we are not delivering something new and it is already in the market without State support, could that money not be better spent on other things such as investment finance, areas of natural constraint payments or a beef initiative?

Control of Horses

8. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 592 of 18 September 2018, if he is satisfied that local authorities are enforcing the Control of Horses Act 1996 adequately, his views on having multiple horse wardens with a particular focus on problem areas for horse abuse and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41482/18]

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: This is a follow up to a previous parliamentary question. Is the Minister satisfied that local authorities are enforcing the Control of Horses Act 1996 adequately? What are his views on having multiple horse wardens with a particular focus on problem areas for horse abuse?

Deputy Michael Creed: Officials from my Department recently met with members of the local authority control of horses working group to discuss this matter. There is a general consensus that the current approach continues to reduce problems regarding wandering horses despite the persistence of a small number of irresponsible horse owners. Overall, the Control of Horses Act 1996, which provides powers to local authorities to deal with stray and abandoned horses, has worked well over the past 20 or so years.

The number of horses being seized nationally continues to decline from 4,923 in 2014 to 1,603 in 2017 and 806 to date in 2018. This reduction is reflective of a number of factors, including initiatives being progressed by my Department in the animal welfare area as well as the active enforcement of the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 and the EU equine identification regulations. In tandem with the work of the local authorities under the Control of Horses Act, officials of my Department have been directly involved in a number of horse seizures and have initiated prosecutions under the Animal Health and Welfare Act.

Horse exports have increased substantially in recent years helping to bring about a much greater balance between supply and demand. In addition, animal welfare charities have been re-homing an increasing number of horses abroad. The increased emphasis on re-homing of horses is being assisted greatly through my Department's funding to animal welfare organisations. A total of €2.56 million has been paid to 111 organisations to assist their work in animal welfare in 2018. A number of these organisations are actively involved in rescuing and re-homing neglected horses.

My Department also provides funding to local authorities to support the development of urban-Traveller horse projects in their respective areas. To date, funding of €1,004,447 has been drawn down across several local authorities, including a contribution of €534,024 to South Dublin County Council towards the development of the Clondalkin Equine Club. Funding has also been provided for projects and actions in Kildare, Kilkenny, Longford, Limerick, Leitrim, Cork, Meath, Offaly and Wicklow. These projects focus on education and they create awareness about compliance with animal welfare regulations thereby contributing to the reduction in the numbers of straying horses. My Department continues to stress that it is the responsibility of individuals to ensure the welfare of horses in their ownership and-or care and to ensure that when they no longer have a need for the animal, they are disposed of in an appropriate and responsible way.

The matter of employing "horse wardens" is an issue for the local authorities to consider. Local authorities are legally entitled to appoint authorised officers under the Control of Horses Act and the Animal Health and Welfare Act. In their consideration of the need for additional authorised officers, account would no doubt be taken on the overall improvements that have taken place in respect of the stray horse issues in recent years, the particular circumstances in their local area and indeed the excellent work of animal welfare charities.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: This sounds very good on paper but the reality is different. We have appalling cases of horse abuse. Last Thursday, a number of animal welfare groups came together outside Leinster House under the banner of action for animal welfare. We heard case after case of abuse these groups know about. They are picking up the pieces because the Animal Health and Welfare Act is not being enforced adequately. Despite what the Minister says, local authorities, which are funded by the Government, are not enforcing the Control of Horses Act. They just impound and kill animals or remove dead animals. In the past 11 months, Tipperary County Council has spent €155,800 on removing dead horses. We have dog wardens and litter wardens so could the Department not give the lead with the local authorities? It could even produce a pilot scheme. We know where the black spots are. The local authorities could work with the owners before the abuse starts. They could work on things like the care of animals, including worming and foot care. We could also ensure that horses, ponies and donkeys are micro-chipped, registered and kept in proper equine-registered properties with equine space. A horse warden could have a lorry that could impound animals on the spot with Garda protection if this is necessary, because we know it has been necessary in places, so that we do not have the cases of starving animals with appalling illnesses that we hear about every day.

Deputy Michael Creed: I appreciate the Deputy's consistent interest in this area and the collaborative efforts made by my Department, local authorities and charitable bodies. The graph is going in the right direction. That being said, we are all shamed by such incidents, which get a lot of traction, particularly on social media. Sometimes they distort the endeavour that is under way and the very good work being done by all the aforementioned in terms of trying to address this problem. The statistics clearly show this good work, although one cannot

hide behind them when one is confronted by the graphic images we see. The Deputy referred to Tipperary County Council.

The appointment of horse wardens is an issue for local authorities, not the Department, but where there are specific problems, it might be a response they consider to be appropriate. It is important that we all continue to collaborate. We are making great progress. The legislative framework is in place and there have been high-profile prosecutions which are important, although I often think they are a reflection of the ultimate failure. We ought to work with a lot less stick and more carrot, but we must retain the stick.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: First, will the Department have the conversation with local authorities about the need for a local horse warden? That could pre-empt some of the problems that we see. Second, there are hundreds of horses in the Dublin City Council area. Each should have a chip and a passport and those in the controlled area should have a licence. The council only issued 15 licences. It is something that should be looked at. I acknowledge the work of the Clondalkin Equine Club. Third, when there is a fodder crisis, is there a contingency plan for the animal welfare groups who are trying to feed animals that have suffered neglect?

Under the Horse Racing Ireland Act 2016, if a horse is found to have been doped, it is banned. I am sure that something would also happen to the owner, but will the Minister clarify what happens to the horse? That is another issue we must look at.

Finally, if the Minister will not go along with the idea of a horse warden, what is the alternative? He says this policy working but there are graphic examples where it is not. A pilot scheme in some of the black spots could add to what the Department is doing and make a difference.

Deputy Michael Creed: As I said, we had recent consultation with local authorities but it is not for us to tell local authorities to recruit wardens. Under the Control of Horses Act, it is something they may do themselves. I appreciate, as a former member of a local authority, there are many competing demands on their resources. Some have wardens but many have not, and it is not something about which we can instruct. That engagement on this is ongoing, particularly regarding what are considered to be hot spots.

Education has a critical role to play. Initiatives such as the Clondalkin Equine Club are important in that context because it provided an opportunity to recognise the culture relating to the urban horse. In Irish society, we celebrate the horse, horse racing, the sport horse and so on, but the urban horse is as much a part of that cultural story as any other. Facilities such as that in Clondalkin are important in recognising that but also in showcasing how the best treatment and practice should be delivered. That is crucial to all those involved.

It is important that the collaborative endeavour continues and my Department will continue to work with all the voluntary organisations which do tremendous work in that area. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that we are in a far better position now than we were. Nevertheless, one case is one too many.

Trade Missions

9. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress in securing new markets for Irish agrifood products in 2018; and the details of forthcoming

trade missions. [41355/18]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Ceann Comhairle has given permission for Deputy Tony McLoughlin to take this question. We should try to get through a few more questions.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: This question relates to the process of securing new markets for Irish agrifood products in 2018 and the details of forthcoming trade missions.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I am firmly committed to increasing market access and opportunities for all Irish agrifood exports around the world. Total agrifood exports amounted to €13.6 billion in 2017, according to the Central Statistics Office trade statistics, an increase of 74% since 2009. My officials continue to work towards opening and enhancing access to as many markets as possible. This is a key part of our response to the challenges and uncertainty posed by Brexit, and is in line with the market development theme of the Food Wise 2025 strategy. Opening new markets involves a wide range of detailed work taking place across a range of levels, including political, diplomatic, technical and official levels.

I am delighted that already in 2018 the Chinese market has opened to Irish beef. Three Irish beef establishments were approved to export to China in April and a further three Irish beef establishments were approved in June following on my trade mission to China in May. Beef access has been achieved as a result of significant effort by team Ireland, including Ministers, departmental officials, the Irish embassy in Beijing and agencies such as Bord Bia over several years. Beef exports to China have commenced.

My Department also recently agreed veterinary health certificates for the export of beef, sheepmeat and poultry to both Kuwait and Qatar. These certificates apply for meat and meat products and are a result of a joined-up effort between my Department and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and, in particular, the embassy in the United Arab Emirates, which is also accredited to Kuwait and Qatar.

The role of trade missions cannot be underestimated. I have led trade missions to the US, Canada and China this year, and my Department is currently making the final arrangements for a further trade mission to Indonesia and Malaysia at the end of October. This will include participants from across the agrifood sector and will facilitate extensive trade contacts as well as high-level political discussions. Both of these markets had been identified by my Department as offering significant potential to the agrifood sector.

These and the other missions that my Department is planning will serve to enhance and improve our existing levels of market access in these destinations. It will also promote Ireland's reputation as a producer of high quality, safe and sustainably produced meat and dairy products. The destinations are also in keeping with the recent market profiling exercise that was completed by Bord Bia at my request, as part of the seven-point action plan on market access. This exercise identified opportunities in new and more mature markets, and will provide valuable market intelligence both for industry operators and policy makers.

My Department will continue to seek out and identify new markets, and I am ready to respond as appropriate to other opportunities that may arise.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: The trade missions outlined by the Minister have been successful but I am concerned about emerging markets. He mentioned India, China and other areas.

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I am also concerned about Brexit and how we replace the British market. Will the Minister comment on that?

Deputy Michael Creed: The UK was the market for almost 40% of our exports in 2017, which is the most recent statistic available, amounting to more than €5 billion worth of products. It should always be our most important market. Much of our efforts since the UK Brexit vote has concerned intensifying our engagement with the UK market and sending a clear signal that we want the closest possible trading relationship. There are hard won yards that we have in UK retail outlets. Among the main supermarket chains with whom I have met personally, there is an awareness that we are here for the long haul. Geography should be a determinant of trade, all other things being equal. That market, which is one of the most valuable in terms of price for primary producers, will, hopefully, remain important. That has been a focus of our endeavour in the negotiations that have been ongoing around Brexit. Nevertheless, market diversification is equally prudent, which is why much of the effort has focused on securing new market opportunities such as beef exports to China.

Sheepmeat Sector

10. **Deputy Tony McLoughlin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which the financial support sheep farmers have received is measured. [41461/18]

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: This question relates to the way in which the financial support sheep farmers have received is measured.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I am conscious of the important role that the sheep sector plays in the continued growth and development of our agrifood sector. For example, in 2017 some 63,000 tonnes of sheep meat worth €311 million was exported, with diversification evident from our traditional primary markets of France and the UK.

With this in mind, I have ensured that my Department has put in place a range of supports for the sheep sector in recent years across a number of schemes. With regard to Pillar 1 supports under CAP, sheep farmers continue to benefit from the direct income support available under the basic payment scheme, BPS. In addition, Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, contains a number of support schemes which offer direct financial benefit to Irish sheep farmers. Sheep farmers continue to benefit from the areas of natural constraint, ANC, scheme and from GLAS in large numbers, as well as from capital investment support under the targeted agricultural modernisation schemes, TAMS. The RDP also includes specific provision for sheep farmers within the knowledge transfer programme, which has helped to build on the existing knowledge base and skill set in the sector in a way which will help to ensure continued sustainable development in the sector.

In addition to these measures, in December 2016, I announced a new sheep welfare scheme as an amendment to the RDP. Under this scheme, farmers are required to choose from a menu of actions which aim to improve the overall welfare of their flock. These actions must be completed over a 12-month period and, in return, the farmer receives a payment of €10 per breeding ewe.

This important support was introduced for a period of four scheme years, and I am glad that

more than €18.4 million has issued to sheep farmers in respect of year one of the scheme. A total of 85% of advance payments under year two of the scheme are due to commence in November of this year.

Taking the range of available schemes together, in excess of €617.5 million was paid in direct financial supports to sheep farmers in 2017. The corresponding figure for 2016 was €601.6 million.

My Department has recently written to all farmers outlining to them the schedule of payments under various schemes in the coming months and I will continue to ensure that these vital supports are prioritised for farmers. For example, almost €195 million has already been paid out to farmers under the 2018 ANC scheme and 70% advance payments under the BPS are due to commence from October 16.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Furthermore, in acknowledging that the extension of electronic identification to all sheep represents a cost to keepers, I recently announced a once-off support measure of up to €100 per keeper to assist with this cost. This payment will be related to the first purchase of electronic tags between 1 October 2018 and 30 September 2019 with a cost of up to €3.6 million.

I am committed to ensuring that my Department continues to work to underpin the development of the sheep sector.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I thank the Minister for the information there.

Deputies Martin Kenny and Scanlon would be supportive on this. In the area that we represent where there is much hill-farming and sheep-farming, and which is also in a disadvantaged area, farmers tell me that they look forward to there being more benefits in addition to what the Minister outlined and, indeed, that these farmers would be looked after, particularly in disadvantaged areas. The Minister mentioned the funding that has been made available to the sheep farmers but many of them, certainly in my area, are concerned about the future. The Minister might elaborate on that.

Deputy Michael Creed: Deputy McLoughlin will be aware that last year we introduced an additional payment of €25 million under the ANC scheme, probably better known as the disadvantaged area scheme. In delivering that payment, we decided to target it at a rate of €13 million for the most severely handicapped which is the hill and mountain land to which the Deputy referred, €9 million for the intermediary level of disadvantage and €3 million for the lower level of disadvantage. That will now be enhanced by an additional €23 million that we have secured in this year's budget which, cumulatively, will bring us back to the €250 million position where ANC payments were prior to 2008 when they were cut by the then Fianna Fáil Government. We are back to that level of payment under the ANC scheme. While it is my intention to consult with farm organisations and stakeholders as to how that additional €23 million should be allocated, my own preferred course would be to repeat the direction of travel that we did last and focus the payment at those who have the highest level of disadvantage, and thereby build on the schemes that we have had in the area of sheep welfare, etc. This would deliver more to those farmers who are in a low income sector working in a most disadvantaged area and delivering significant public goods at the same time.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I would place the emphasis on the disadvantaged areas. I

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represent a disadvantaged area, as do some of the Deputies here this morning, many of whom would be of the same opinion. Certainly, I welcome the additional funding of €23 million in the budget that the Minister mentioned but it is vitally important that we support these farmers.

Deputy Michael Creed: Although it is often not acknowledged, I represent a constituency that has significant amounts of such land, from the west Muskerry area, in particular, the hills of Cúil Aodha, Ballyvourney and Ballingearry. I am aware of that hill sheep farmer component, the value of the products that they produce, and as I said, the public goods. That is why the ANC payments are recognised by me as a way of delivering direct financial support into that sector in a targeted way, and to deliver it according to the higher levels of disadvantage, as I said, is something that I would like to repeat in 2019 with the additional €23 million that we now have.

Question No. 11 replied to with Written Answers.

Beef Industry

12. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to protect the interests of beef farmers in view of understandable frustration at poor prices and the ongoing systemic flaws in the relationship between farmers and factories; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41263/18]

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: As the Minister will be aware, most of the farming organisations have pulled out of the beef forum body that was set up a number of years ago to ensure a fair price for beef. I would like to know the steps the Minister will take in the interests of beef farmers in view of the understandable frustration at poor prices and the ongoing systematic flaws in the relationship between farmers and meat factories.

Deputy Michael Creed: As I indicated earlier, in accordance with competition law, neither I nor my Department has any role in determining market prices for any commodity, nor can I intervene in this process.

I am conscious that this has been a difficult year for the sector in terms of weather and the range of challenges associated with it. We have to acknowledge that input costs at farm level will be unexpectedly high this year as a result of fodder shortages.

At the recent meeting of the beef round table on 3 October, I highlighted the need for stakeholders to recognise their inter-dependency. I urged processors to engage positively with their farmer suppliers to build the sustainability of the sector as a whole and to ensure a reasonable return for the farmers on whom the sector relies for its development. It is essential that the position of the primary producer in the supply chain be improved if the industry wishes to have a sustainable future.

The beef round table also included discussions on the potential for producer organisations and the development of new technologies as ways of adding value along the whole supply chain through increased engagement in the bioeconomy. These discussions were aimed at highlighting available tools to build resilience in the sector.

I noted that previously at the beef round table in 2015 a commitment was made to legislate for the recognition of POs in the beef sector. This initiative was supported by all sectoral stake-

holders and in February of 2016 a statutory instrument was signed into law to give a legal basis for my Department to maintain a register of recognised POs in the beef sector. The recognition of POs will encourage primary beef producers to form producer organisations and allow farmers to engage collectively with processors. The ultimate aim is to ensure the viable development of production by strengthening farmers' bargaining power with downstream operators.

At the round table on 3 October, I also asked Bord Bia to conduct a detailed examination of market dynamics, with the co-operation of the industry, taking into account sales of particular cuts into particular segments of the market in order to improve price transparency.

One of the unique strengths of the agrifood sector is our shared vision for the sustainable development of the sector in Food Wise 2025. I hope that this positive engagement will continue.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

More generally, in the beef sector, I was pleased to secure in the recent budget €20 million for a new pilot scheme targeted at suckler farmers and specifically aimed at further improving the carbon efficiency of beef production. The pilot will build on existing work in this area and inform the development of future policy direction.

My Department is examining all appropriate measures to support the different agrifood sectors, including the suckler sector in preparation for the next iteration of CAP. I will continue to argue for as strong a CAP budget as possible, post-2020. In particular, I am committed to ensuring that suckler farmers continue to receive strong support in the next CAP. My view is that such payments should support and encourage suckler farmers to make the best decisions possible to improve the profitability, and the economic and environmental efficiency, of their farming system.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: It is crucial that some body is set up to oversee what is happening between farmers and meat factories because there is a situation in this country where farmers have bought expensive store cattle and some of them are not leaving any profit whatsoever. When one considers that €3.70 per kg is what is being paid in Ireland for good quality cattle, in England farmers are getting €4.40 per kg for their cattle. There is something badly wrong. Most of these Irish cattle are going into England anyway. I cannot understand it. Until the factories are brought into line - I understand fully that the Minister cannot interfere with market prices - farmers will not be treated fairly, as their counterparts in England are, by the meat plants.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister has one minute. I am anxious to take another question.

Deputy Michael Creed: I share the same ambition as Deputy Scanlon. I appreciate that the Deputy comes from a constituency where the suckler beef sector is a strong component of delivering high quality weanling cattle, perhaps to the plains of Kildare and Meath, for further onward fattening. It is a critical part of that rural economy. Both of us share that ambition that they would have a return for that endeavour. That is why, while direct prices with meat plants, in the budget we introduced this pilot initiative in the area of environmental efficiency which will deliver a €40 payment per weanling. My ambition is to make that scheme as simple as possible and as cost neutral as possible for the farmer and deliver the maximum amount of that into the farmer's pocket.

Also, as Deputy Scanlon will be aware, and as has been alluded to by Deputy McLoughlin in Question No. 10, ANC payments are another way of delivering direct income support into that sector where they are operating under that designation. Skewing that payment in favour of those who are on the higher levels of disadvantage delivered significant income opportunities last year and that will continue this year.

The ambition of the beef data and genomics project is to deliver the highest genetic merit beef herd that we can and, in so doing, maximise the profitability of the sector. We are making considerable progress in that regard.

Question No. 13 replied to with Written Answers.

Sheepmeat Sector

14. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps being taken to make sheep farming a more economically viable activity. [41447/18]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The income of sheep farmers is less than half the average industrial wage. I note the age profile of sheep farmers, one third of whom are well over 65. Typically, they are older than the average farmer. People will not be farming always and there are not new entrants to farming. They do not see it as a viable enterprise. What steps is the Minister taking to make sheep farming be seen as a viable enterprise?

Deputy Michael Creed: I am very conscious of the important role the sheep sector plays in regard to the continued growth and development of our agrifood sector. With this in mind, I have ensured that my Department has put in place a range of supports for the sheep sector in recent years across a number of schemes.

With regard to Pillar 1 supports under the Common Agricultural Policy, sheep farmers continue to benefit from the direct income support available under the basic payment scheme. In addition, Ireland's rural development programme also contains a number of support schemes that offer a direct financial benefit to Irish sheep farmers. Sheep farmers continue to benefit from the ANC scheme and from GLAS in large numbers, as well as from capital investment support under TAMS.

In Tuesday's budget, I announced an additional €23 million for the ANC scheme, bringing the total to €250 million in 2019. I expect sheep farmers to be significant beneficiaries of that measure. The rural development programme also includes specific provision for sheep farmers within the knowledge transfer programme, which has helped to build on the existing knowledge base and skills in the sector in a way that will help to ensure continued sustainable development in the sector.

In addition to these measures, in December 2016 I announced a new sheep welfare scheme as an amendment to the rural development programme. Under this scheme, farmers are required to choose from a menu of actions that aim to improve the overall welfare of their flock. These actions must be completed over a 12-month period and, in return, the farmer receives a payment of €10 per breeding ewe.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

This important support was introduced for a period of four scheme years, and I am glad to say that over €18.4 million has been issued to sheep farmers in respect of year 1 of the scheme. Eighty-five percent advance payments under year 2 of the scheme are due to commence in November of this year.

I am pleased to note the strong export performance of the sector last year, which was reflected in the Central Statistics Office trade and livestock statistics of 2017. In 2017, just under 63,000 tonnes of Irish sheepmeat, worth €311 million, was exported in comparison to 56,000 tonnes, worth €277, the previous year. This represents a significant growth in tonnage, of 12.5%, and net worth of 12%.

I am committed to ensuring that my Department continues to work to underpin the development of the sheep sector.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Dara Calleary: Coverage of the budget and related events will probably have overshadowed the very significant speech by Mr. Michel Barnier on the withdrawal treaty and the progress achieved in that regard. I understand from his speech, as covered in a RTÉ report this morning, that some 85% of the agreement between the United Kingdom and European Union has been agreed. The remaining 15% applies directly to Ireland and to how goods are imported and exported east to west and north to south. The progress is welcome. I commend all the Irish officials who have been involved.

In this House, we agree that a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland is absolutely unacceptable for political, human and economic reasons. Mr. Michel Barnier stated yesterday:

The UK wants to and will leave the Single Market and the Customs Union.

This means that there must be checks on goods travelling between the EU and the UK – checks that do not exist today:

- customs and VAT checks;
- and compliance checks with our standards to protect our consumers, our economic traders and your businesses.

We have agreed with the UK that these checks cannot be performed at the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

It looks like this will be a unique set of circumstances, if agreed by all EU members and, of course, the Parliament in Westminster. Again, this is good news but the mechanisms now have to be worked out.

I am concerned about the response from the DUP. In particular, it is latching on to old arguments and, unfortunately, old language by mentioning “blood-red lines”, saying it will not be treated differently than others in the United Kingdom. This is highly politically charged and unnecessary language. It does not represent the views of the majority in Northern Ireland, who just want to get on with their lives and with doing business and creating and retaining jobs.

Has the Tánaiste any plans to meet the DUP to discuss its concerns over and approach to these issues and to reflect his concerns and the Government's input regarding these views? Is he concerned about the DUP position threatening a budget in the United Kingdom and how that position might affect the UK Government's approach to the last stages of these talks? Could he confirm that the reports on RTÉ this morning reflect the current status of the negotiations? What is his view on there being a conclusion to those negotiations next week?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy asked a lot of questions - a lot of good questions. I caution against people taking their lead in respect of these negotiations from media reports today. There have been intensive efforts this week by both negotiating teams to try to find a way forward. As Mr. Michel Barnier said yesterday, the vast majority of the text of the withdrawal treaty has been agreed. That is not new; we have known that for a while. The last 10% to 15% is difficult. Most of it involves Ireland. There are some other issues also. The intensification of discussions this week is primarily about trying to find a way forward to follow through on the commitments that have already been made in these negotiations, including last December and last March, to have a legally operable text that follows through on last December's commitment to an Irish backstop, which provides the guarantee that there will be no border infrastructure on this island in the future. The British and EU approaches to that have been somewhat different. The two negotiating teams are trying to find a way such that the European Union can be sure it protects the integrity of its Single Market and customs union in the future. The United Kingdom obviously wants to try to protect the integrity of the United Kingdom economically and reassure unionists, in particular, that there will be no significant new barriers to trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. There is a difficult political job for the negotiators. We need to give them the time and space to do it. I expect we will get a report on Monday to what is called COREPER in Brussels. We will have a General Affairs Council meeting. I will be meeting Mr. Michel Barnier on Tuesday morning, at which meeting we will get an in-depth readout of where the negotiations have gone over the past week or ten days. We are obviously speaking to the task force on a daily basis and getting briefings from it.

There is much focus and media attention on this issue because so much is at stake. We should, however, rely on the accounts that come from the task force and the British negotiating team directly rather than on rumours and reports that may or may not be based on fact. We are at a very delicate stage in these negotiations at which we need to find agreement, and time is running out. I am optimistic that an agreement can be reached. To my knowledge, the two negotiating teams do not yet have an agreed position on the Irish backstop, but the work continues.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Tánaiste for his response. That uncertainty makes it all the more important to engage the DUP. That was the core of my question. Has the Tánaiste plans to meet the DUP to reflect his proposals to it directly given that Mrs. Foster has met Mr. Barnier? She has obviously got the relationship she has with the UK Government. Do we intend to communicate the Irish Government's position to the DUP?

By contrast with all the media reports, Mr. Barnier's speech is quite detailed. I refer to the European Parliament speech and the subsequent statement, which outlines specific roles for Dublin Port in all this. Is the Tánaiste confident that, if agreement is reached, he will have the proper resources and facilities in place at the port and that nothing will be added to the burden or cost of business because of the extra responsibilities there? Is there proper investment not only at Dublin Port but also at all our ports to deal with this new environment? What are the Tánaiste's plans to meet the DUP?

The Tánaiste: We are engaged in ongoing communication with the DUP. Sometimes it involves direct meetings, sometimes back channels, and sometimes officials talking to one another. I have always said, however, that we talk to and consult all parties in Northern Ireland, not just one. We need to listen to all their concerns. The DUP is a very important voice in Northern Ireland but it does not represent a majority there. While the DUP has a special relationship with the British Government in the form of a confidence and supply agreement, which makes the relationship a close one, I hope we have a relationship with all political parties in Northern Ireland that allows us to meet them and listen to their concerns. Later today, the Taoiseach and I are meeting a series of parties in Northern Ireland here in Leinster House.

The answer to the Deputy's question is that the DUP does understand the Irish Government's position, as I hope do all the other parties in Northern Ireland. What we are looking for is an outcome that everybody can live with, protects the *status quo* as much as possible and does not interrupt in any major way trade between Northern Ireland and Britain but at the same time honours the commitment on guarantees to have no physical border infrastructure on the island of Ireland. Any issues relating to contingency planning linked to Dublin Port, Rosslare Europort, Dublin Airport or other airports may involve businesses having to alter their normal export or import patterns. That is why we are holding big meetings with businesses on getting Brexit-ready. There will be one in Galway tomorrow, weather permitting, and we were in Cork last Friday. We want to ensure that businesses understand the potential consequences of Brexit and that they prepare and invest accordingly.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The tendering process under the national broadband plan, NBP, has been chaotic, to say the least. The big players, namely, Eir, the ESB and Vodafone, have pulled out. SSE Airtricity has left the consortium led by Mr. David McCourt. The John Laing Group, which was one of the companies providing cash and firepower, is also gone and Enet has been relegated to the role of a subcontractor in the process. Just one company remains in the process and all the others are gone. The State, which owns Enet, is to become a subcontractor to a private venture firm from America but will bankroll the project. It is essentially becoming an employee of a venture capital company. It is absolutely bizarre that we are in this position.

To add to this, there are serious questions about the contact between the Minister responsible for the process, Deputy Naughten, and the head of the sole remaining consortium, Mr. David McCourt. The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment facilitated a lunch in Leinster House for Mr. McCourt and his family in April, paid for by the Minister. That was on the same day he was answering questions in the Chamber about inappropriate contact regarding the takeover of Celtic Media Group by Independent News & Media, INM. The Minister later met Mr. McCourt in June and he also met him at a dinner in New York in July. All of that happened at a crucial point in the tendering process. The Minister has acknowledged that the process was in its final stages. He has said that he did not discuss the process with Mr. McCourt at the dinner in New York, that he was at the table but that the officials were engaged in the discussion. That is simply unbelievable. Information on the discussion is contained in the minutes. This is despite the communications protocol for the process, which is laid out in black and white, stating that officials from the Department outside the team involved in the process could not meet the bidders at any time. It is protocol No. 1 on page No. 7 and it states that it should not happen. It is forbidden. The protocol is there for particular reasons.

While the Minister may not have been part of the discussion, as he claims, he was at the table. It is clear that he breached his own rules. He says that he did not, but the rule is laid out in black and white for everybody to see and it shows that he did. The Taoiseach said this morning

that he has full confidence in him. Frankly, the process has gone from chaotic to farcical. All the while there are significant doubts about the capacity of this consortium to deliver. Leaving aside the inappropriate contact between the Minister and Mr. McCourt, there is no evidence that we are any closer to knowing when the roll-out will begin and whether the Government has a plan B to deliver broadband to the 542,000 households if this process falls apart.

Has the Tánaiste spoken to the Minister about his contact with Mr. McCourt? Were there just those three contacts with that individual over the past year or 18 months? Does the Tánaiste accept that the Minister breached his own protocols, set out in black and white, in respect of the tendering process? Does he have full confidence in the Minister? Would he do what the Minister has done, which is meet with a person who is involved in a serious bid worth €500 million, facilitate his family in private dining and meet him where issues were discussed? Finally, will the Tánaiste ensure that the minutes of the meeting of 28 June, which we discovered yesterday, are published in advance of the Minister coming to the House so that Members of the Opposition can thoroughly question and tease out aspects of that meeting?

The Tánaiste: First, I am glad to put on the record the process that is under way to ensure the approximately 500,000 properties that will be unable to get high-speed broadband through normal commercial channels will be able to get it through a national broadband scheme which the Government is determined to deliver. The Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment has advised that the bidder in the national broadband procurement process is led by Granahan McCourt Capital and includes subcontractors Enet, Nokia, Actavo, the Kelly Group and KN Group. Enet will provide access to the metropolitan area network, MAN, infrastructure together with day-to-day operational activities. Nokia will provide a wide range of high-speed broadband equipment throughout the intervention area and the Kelly Group, KN Group and Actavo will provide the necessary staffing and construction expertise when building the fibre over the Eir network. Eir is also a key subcontractor to the bidder and will provide access to more than 1 million poles and 15,000 km of ducting to serve consumers in the intervention area. This tendering and procurement process is moving forward so we can complete the job of ensuring that homes and businesses in parts of rural Ireland can enjoy the high speed broadband connectivity they need to run their businesses and to interact, as many households do, with cities and towns.

On the second issue, the Minister, Deputy Naughten, has agreed to come to the House between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. today. He has agreed to make a detailed statement and to take questions from the Deputy and other Members who wish to ask them. It is appropriate to give him the opportunity to outline in detail what his involvement has been in meetings with Mr. David McCourt or anybody else, and to answer the questions Members are entitled to ask about a process as significant as this procurement process in order that he can reassure the House that his meetings and interactions have been appropriate and in no way have undermined the credibility of that process.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I asked my questions of the Tánaiste in his capacity as the second most senior member of the Government. Does he have full confidence in the Minister? Would he have done what the Minister did repeatedly at a late stage in the tendering process, which is continue to meet one of the main bidders? Will he ensure the minutes of the meeting of 28 June, which we discovered yesterday, are published so that we can scrutinise them before the Minister comes to the House? Does the Tánaiste accept what is stated in black and white, that officials from the Department, outside of the NBP team, will not at any time discuss the procurement process? He blatantly breached that. Has the Tánaiste sought any assurances or is

he just going on blind faith? Has he spoken to the Minister? Has the Minister confirmed to the Tánaiste that these three occasions were the only occasions he has engaged with Mr. David McCourt? Perhaps he shone a light on what he told the committee on 8 February, which is that he had spoken directly at that time to Mr. David McCourt regarding their intentions in the bidding process, another event we do not know about.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We also know that the meeting which emerged yesterday is not included in his official diary.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know that the Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Has the Tánaiste received any assurances in that regard and does he believe the Minister breached his own protocols?

The Tánaiste: First, I spoke to the Minister this morning. I rang him and he rang me back. It was a relatively brief conversation. I asked him to outline the detail for me, some of which the Deputy has asked about, and he did that. I expect that there will be no problem with publishing minutes of meetings. He has done that in respect of the minutes relating to the dinner in New York. The Minister would like a fair hearing in this House and he is happy to field detailed questions from Members who wish to ask them so that he can reassure the House and the Government of his bona fides on this issue. Nothing he told me this morning undermines my confidence in him. Members should give him the time and space to outline in detail the meetings he has had with Mr. David McCourt and the nature of those meetings so we can try to put this issue to bed.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: As stated by the Tánaiste, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten, is to make a statement in the House this afternoon. I seek clarity from the Tánaiste on the central issue. Despite what the Taoiseach said in the House yesterday, it is inappropriate for a Minister to have any contact with a bidder during a procurement process, and every Minister knows this. As a former Minister with responsibility for procurement for five years, I note this was made crystal clear and drilled into everybody. The Minister, Deputy Naughten, said that he has no hand, act or part in the bidding process. This displays a fundamental lack of understanding of his role under the Constitution and the law. The Minister is in charge of this procurement process, ultimately. Putting it mildly, in meeting the bidder he may have contaminated the process. He certainly has opened it up to legal challenge. We know that there have been three engagements involving the Minister, Deputy Naughten, and Mr. McCourt, whose investment firm is currently leading the broadband consortium that is bidding for the contract. The Minister, as we know, bought Mr. McCourt lunch in April. Bizarrely, at the same time he was standing in this Chamber to apologise for having taken a phone call from a lobbyist in another contract. The Minister told the House that everybody had his telephone number and that he took a call when he should not have done. The House gave him a fool's pardon at that stage. At the same time, he was arranging a lunch for a bidder in a bigger contract. The Minister had to be reminded by an official yesterday that he met Mr. McCourt on 26 June. There was no public announcement in this regard and, as has been said, the minutes of that meeting have not been released. We know that in the New York meeting, there was a discussion on this matter, although it is said that the Minister was not directly involved. It is taking it to extremes to say that there was a discussion on the matter between the bidder and officials and that while the Minister was sitting at the table, he was not involved in

that discussion. This just is not how it works. Does the Tánaiste believe these meetings were appropriate? In light of the standards set by this Government, does he think that it was appropriate for the Minister, Deputy Naughten, to have these meetings?

We learned in recent days, that the former lead in the consortium, Enet, is now relegated to being a supplier and that the Irish Infrastructure Fund, a fund owned by the State, has bought Enet in its entirety. We now have the bizarre situation whereby the State is going to contract a private supplier - an investment company that has nothing do with telecoms - to hire a company, Enet, which the State owns, to provide broadband at a significant cost. Is the Tánaiste concerned about any of these matters?

The Tánaiste: Following on from the Deputy's remarks, I am sure he will agree that it would be inappropriate for me to discuss the detail of the procurement process and the proposal that is currently being assessed. The Deputy and I know that Enet is a company that manages metropolitan area networks, MANS, in which the State and the private sector have invested a great deal of amount. The company installs fibre rings around towns across the country and uses this fibre network to connect into a national broadband-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I ask the Tánaiste to answer the questions I put to him.

The Tánaiste: I will come back to them. The Deputy has cast aspersions perhaps on the appropriateness of Enet being part of a solution being proposed by a bidder.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I did no such thing.

Deputy Paul Murphy: He did the opposite.

The Tánaiste: My understanding is that Mr. McCourt is a telecoms investor and as such he is not someone that has nothing to do with telecoms.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: He is not a telecoms man. He is a man who owns a financial investment company.

The Tánaiste: He is a telecoms investor. He has invested in Enet in the past and he is now the lead bidder in a procurement process that is at a delicate stage.

On Ministers meeting bidders-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: A bidder.

The Tánaiste: -----it is not appropriate for a Minister to discuss the detail of any procurement process or bidding process while that tendering process is ongoing.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: May a Minister sit beside an official as he or she is doing so?

The Tánaiste: Deputy Howlin will be aware from his time in government that this bidding process has been ongoing for over three years. It has involved multiple different players in the Irish telecommunications industry. The idea that the Minister with responsibility for telecommunications would not have had discussions with the head of Vodafone, Eir or others-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I did not ask about that.

Deputy Brian Stanley: A Minister should not do so during a tender process.

The Tánaiste: -----over the past three years, because this tendering process has involved some of their companies, is not realistic.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The guidelines are crystal clear.

The Tánaiste: They are crystal clear. It is inappropriate for a Minister to discuss the detail of a procurement process or a bid in the context of that Minister's Department assessing that bid. It is important to say that the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment has nothing to do with the assessment process of the bid in technical terms.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Minister is the person in charge under the law.

The Tánaiste: The Minister's responsibility is to come to Government for funding requests and to ensure that the process remains on track and on time. He has no role in terms of finalising the recommendation in regard to the bidding process. There needs to be, and has been, a separation between the Minister and his office and what is being assessed by the Department.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I asked the Tánaiste whether it was appropriate for the Minister, Deputy Naughten, to have two meetings with the lead bidder in the most significant contract being overseen by his Department. It is a simple and straightforward question. I have had engagements with procurement officers in the context of the protocols for this area, which I drew up during my time as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. Interestingly, when I tried to access them online at the weekend I noted they have been removed from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform website. Under those protocols, a designated official with a designated email address was the only point of contact in a bidding process. Ministerial staff and the Minister were debarred from having any contact with a tenderer during the tender process. This was rigidly adhered to and, I believe, is still rigidly adhered to in most Departments. It is particularly bizarre that this is not the case in the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, in particular because following on from the Moriarty tribunal, the guidelines are clear that there should be no meetings between a Minister and bidders during the bidding process. Any meetings between officials - there should be a designated official - should be minuted and published, whether or not commercially sensitive.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Why do these protocols not apply in this case?

The Tánaiste: For reasons that I have outlined, namely, this has been a long procurement and tendering process that has involved multiple players in the telecommunications industry in Ireland. As Minister with responsibility for telecommunications, Deputy Naughten would have been at events where-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Not with the lead bidder in the final stages of a contract.

The Tánaiste: For much of this process, there was not a lead bidder. Two other-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: There was at this stage. The Minister went to New York to meet him.

The Tánaiste: -----companies were part of this process but pulled out. There is one remaining bidder. It would be, and is, inappropriate for a Minister to discuss with this bidder any detail that relates to the bidding process or the procurement process.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am sure the Minister did not do so.

The Tánaiste: The Minister, Deputy Naughten, wants an opportunity to come before this House to explain that he maintained a separation between both processes.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yesterday, the funeral cortège of Emma Mhic Mhathúna passed Leinster House. It was a very emotional afternoon. A very pointed message was being sent by Emma. It was not directed at any particular person but at the people inside who they wanted to do something. What can the people in here do? We can investigate the actual cause of the death of Emma and 20 other women and ensure that unavoidable mistakes never happen again. Following Emma's death, her solicitor, Mr. Cian O'Carroll, said on an RTÉ radio programme that he is dumbstruck as to the reason the HSE and the Government are hell bent on avoiding the laboratory issue. He said that when the issue is raised with the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Government, they focus on non-disclosure. Non-disclosure did not kill Emma. Emma died owing to failures in a laboratory in 2010 and 2013, as he said.

It is inexcusable that today, following her death, there is still not a clear and determined statement from the State saying that it will investigate why those slides along with so many hundreds of others were critically misread in the laboratories in the USA and Ireland. He also made the point that the 221 errors have not been properly investigated. They are not being looked at, and neither are the actual laboratories. The laboratory that misdiagnosed Emma and many others is still being used. I want to read a section from a report from Quest Diagnostics to the Tánaiste. It reads:

- We generated double-digit revenue growth in our near-patient - or "point-of-care" - - testing business.
- We continued to reduce our cost structure and improve our efficiency.
- We opened our lab in India.

As my colleague, the former Deputy Joe Higgins, said ten years ago, they could be producing cement for all that could be judged from statements like that. Is it not the reality that the Government's lack of interest in focusing on the labs is because political parties in this Dáil took a decision that cost would be the overriding criterion in deciding on the testing service?

Dr. Scally made the point yesterday that he did not give the labs the clean bill of health that the Minister has been so determined to suggest. He also made the point that a whole host of women could also be affected because the HSE and CervicalCheck took a decision to limit it to within an 18 month range. Dr. Scally and his investigators made the point there was not a clear and unambiguous international accreditation awarded to the labs. Why is it that a decision was taken that cost would be the fundamental criterion for the testing service and is it not the case that the Government decided to do medicine on the cheap and that many women are now paying the price?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the question. First, on behalf of this House, I recognise the significance of Emma Mhic Mhathúna's funeral passing this House and other significant institutions of the State yesterday. I hope that this House will be able to honour the legacy of an extraordinarily brave woman and ensure the truth is fully understood in regard to what happened to her and others so that we avoid making the mistakes made in the past again in the

future. The Minister, Deputy Harris, and this Government are absolutely committed to doing that and I thank other parties in this House for supporting us in this work.

I refer to what Dr. Scally said yesterday but first I thank him for his continuing work and his continuing support to the Government and the Department of Health on this. I thank him for his appearance at the committee yesterday and for speaking on his excellent report, which I encourage everybody to read. The reality is that we have known for a long time that the numbers may increase after we get the report of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which is currently under way. We know that the overall number being reviewed is higher than the CervicalCheck audit because there were a number of cases notified to the National Cancer Registry but not included in that audit. Members will recall that as soon as the Minister, Deputy Harris, learned this he informed the House straight away. Dr. Scally has done great work in setting out answers to questions. His recommendations have set the Government a goal, and we have adopted entirely those recommendations. The aim of eradicating cervical cancer through a programme of screening and vaccination is now what we want to implement. Dr. Scally is continuing his work and will continue to support the Government. He will independently oversee the implementation of many of his recommendations. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists work is under way, which is an independent, outside, expert review of smear tests and which will provide answers to some of the questions the Deputy is asking today. It is not appropriate to draw conclusions, however, without having the benefit of that report.

The Government is certainly not focusing on using labs for this purpose on the basis of cost. My understanding is that the cost of labs outside of Ireland is no less than the cost of labs used in Ireland in regard to assessing screening results.

I urge caution here because we have made mistakes in the past and jumped to conclusions. Let us wait until we get the detail of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists report which will hopefully be available in early 2019. Let us continue to work with Dr. Scally to ensure that we provide the supports necessary and that we learn from the mistakes that Dr. Scally, to his credit, has uncovered.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Dr. Scally told the Joint Committee on Health that there are still serious issues with slides sent by Clinical Pathology Laboratories Inc., CPL, to other labs in the USA. This is the outsourcing that the HSE did not even know about. Mr. O'Carroll made the point that when a mistake is made in other countries, the person in the lab who made the mistake is debriefed as to why he or she might have made the mistake. That has never been done in any of the labs that CervicalCheck has used. The reason is that CervicalCheck did not even know what labs were doing the testing. That is what we have now discovered in many cases. The outsourcing was being re-outsourced.

I ask about the tender documents. Why is it that we cannot get our hands on the tender document for the labs? It was revealed by Dr. Scally that original tender documents were shredded by the HSE. Was an email ever sent? It is 2018 and there is only one original document, so was it delivered by plane? It reminded me of the quotation that Mr. Tony O'Brien apparently had on his wall about speaking truth to power. When I heard about the shredding of the contract it reminded me of Noam Chomsky's words, "power knows the truth already; it is just busy trying to conceal it." It seems that is the case with the HSE and the original tender documents for the labs.

It is still going on. Sonic Healthcare, which is a parent company of MedLab Pathology and

CPL, is now outsourcing to Australia. The kernel of the issue in regard to the death of Emma and other women is still not being investigated and has still not been changed.

The Tánaiste: I do not accept the Deputy's last statement. The kernel of this issue has been, and continues to be, investigated and if mistakes have been made we will learn from them, fix them and make sure they are not made in the future. We need a screening system in Ireland that women can trust and believe in. That is why Dr. Scally is, and has been, so committed to this effort and why he continues to want to engage with the Government and healthcare system to ensure we follow through on the recommendations he has made. I suggest that we work with him and I support the Minister in those efforts.

I do not have any information on original tender documents but I am sure there is an explanation for it. There are processes under way, some of which have not been completed, and we should not be drawing conclusions in the absence of that information. We also need to ensure that we have the continuing use of laboratories so that we can keep a screening system in place and functioning into next week and next month so that Irish women get the benefit of an effective CervicalCheck screening process. That is an ongoing discussion and negotiation between the Department of Health and the relevant laboratories. We need to maintain a screening process, we need to make sure that it is credible and we need to make sure that any mistakes that have been made in the past are fully uncovered and people are held to account for their actions so that we can learn lessons and fix it for the future.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: General practitioners, GPs, are the cornerstone of our primary care services. Primary care is at the front line of health service provision and deals with the bulk of the health needs of our population. It has lower costs than acute care and can deliver a better preventative quality of care faster and closer to home. I do not need to emphasise the importance of our GPs but for the avoidance of doubt, last year according to the Irish College of General Practitioners approximately 25 million patients were seen in Irish general practices. That is a sensational performance, particularly when it is factored in that the care that is delivered is world class. It is even more sensational when it is factored in what the Government has done to general practitioners and primary care through savage funding cuts. The Government cut 38% from general practice under FEMPI legislation and there has been a steadfast refusal to reverse this. The Government claimed the budget would signal that Ireland had exited recession. That is absolutely meaningless to GPs, those working in primary care or those who need access to primary care services. What the Government is doing does not make any sense in terms of healthcare or economics. The Government has exhibited an absolute poverty of imagination when it comes to addressing the problems in primary care. Instead of investing properly in our GPs and primary care, which is much cheaper than secondary acute care, the Government prefers to starve the sector. The result is that our GP network is now close to collapse. The Government's actions, particularly in this year's budget, have done little to address the recruitment and retention crisis among GPs because nothing has been done to reverse FEMPI measures. It has made no progress on the GP contract negotiations. Instead, it produced a report yesterday claiming €100 million could be saved in efficiencies to completely undermine GPs. This represents a poor start to the contract negotiations. GPs are operating at and above capacity in a primary care system creaking with problems and the Government has the cheek to throw out reports claiming GPs and practice nurses are inefficient. GP practices in my area, particularly in Swords and Balbriggan, are closed to new entrants. I do not know how GP practices can become more efficient. Suggesting that GPs and practice nurses are not working to full capacity is nothing short of insulting. General practice is in crisis and the Government

refuses to acknowledge it or do anything meaningful to address it.

Considering the recent restoration of Deputies' salaries by the Government, when does it plan to reverse FEMPI in respect of primary care, which took a disproportionate 38% cut during the austerity years? When can GPs expect negotiations on a new contract to be concluded? What concrete steps is the Government taking to increase capacity in primary care?

The Tánaiste: A big part of Sláintecare and the Government's health strategy is about investing in primary care to keep people out of hospitals in the first place, as the Deputy will be well aware. That is why we have invested tens of millions of euro in primary care facilities throughout the country in many of the towns, cities and constituencies represented in this House. As announced in this week's Budget Statement, 100,000 more people will qualify for free GP care due to the changes we are making in qualifying thresholds. This is intended to make life easier for families to help with health costs which we have also done by reducing the cost of medicines. This is also in line with Sláintecare.

Separately in budget 2019, the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, secured significant funds to invest in general practice. We recognise that GPs need to be supported in a sustainable manner to deliver the increased services we are asking them to deliver. We also want to deliver on the Sláintecare reforms to move more care into the community, which is better for everybody. We need to ensure general practice is ready and able to do that and we are investing in that. We have a significant multi-annual investment to make, which is worth many millions of euro. Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, officials were in the Department of Health yesterday and I expect to see progress soon on a process the Government and the Minister for Health are eager to see delivering an agreement as quickly as possible. We are about trying to reverse cuts of recent years; we are doing it across all sectors.

My note tells me the Sinn Féin budgetary position did not even provide for the development of a new GP contract.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Tánaiste's note is incorrect.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy might send me information on that if I am wrong.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I will be happy to.

The Tánaiste: The Minister for Health is at the point-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is Leaders' Questions.

The Tánaiste: -----of trying to get agreement with the IMO on primary care and creating a supportive environment for GPs to be able to provide expanded services which we are both planning for an investing in through the budget this week.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Scotland has 4,953 GPs for a population of 5.2 million. Wales has 2,887 for a population of 3 million. We have 2,500 in the State to cover a population of 4.7 million. Where are the tens of millions of euro the Tánaiste referred to going? Every time I ask a question about the development of primary care services, I get the same answer, which is services will be provided from within existing resources. We will be 1,000 GPs short over the next decade. More people do not have an entitlement to access their GPs. They will go onto a waiting list and wait like everybody else for healthcare. Seven in ten GPs can no longer take on new patients. Where will the new patients go? The Government is doing nothing to

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address the underlying causes of these problems. When does the Government plan to reverse the FEMPI legislation completely for GPs? When will the negotiations be concluded? What concrete steps will the Government take to increase capacity, which is key? Making a promise it cannot keep seems to have become the hallmark of this Government. It is telling people they will now have access to a GP when seven in ten GPs in the State are saying they will not take on any new patients.

The Tánaiste: I am not aware the Deputy's party made a promise in its pre-budget submission on a new GP contract.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: As I told the Tánaiste, we did.

The Tánaiste: Perhaps the Deputy can send me the detail on it.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I will send it. As Deputy Coppinger pointed out, this is Leaders' Questions.

The Tánaiste: I notice the Deputy has not referred to it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: There is somebody in the Deputy's office going through it right now-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This is Leaders' Questions, so, with respect-----

The Tánaiste: I will answer the questions.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: -----I ask the questions.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Tánaiste is not here to ask us questions.

The Tánaiste: I will answer the questions. It is important that if the Deputy is making accusations across the House that she takes a look in the mirror. On the resources that are needed to expand our primary healthcare system, we are providing an additional €1.2 billion for healthcare next year, which is a massive increase in health expenditure. Much of it will go into primary care. I have stood in some of the new primary healthcare facilities in various constituencies. There are many of them and GPs are moving into them to try to improve the facilities that GPs operate in.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There is no staff in them.

The Tánaiste: With regard to the financial resources that are needed for a new GP contract to ensure GPs are fairly paid for the increased workload we are asking them to take on, negotiations are going on right now and the Department of Health hopes to make progress with the IMO. We had meetings on that issue as late as yesterday.

Deputy Catherine Martin: On Monday, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, issued a stark and frightening report on humanity's impact on the world around us. The day after the report was published, the Government did a U-turn on carbon tax. Carbon tax is not the be-all and end-all of climate action and it needs to be balanced with supports to stop fuel poverty. This move showed exactly where the Government's priorities lie. As Professor John FitzGerald has said, carbon pricing alone will not deliver the necessary emission reductions but delivering emission reductions without a sufficient carbon price will almost be impossible and much more expensive. The Government has a Minister with responsibility for climate action

who did not even seek an increase in the carbon tax in the budget. He should resign on that issue alone and that is before we get into the issues of the impropriety of his dining habits.

The Government has a national development plan, NDP, which has not been climate-proofed. At meetings of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, three Secretaries General have looked like deer in the headlights when asked how we will close the 100 million tonne emissions gap. The Government has a transport plan that is all roads, roads and more roads. The NDP provides for more than 60 motorways or national road projects. There is not a single major public transport project in construction today. With the exception of the Royal Canal greenway, there is not a single cycling project in construction today. The Government keeps pushing public transport projects into the future. It delayed metro north by a decade. The DART Interconnector is in the plan for after 2027, if at all, and the Navan railway line, which was ready to go, is also on the long finger for at least another decade. What is the public transport plan for the Tánaiste's city of Cork?

The Government's tokenistic actions on climate and environment have been woeful. Last month, Fine Gael launched its very own green week. The irony of having a single green week where the party deflected its own shameful lack of real action on climate issues onto the people seems to have been totally lost on Fine Gael. The Taoiseach highlights the benefits of switching to a reusable coffee cup while, at the same time, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment continues to block the Green Party's Waste Reduction Bill. The Government has opposed our Bill and the Labour Party Bill to ban microbeads, has opposed Deputy Bríd Smith's climate emergency Bill, and has continually declared that Ireland is open for business when it comes to fossil fuel extraction. At the end of the day, on the international stage, Ireland is the second worst performer in the EU on climate change. We are bottom of the class.

The Ministers assure us we will have massive reductions in our emissions by 2030 but no one can see that. The Committee on Climate Action says we are completely off course, and the Environmental Protection Agency predicts our emissions in 2035 will be higher than they are today, yet we are presented with a national development plan with no idea of climate impact. Does the Government accept that the national development plan is not fit for purpose? It is not climate-proofed, it is not real climate action and it needs to change.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy asked many questions. I agree with her that the report published at the start of the week needs to be a wake-up call for us all on climate action and its prioritisation in everything we do, from education and transport to waste and planning for the future in how we live, move around and so on. As a Minister who has been part of the story of the Ireland 2040 plan, which the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government is now delivering on, I know that a big part of that discussion was about climate and changing how Ireland functions in the context of the responsibilities we have to reduce emissions.

The decisions made this week on carbon were the correct ones. We already know both petrol and diesel have increased significantly in price in recent months and will continue to increase because world oil prices are increasing. We need to learn lessons from the water debates that if one is to change how people perceive increased charges, and if one hopes to change their behaviour by doing so, one needs to bring people along. This Government will commit to steady increases over time in carbon taxes but we will try to bring people with us rather than tell them how it needs to be without preparing the ground for doing that.

On the national development plan and the €116 billion we are committing, approximately

20% of that expenditure is linked to climate action, more efficient energy and more efficient transport movements. In regard to planning for my city, which I hope the Deputy might look at in a bit more detail, we are planning €200 million of expenditure in new BusConnects projects. We are planning for a light rail system for the first time in the city. We are planning for much higher density and much higher quality buildings in order that people can live closer to each other and benefit from real economies of scale that do not require people to drive their own car to work any longer because we are planning for a more climate-efficient society in the future.

Much of what we are doing and have done in this budget through vehicle registration tax changes, supporting electric transport and public transport, and providing more funding for greenways next year, is to ensure the green agenda is real in government.

Deputy Catherine Martin: Monday's report was obviously not a wake-up call for Government. In Cork, all that the Government has agreed is to expand the road network.

To return to my main question, the national development plan is not a plan to achieve a low-carbon economy and it is not fit for purpose. This is my main question today to the Minister. Will he admit it is not fit for purpose? No strategic environmental assessment was carried out for the national development plan. There was only one for the national planning framework but, most importantly, it did not provide a quantitative level of emissions reductions at all - no numbers and no target.

The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment spends so much time talking about the one in five euro that will be spent on climate action under the national development plan, as the Tánaiste has just mentioned also, but they fail to note that €13 billion of that €21 billion was already committed by the ESB to standard energy expenditure anyway. The budget provided for €25 million for retrofitting the State's stock of 150,000. We need €5 billion. At this rate, it will take 40 years. The Government is not serious about climate change, or at least that is what all the evidence suggests. If I am wrong and the Government cares, will it lead and take action?

Limiting climate change to 1.5° Celsius is a matter of survival for us all. It is not about the distant future. We have 12 years for this Government to show leadership and take brave and bold political decisions. Does it have that courage? If it does, it should take the brave and bold step here in the Dáil today and admit that the national development plan is not fit for purpose and it needs to change.

The Tánaiste: As someone who spent many hours trying to be part of designing a much more sustainable way forward for this country through 20-year planning for the first time, and as the person who ensured independent review of the sustainability of that plan happened, I will not say that our national development plan is not fit for purpose on climate change.

Deputy Catherine Martin: Where are the figures? We cannot see them if they are not there.

The Tánaiste: Sometimes I think the Green Party does not want this Government to be seen to be achieving on climate change.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I do not want this Government.

The Tánaiste: The Green Party could have been part of this Government but it chose not

to be.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: The Green Party could have joined us.

The Tánaiste: It chose not to be because it did not want to take on the responsibility of Government. It is unfortunate because I would have liked the Green Party to be part of it. I ask it not to start painting a picture which is not accurate. Let us talk seriously about what is and is not happening. More needs to be done on climate change, which I accept, and more needs to be done on emissions. Certain sectors in Ireland are not performing on reducing emissions as well as they need to. We want to work with the Green Party on that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Government needs to act first.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The Government must lead.

The Tánaiste: What I will not accept is the painting of an inaccurate picture of the prioritisation of climate in the context of the policy and funding decisions we are making and have made this week.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes our extended Leaders' Questions. Before proceeding to questions on promised legislation, I understand the Government Chief Whip, Deputy Joe McHugh, has a business proposal to put to the House.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh): It is proposed that notwithstanding the motion re sittings and business of the Dáil in budget week, agreed on Wednesday, 3 October 2018, that proceedings on Financial Resolution No. 4, if not previously adjourned, shall be interrupted at 3 p.m. today to take item No. 33a, a statement by the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment. The statement of the Minister shall not exceed ten minutes, following which each party or group in opposition shall have eight minutes consisting of alternating questions and answers. The Minister shall have five minutes for his statement and conclusion. The opening statement, the questions and answers and the concluding statement shall not exceed one hour and 11 minutes in total. Topical Issues shall take place on the conclusion of the Minister's concluding statement for one hour, and the Dáil shall adjourn on conclusion of topical issues.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are on the cusp of being hit by Storm Callum. Will the Minister confirm whether the national emergency co-ordination group, NECG, will meet this afternoon? In the context of what are expected to be 130 km/h winds with spring tides, there is considerable disruption forecast for the morning. As the impact of this will be felt at commuting time, when will the Government be in a position to alert people about travel plans for the morning? Is it satisfied that adequate preparations are in place for what may be ahead?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this because it gives me the opportunity to

inform the House that the Department has convened a meeting of the NECG for 3 p.m. this afternoon to review preparations and public safety messaging for the arrival of Storm Callum, as well as to highlight to Departments and agencies the need to be prepared and to make any necessary decisions concerning their sectors on Thursday or Friday morning. Depending on the impact of the storm, the Department will make further decisions on Thursday night or Friday morning about whether to convene the NECG again on Friday. Storm Callum is due to arrive on the south-west coast this evening and will track north west, simultaneously affecting the west, the south and then the east coast with very high winds.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Will the Tánaiste circulate a note to the Members?

The Tánaiste: Yes. The preparations are under way.

Deputy Dara Calleary: There are travel plans. People need to know.

The Tánaiste: Absolutely. People should try to make early decisions on the basis of the information provided to them. Following the meeting of the national emergency co-ordination group later, I expect the Minister will be very clear in his advice.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Before the summer break, the Government produced a general scheme for the airport noise regulation Bill 2018 which makes Fingal County Council the designated noise regulator. Doing that disregarded the concerns of local communities, as the airport noise plan will undermine the noise restrictions that should be retained as per the planning permission granted in 2007. The Government is also ignoring an EU directive which clearly states that any review should be conducted by an independent noise regulator. When will a genuinely independent noise regulatory authority be established to ensure that the opinions of local people and communities are taken into account and that they are centrally involved in the decision-making process?

The Tánaiste: My understanding on that legislation is that the Joint Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport started the pre-legislative scrutiny process last week. All of these issues can be raised during that process.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Minister for Finance announced in May that the Government had approved the drafting of the so-called rainy day fund Bill. The budget allocated €500 million to that fund and another €1.5 billion is to be transferred to it from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF. The national surplus (reserve fund for exceptional contingencies) Bill - not an elegant title - was mentioned in the Programme for a Partnership Government. We have not seen any heads of that Bill, although they were apparently approved in May. When will we see the draft legislation? Will there be pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill? Can we please have a copy of the draft heads of the Bill that were approved?

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy said, the heads of this Bill were cleared in May. I understand that the committee decided not to go through a pre-legislative scrutiny process in September. I am assuming that this legislation will now move ahead. I acknowledge that the Deputy has an interest in it and he raised concerns about it with the Taoiseach yesterday. I look forward to hearing his commentary as that legislation moves through the House so that we get it right.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: In recent months, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has advertised that employees who feel they may be victims of bogus self-employment practices should report that, which is welcome. It has been a long time com-

ing because such practices are widespread, particularly in the construction industry. Does the Government have any intention, in the forthcoming Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, to deal with this in a comprehensive manner? There are still problems in this regard. That is particularly the case in an area that we could do something about, which is public procurement contracts. For example, I received a call this morning from building workers employed on such a contract in St. Mary's Mansions on Gardiner Street building houses for Clúid, the voluntary housing association. The workers say there is bogus self-employment on the site. They have not received their wages for weeks, they are not getting pay slips and no pension contributions have been made. The joint investigations unit should be down there today or tomorrow. We need the Government to act on this issue of bogus self-employment.

The Tánaiste: New legislation is proceeding in this area and I suggest that the Deputy tables an amendment. He will then have the opportunity to debate it with the Minister.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It was announced yesterday that, as part of the budget process, that the Government has committed an additional €9 million to RTÉ. That money largely comes funding restored to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. That is it, however. We are in a situation where the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, BAI, has said that it would be in real trouble if it did not get €30 million and TG4 has a similar problem. Is what was announced yesterday the sum total of what this Government intends to do to help Irish media? Our Oireachtas Joint Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment recommended a suite of different measures that could provide further funding. In a world where all the big international media are becoming increasingly wealthy and dominant in Ireland and Irish media are in crisis, is that all we can expect from this Government to help Irish broadcast media?

The Tánaiste: I want to be careful about what I say in respect of RTÉ because I have a brother working there at a senior level. I do not want to be accused of having any vested interests or anything like that. Decisions were made on RTÉ that I think were sensible. RTÉ has funding pressures. The budgetary announcement will help somewhat in that but RTÉ also has responsibilities to provide a significant volume of programming in a cost-effective way. However, we will continue to have a discussion with RTÉ, and indeed with other parties in this House, in respect of how we fund public service broadcasting. That discussion needs to continue but it is not true that this was the only measure in the budget for Irish media. We decided to retain the VAT rate of 9% for the newspaper industry, despite changing that rate for many other sectors. Irish media did get preferential treatment for the reasons the Deputy Eamon outlined.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: The programme for Government committed to targeting waiting lists in our hospitals. Unfortunately, they have not improved. They are worse than they have ever been in the history of the State. I refer to Portiuncula Hospital in Ballinasloe in my constituency. A unit with 50 beds is shovel-ready and ready to go. At the request of management and staff, I recently visited that hospital. Despite the outstanding service of the staff, the conditions are appalling. It is a €17 million project and everything is ready. It is simply waiting for the green light from the Government.

Going back a number of years, a Government, in which the Tánaiste was a Member, blatantly closed the emergency department in Roscommon town. It was a brand new building that cost €8.5 million and it was closed, which was an outrageous decision. Portiuncula Hospital then became the emergency department for patients from Roscommon. It is important that this project gets the green light immediately. I know that the Tánaiste cannot give me a concrete

answer today but he might pass on this message to the Minister for Health to give the green light without any further delay.

The Tánaiste: In respect of waiting lists, in the budget for next year we have announced €75 million in expenditure for the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, to try to reduce waiting lists and to make sure that, while people might not have the operations they need in their local hospital, they can certainly get them done somewhere. Expenditure will increase by between €20 million and €25 million, which is a welcome development. I will, however, pass on the Deputy's request directly to the Minister.

Deputy John Brassil: Commitments were given in the programme for Government to restore cuts made as part of the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, legislation. Earlier this morning, the Tánaiste said that negotiations on general practitioner, GP, contracts were ongoing. He said that restoration is happening in all sectors. There is one sector, however, where it has not commenced and that is the pharmacy sector. As a pharmacist, I am aware the role pharmacists play in primary care in all communities is very valuable. They are much underutilised but I also believe that the FEMPI restoration should commence for that profession. Pharmacists are all working hard and they deserve the same respect as every other healthcare professional.

The Tánaiste: I defer to the Deputy's expertise in that sector. This is a matter for negotiation with the Minister for Health.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Despite seven years having elapsed since the inspection of places of detention Bill first appeared on the Government's legislative programme, we still await its publication. This Bill would provide for Ireland's ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture, OPCAT. With some 90 states having ratified the protocol, it is to our collective shame that this legislation, which would oblige the State to ensure the safety of all vulnerable people behind the closed doors of children's care homes, nursing homes and places of detention via independent inspection has not been enacted. When will the Bill be presented?

The Tánaiste: I am told that the heads of the Bill are still in preparation. I am sure that the Deputy has heard that previously. I will try to come back with a more detailed response.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Seven years is a long time for something to be in preparation.

The Tánaiste: I take that point.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Last week I raised the issue of the deficiencies of the Garda fleet in Louth with the Minister for Justice and Equality. I referred to the fact that there was only one community policing van shared between Drogheda and Dundalk, there are only two Garda cars to cover the entire town of Drogheda and the surrounding areas and that gardaí are forced to use their own cars or to walk. They are effectively starved of the resources required to carry out their duties effectively. Not only did the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, not show any concern for this serious situation, he absolved himself of all responsibility, stating that the local community should raise the issue at the joint policing committee, JPC. The Taoiseach sat there and ignored the fact that his Minister for Justice and Equality has absolved himself of all responsibility.

We raise issues and ask questions every week. The Minister for Justice and Equality is paid a salary in excess of €163,000 per year to take responsibility. I have to ask the question again, because I got no response last time. As the Minister for Justice and Equality has not turned up to the Chamber this morning, will the Tánaiste insist that he states clearly, on the record, when the Garda in Louth will receive the fleet resources it needs to carry out the work it is supposed to be doing? We have had enough of the “could not care less” attitude of the Minister.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy has the wrong impression of the Minister. In my experience he is a ferocious advocate for An Garda Síochána around the Cabinet table.

Deputy Michael Creed: That is more than can be said for Sinn Féin.

Deputy Imelda Munster: His response is on the record.

The Tánaiste: It is nice to hear Sinn Féin advocating for more resources for the Garda in Louth.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Minister’s response is on the record.

The Tánaiste: The Minister has secured an increase of €110 million for the Garda Vote for next year, which will deliver an extra 800 gardaí. He has also delivered a further €10 million investment in the Garda transport fleet, which seems to be the issue the Deputy is raising.

Deputy Imelda Munster: When can we expect to get the new equipment?

The Tánaiste: It is earmarked for next year, which is not too far away.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is the question we asked.

The Tánaiste: For further detail on that the Deputy will have to ask a parliamentary question.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy could table a Topical Issue and we can discuss the matter then.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I will.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: On 13 April, the Minister for Education and Skills announced that 42 new schools would be built around the country, including 17 which would be up and running by next September. We are now six months on from that announcement, and almost nothing has happened. During the summer four patronage processes for secondary schools began, but they have not been completed because we do not have the results of the processes. Parents are currently visiting schools with their children to decide on the schools they might attend next year and they are asking about the schools the Minister promised six months ago. The Joint Committee on Education and Skills was promised that we would have an update on each of the 42 schools and the progress made on them by the end of September. I have not received that update, and I would be grateful if the Minister could update the House as to his announcement and give parents the information they need.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I do not know what happened to the Deputy, but the update was provided to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills last week, as requested and as we indicated we would. There are 42 new schools scheduled to open up to 2022. We are acting to provide a better pre-planning process in order that

we can anticipate needs and make plans, and to have a timely programme for construction. As the Deputy mentioned, in the case of post-primary schools a parental selection has been invited and an independent commission considering the view of parents as to the preferred patron for those second-level schools. Before Christmas a similar process for primary schools due to open in September 2019 will begin. The Department is identifying temporary sites in most cases, which is the norm for new schools. The Department is working with local authorities to find the permanent sites these schools will need in the long term.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: My question concerns the review of the aquaculture sector which was completed and provided to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine more than a year ago. There is no implementation strategy yet or timeline for how the 30 actions contained in that review are going to be implemented, which is crucial for the development of the industry and the sector. One example is Marine Harvest, in Fanad, County Donegal, which has been waiting for seven years for an answer on an application for a license for one of its sites in Cork. Its processing site in Donegal is operating at 30% or 40% capacity. If licences could be dealt with in a more timely manner additional employment could be created but we need a timeline in which that strategy will be implemented. Can the Minister update us on whether he will put an implementation strategy in place for this sector?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I appreciate the Deputy's interest in the aquaculture sector. We conducted a review of the aquaculture licensing regime and I understand that a date was agreed with the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine for an update on the process. I can confirm that we are on track to eliminate the arrears of processing of aquaculture licences. There was a two-year timescale in which to clear the backlog, and we are well on track to deliver. We will provide a comprehensive report to the committee at some stage later this month.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: My question relates to survivors of historical child sex abuse at Creagh Lane national school in Limerick and in other schools. The Minister for Education and Skills will be aware that the Dáil debated a motion on 4 July on this matter, and it was passed the following day. When will the Government publish Mr. Justice Iarfhlaith O'Neill's report, and will it now act on the will of the Dáil, as expressed in the July vote, and allow these people to access compensation for the awful abuse they suffered while attending these schools? So the Tánaiste is satisfied, in our pre-budget statement we have provided for the compensation money that would be required.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The position is that Mr. Justice O'Neill has been appointed to review cases where people have not been successful in applications for compensation under the European Court. He is continuing his work, and no report is available to my Department at this point. We have submitted all of the information requested by Mr. Justice O'Neill, and I understand he is working on it.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: When can we expect that report? It was due in August.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: On page 108 of the programme for Government, there is a range of commitments on farm incomes and supporting next-generation farmers. Not many young farmers are going into sheep farming in particular. At the recent graduation in Macroom, it was wonderful to see 18 new farmers receiving their green certificates. Only one person, who was from a very hilly area, was going into sheep farming from that group. Sheep farming is not seen as a viable option for people and they are voting with their feet. The introduction of the

sheep welfare scheme was positive but because only two thirds of sheep farmers are involved in it, amounting to just over 20,000 people, there is an underspend and a large number of people are interested in getting into it. Is the Minister reviewing that scheme or is he considering re-distributing that funding in order that extra people can get into it, or will there be top-ups for people already in the scheme?

Deputy Michael Creed: It is a demand-led scheme, open for applications on an annual basis. Anyone who applies gets a payment of €10 per ewe on the basis of actions they commit to, whether for hill farmers or lowland sheep productions. There is a menu of options specifically designed and tailored for either commodity area.

On generational renewal, the Deputy will appreciate that as well as increasing area of natural constraint, ANC, payments in the budget, which will specifically deliver more money to those farmers in more marginal and disadvantaged lands, we also renewed a suite of taxation measures to encourage land mobility and young farmers, including measures on stamp duty relief.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: Applying for a medical card today reminds me of applying for planning permission. One applies for planning permission and seven weeks later one gets a request for further information. One sends the information in and then one might get a subsequent request. That is fair enough for planning permission, but for medical cards, people are being notified four or five weeks after they apply by text message or by letter that more information is required. After sending in that information, people can then get a further request.

I do not know if this is a staff issue. I want to say that the staff of the dedicated line to the medical card office that we have as Deputies are courteous and helpful. They try to do the best they can for us. However, there must be a policy to stall, delay or frustrate these applications. I do not know what the problem is. Are more staff needed? More GP cards are provided for in the budget, but unless there are staff to deal with the current backlog, it will not work.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): I thank the Deputy for his points. As practicing politicians, we all understand the frustrations arising from the application system. To be fair to the system however, it is very fair. It is a centralised national system. Previously, this work was carried out separately in different geographical areas, using different yardsticks. This is a better way of doing it, notwithstanding our frustrations with delays. Documents can go missing, and things like that are frustrating. By and large, the central office is doing a reasonably good job. It has made huge strides and treats everybody exactly the same. That element of fairness has to be welcomed.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: I want to raise the issue of Spinraza with the Tánaiste. This is my fourth time raising this issue in the Chamber. Today Grace, an amazing little girl, and her parents came to Leinster House again. They met Deputy Finian McGrath, the Minister of State with special responsibility for disability issues, and by all accounts it was a good meeting. However, we still await a response from the Minister for Health, who has simply sent a holding response. He acknowledged receipt of their letter and that was it. There has been no decision. These parents have been waiting week after week for a decision from the HSE as to whether it and this Government will provide their daughter and the other 24 affected children with the medication they need to live and to have some quality of life. Will the Tánaiste endeavour to get a response to those parents and children? For God's sake, I ask him to ask the Minister for Health to get in touch.

The Tánaiste: I actually raised this matter with the Minister this morning because I anticipated that somebody would raise it today. Everybody wants to move towards a decision here. The Minister does not make the decision himself. He has to get a recommendation from an ongoing negotiation process. There are two parties to the negotiation. A company is also involved. The State has managed to negotiate a more realistic price for a whole series of products in the last 12 months. This is a medication on which we would obviously like to see progress and we are endeavouring to bring that about, but I am afraid I am not in a position to give the Deputy an exact timeline today.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The voisinage agreement was agreed between Britain and Ireland in 1964, before we joined the European Union, to allow for fishing rights across the Irish Sea. That agreement fell down due to a court order a few years ago. The House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee reported recently that if something is not done about this by a deadline of the end of March next year, Irish fishing vessels will be prevented from going into British waters. That is a serious problem for the fishing community throughout the country, particularly for those on the coastline of the Irish Sea. We need negotiations. We know Brexit is imminent and that has its own problems but this is something that predates our entry into the European Union. I would like an update. Have our officials been engaging with the British Government and British officials in this regard? Has any progress been made? When will progress happen? We need a new agreement as quickly as possible.

The Tánaiste: I can go into the technicalities of that agreement on another occasion if the Deputy wishes. I assure him that our officials are very much aware of it despite that court case. We want to protect the *status quo* whereby Northern Irish boats and Irish boats share each other's waters. We are talking about waters close to shore, as opposed to those governed by the Common Fisheries Policy. We are working to protect that understanding and arrangement between Britain and Ireland.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I wish to ask the Tánaiste about the building of houses. Over the last number of years, scores of families have called into my constituency office with problems in this regard. Local need rules from 2005 are still in place. These rules prevent people from owning their own house. I hear from families who live in the countryside and have sites they got from their father, mother, granny or aunt and on which they are not allowed to build. I also hear from families living in villages who want to move to the countryside because their family has gotten bigger and the house they live in is too small. The local needs rules are preventing us from building these houses. Local authorities all seem to have different rules. I will say one thing. The Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, has done a lot of work on this issue in recent years, and I thank him for his work. I believe the EU will issue new directives in October this year. When can I tell these people the good news that they can build in their own community?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): There is an ongoing conversation on the local needs aspect of the rural planning guidelines. We expect to see some movement on that in the autumn. To be clear, more than 6,000 one-off houses have been built every year in this country for the last several years, so many one-off houses are still being built. Each local authority is its own planning authority. The local councillors will vote through certain interpretations of local needs provisions, which will be different in each area. However, I believe most people with a social or family tie to the area and a local economic need are in a position to build their house. Some clarification on the rules around family and social needs will issue in the coming months.

Deputy Tom Neville: Page 38 of the programme for Government addresses economic infrastructure development and Irish Water. Last Friday a “Do not drink” notice was issued to 2,500 costumers in Rathkeale and the surrounding areas of County Limerick due to the increased turbidity in the raw water supply. Work is ongoing on this. I would be grateful if Irish Water could furnish us with a comprehensive update and timeline on this matter. Updates are posted on the Irish Water website but I would prefer if they were a lot more frequent. Moreover, I would like specific times and locations to be announced for the delivery of tanker water in addition to the deliveries that have taken place in Knockaderry and Rathkeale. Last Friday night we were given to expect that bottled water would be distributed on Friday evening. That changed at 10.30 p.m. or 11 p.m. on Friday. Obviously many people, who were ready to collect water, were disgruntled. If we are to learn from this incident, this process should be streamlined. I understand that emergencies happen, but when something like this happens the way we react and communicate with the public has an ongoing effect. That created a fear factor among the public over the weekend, and we need to correct this. I would be grateful if Irish Water could issue an update on the matter.

The Tánaiste: I will make sure my office relays that concern to Irish Water in order to improve its communication. To be fair, Irish Water is usually pretty good at this stuff and works very closely with local authorities to make sure communities are informed. I am sure the company will respond to the criticism accordingly.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes questions on promised legislation. We managed to accommodate everyone. I thank Deputies for the brevity of their questions and answers.

Financial Resolutions 2019

Financial Resolution No. 4: General (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following motion:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

- (Minister for Finance).

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I welcome the opportunity to speak today. As a former member of the Government party, I acknowledge the progress made in improving the country’s finances since the economic crash. We are now in a position where the finances are in a very healthy state and we should be in a position to pay back some of the burden carried by the Irish people during the austerity years.

We are also in a position where money is available to improve our public services. We must be careful not to go back to the boom-and-bust polices of previous Governments.

Regarding budget 2019, I welcome the widening of the tax and universal social charge, USC, bands and the increase in the minium wage. The health budget has been increased by more than €1 billion to reach €17 billion. I welcome any increases in the budget for health services and delivery, but I have a major problem with the returns we are getting on this in-

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vestment. Despite being allocated its largest budget ever, the Department of Health is still not delivering on targets. Waiting lists are increasing and people are still lying on beds in accident and emergency departments for days on end. In my own town of Dundalk we saw our hospital continuously downgraded by previous Governments to the point that we feared it would be closed completely. Since my election in 2011 I have fought to have Louth County Hospital restored and while services have been increased, we must do more for the hospital.

A fully functioning accident and emergency department must be restored to Louth County Hospital. As an Independent representative for the people of Louth and east Meath I will fight for improved services in Louth County Hospital and Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda.

We cannot have a situation where money is simply being pumped into the Department of Health but we do not see positive results. Coming from a business background I know that if the health service was being run as a commercial company it would be closed down as not fit for purpose. Simply throwing money at this is not a solution. We need real action on the ground to ensure the money being spent is spent wisely to the benefit of patients. We are spending billions of euro on health services. It is time that we saw real results from this massive investment of taxpayers' money.

With regard to housing, I welcome the announcement of the €2.3 billion investment. What I want to see is a real plan put in place to ensure the money allocated is invested in the most efficient way possible to deliver much needed social housing. My constituency office, which is one of the busiest in the country, is inundated with constituents who are having difficulty sourcing affordable housing. We are being told that affordable houses will be available at a cost of €320,000. This is not realistic. For someone to be able to afford a house at this price he or she would probably need a minimum deposit of €32,000 and an income of between €75,000 and €85,000. Is this affordable housing?

Louth County Council has been one of the most progressive in the country in developing houses that were in a state of disrepair but it is now in a position where it cannot develop any more in 2018 due to a lack of money being made available by the Government. Will the Government clarify this and make a commitment to local authorities, such as Louth County Council, that money will be made available to them to develop their housing stock? I appeal to the Minister to look at including Dundalk in the rent pressure zone. Rents in the town are increasing at an alarming level and putting houses out of the reach of many. I would welcome an opportunity to discuss this with the Minister as a matter of urgency.

Overall, I feel the budget was a missed opportunity. We have employers now faced with increased PRSI contributions for their employees, which will be a disincentive to create new jobs. We have the squeezed middle only benefitting by an average of €5 per week, which will be offset in increases elsewhere. We must not forget that it was the squeezed middle who carried most of the burden during the austerity years. The Government is not doing enough for them. The budget should have done more for the less well off, our pensioners and, of course, the squeezed middle.

As I have already stated this week, I was shocked at the decision to increase the VAT on the hospitality sector. My constituency of Louth-East Meath relies heavily on the tourism sector and with the coming threat of Brexit the sector needs every support to overcome the challenges it will undoubtedly bring. I do not accept the Minister's explanation that this measure allowed

him to protect our corporation tax rate at its current low level. This is a measure I want to be addressed as a matter of urgency and with proposals brought forward to help the tourism sector, particularly along the Border areas.

The budget was a missed opportunity. We have not done enough for our pensioners, our less well off and the squeezed middle. The self-employed are still not treated the same as their PAYE counterparts. The tourism sector will be crippled with the VAT increase at a time when it needs all the support it can get. With regard to health, we are throwing money at a problem without a real plan in place to improve the service and we are hoping the problem will go away. Housing needs a more targeted approach. We have the money now to develop housing and what we need is a realistic plan of action to build and develop the houses that are badly needed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next speaker is Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I did not know he was as good at running as that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----when he has his breath back.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am sound. I welcome this opportunity to speak on the budget. I looked at what the Minister said about a responsible, caring and modern Ireland. He used the word “caring”. Let us look at the carers throughout the country who give of their time, and some people give up their jobs, but there is nothing in the budget for them, unfortunately. It is something we have highlighted during the year.

I will take the budget stage by stage and look at its vision. With regard to housing, I am sick of saying that we are not able to spend the money we have because of red tape, bureaucracy, planning, objections and incompetency. We can talk about throwing money at whatever we want but in many cases we are not able to spend it on new housing because so many obstacles are put in the way. I welcome the money for affordable and social housing but when we speak about housing we are not speaking about horse stables. I was astounded during the week to see on television that people would not move into a house because they would not have had stables for their horses. If a farmer gets a social house we will put up a slatted shed. We must ensure when giving housing to people that a mockery is not made out of it. The foot has to be put down. People throughout the country are in desperate situations. Many young people are going to work, day in day out, who will not get a mortgage from the bank but if they were lucky enough to get one they would struggle.

With regard to the new tax rules that have been introduced, I rang an accountant this morning to ask whether it paid to go to work in the situation of a teacher in Dublin on €50,000 or €60,000 who had five children and whose partner was not working. According to the statistics he gave me, it is a sad reality that the budget does not incentivise people to go out to work. I am speaking about people who earn between €35,000 to €40,000 and €60,000 to €65,000, which sounds like lot of money, but if someone earning that amount is in trouble with his or her mortgage there is nothing for them. They will not get the housing assistance payment, rent allowance or family income supplement. They are the new poor in Ireland. Does anybody care about them? Of course they do not have a medical card and of course their children will not be looked after when they go to college. While everyone deserves an education the budgets we are bringing in are not incentivising work in this country. We are depriving some youngsters in what I call middle Ireland of the ability to follow their dream or get to college because their parents work. This is a sad reflection on any society.

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The agricultural budget this year is a forestry budget. Does the Government want to plant the west of Ireland? Is that the dream? There is €103 million extra for forestry. No matter how the Minister tries to twist and turn it, €73 million has not been spent under the green low-carbon agri-environment or GLAS scheme, the beef genomics scheme and other schemes. According to emails from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform more than €100 million has not been spent over two years. For the next three years, if we look at the figures put in front of us in the Book of Estimates, it will work out the same. Extra grants are being provided for forestry with regard to climate change but it is the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine that looks after it. Cromwell said to hell or to Connacht but some people want to have trees in Connacht instead of what Cromwell wanted, as bad as he was.

Currently, we have schools with autistic students that are fighting to get special needs assistants because it is now on the school to do so, and one to one services are being removed. Teachers in school are trying to ensure they give the possible education. Occupational therapy services come under the disability heading. Children are being told they are No. 99 on a list and they will probably be in college before they get the service. Is that the Ireland we want or the budget we need to bring forward?

Related to education, one of the most important elements of schools and rural parts of Ireland in general was not mentioned in the Budget Statement. There was not a word about broadband. A deal was supposed to be done. I am not worried about who is having dinner with whom, to be quite blunt, and I do not care who sits down with whom. There is one person on one side of the fence and one on the other side; it would be different if there were two or three bidders. If there is only one person on a side that will do a job and one person on the other side, I cannot see how too much dilly-dallying can be done. Perhaps mistakes might be made in following the so-called procedures but I am more worried about Kilcroan school nearly Ballymoe. When the children turn on the computers, the system crashes after the fourth child turns on the machine. This is despite the fact that 300 m down the road there is a box with which the problem could be solved. However, apparently we must wait for this great broadband plan, whenever it will come. It is like trying to look into the future.

That is not the way to give a perfect education to children. This is about a child in Kilcroan school near Ballymoe or in Tarmon, which also has broadband problems or a Garda station with no PULSE because there is a deficiency in the broadband. That is crucifying areas. Do the children in those areas not matter or deserve the same as any other child in some other part of the country? The Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Bruton, might say the Government is providing broadband to X, Y and Z. It is but perhaps the speed is 1 Mbps here while it is 10 Mbps for the rest. If that issue is solved, it would be a help, and that is where the Department of Education and Skills must work. It must bring people into the future. It is what the Minister and this Dáil must be doing instead of talking about who ate with whom.

I understand hotels in the likes of Dublin have been booming. They have done well, as we know because one would almost be thrown out during the week during busier times when the hotels can get good rates. In the smaller hotels in the rural parts of Ireland on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday night, there is a problem as there are not enough people there. I do not know the ins and outs of this but I would rather have seen the likes of a bed tax than the VAT increase if it had been workable. I know there is a boom in Dublin and a few other places but, in fairness, there are problems down the country. Do not get me wrong, as I am not saying I do not welcome the money for the Hidden Heartlands, but we must be realistic as well. Not all boats have been lifted by the improving economy.

I am surprised there is no medicine in the budget for working people who are losing their homes. These are people with mortgages who are struggling day in and day out. How are we throwing €110 million more overseas? I know the budget is fairly big currently but are we allowing people to be thrown out of their own houses in this country? Will we leave them on the streets or on trolleys in hospitals while we send money to other countries? We could continue with the existing overseas development aid budget as a further €110 million is fairly substantial.

The agricultural measures are disappointing. The average GLAS payment had been €4,300, with 50,000 farmers in the scheme. There was between €35 million and €37 million per year left over. Only 75% of people brought into the beef genomics schemes have remained, with the rest walking away. We have not introduced an environmental scheme for farmers coming out of the agri-environmental options scheme, AEOS, in the next few years. There will be a gap between now and 2021. One would be delusional to think the €40 to be paid per cow to suckler farmers will save the calf and cow. It would take a hell of a lot more than that.

I welcome the extra €5 per week for pensioners and there are parts of this budget that anybody should welcome. That is not the case with the measures for the self-employed. It is getting to a point that if somebody is seeking to set up a business, I would nearly tell them not to bother. On one side, the other day they got €200 more and there are certain incentives to set up a business. What about the small and medium-sized businesses? I refer to those with one, two or three additional employees. I spoke with a hairdresser the other day who has five girls working for her. I also know people running nursing homes. What have we done for such people with the new system being introduced by the Revenue Commissioners after Christmas? Accountants have told them that it will cost €450 per person employed per year to do the paperwork. I ask the Government to address this. I spoke to a person in the oil business last night who told me that given what is to be introduced, the big guys will be fine but the small fellow will be pushed out. As many Deputies know, in rural parts of Ireland, small businesses with one, two or three employees keep the area surviving. We must ensure we can encourage those businesses.

I know the Government does not listen much to contributions on the budget but there must be something teased out before next January for businesses, especially SMEs. The accountants have said it will cost an additional €450 per person for the paperwork. Some of these people might only be paying €1,000 or €1,500 to an accountant. If those businesses have two or three employees, the cost will be doubled. One might say it might not be that much and the business will get €200 in tax back, etc. One must first make money to be able to pay tax. I ask the Government to consider this

The Government should concentrate on making it attractive to work, which is not the case currently. There are young people out there struggling so we must ensure an affordable home scenario is realised. I know there has been an allocation of additional money but I worry nonetheless. Documents and glossy reports have been done through the years but delivery the problem. If we do not deliver for those young people, there will be people working in what we might see as good jobs who will not be able to sustain a living in Ireland. That is not good. We cannot have a position whereby a person is more enticed to stay at home instead of working if he or she has five or six children.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputies Clare Daly, Louise O'Reilly and Darragh O'Brien - the need to discuss the current conditions in St. Molaga's school, Balbriggan; (2) Deputy Marc MacSharry - closure of post office in north County Sligo; (3) Deputy James Lawless - overcrowding on commuter train services from Kildare; (4) Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - the effect of the Garda overtime ban on operations over the Halloween period; (5) Deputy James Browne - the need for the Minister for Health to address the delays facing County Wexford children awaiting orthodontic treatment; (6) Deputy Eugene Murphy - to discuss the impending lost of a second teaching post at Ballinlough Church of Ireland national school in County Roscommon and the need to grant a reprieve until September 2019 due to extenuating and exceptional circumstances; (7) Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin - that the Minister for Health would explain his continuing refusal to accept the BeNeLuxA initiative concerning nusinersen, Spinraza, now that Ireland has joined the initiative; (8) Deputies Joan Burton, Ruth Coppinger and Lisa Chambers - to ask the Minister for Education and Skills if he is aware of the campaign by parents of children with autism in Dublin 15 for the need to establish an autism-specific special school, the fact existing 18 autism spectrum disorder units in Dublin 15 are oversubscribed, and the considerable distance parents and pupils need to travel to send their children to an autism-specific special school, the fact there is no such school on the northside of Dublin, what proposals his Department has to address this and if he will make a statement on the matter; (9) Deputy Peadar Tóibín - to discuss the crisis in the GP system; (10) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the scheme to replace lead piping in housing throughout the country; (11) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to ask the Minister for Justice and Equality what plans he will put in place to address the backlog of 763 court cases currently in Limerick; (12) Deputy John Lahart - to discuss the rates charged by hospitals to private health-care providers; (13) Deputy Gino Kenny - staff shortages in the National Rehabilitation Centre; (14) Deputies Anne Rabbitte and Frank O'Rourke - to ask the Minister for Finance to explain the proposed change for mileage relief allowances for staff who work with Waterways Ireland and make a statement on the matter as its impacting on staff in southern Ireland; (15) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss with the Minister for Education and Skills the funding needed for a new building for Kolbe special school in Portlaoise, County Laois; and (16) Deputy Mick Wallace - to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

The matters raised by Deputies Clare Daly, Louise O'Reilly and Darragh O'Brien, Joan Burton, Ruth Coppinger and Lisa Chambers, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, and Marc MacSharry have been selected for discussion.

Financial Resolutions 2019

Financial Resolution No. 4: General (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following motion:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

-(Minister for Finance).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next slot is a Government one. Four Deputies are offering. A total of 20 minutes have been allocated. I will not be interfering. The Deputies can decide among themselves how many minutes they will take.

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Is mór an onóir dom é an deis seo a fháil inniu chun Meastacháin mo Roinne do 2019 a phlé. I welcome this opportunity to outline to the Dáil the principal features of the 2019 Estimates for my Department. Our culture, heritage and language distinguish us as people. They play a hugely positive role in our lives enhancing our physical and mental well-being and nourishing our national psyche. The Government recognises the importance of culture, heritage and the Irish language. That is why the Taoiseach has put on record a public commitment to double the spend on arts and culture by 2025.

Budget 2019 was an important milestone on this journey. The funding package of €339 million for 2019 for developing culture, heritage and the Irish language is an increase of €36 million, or 12%, on that of last year. Earlier this year, the Government launched Project Ireland 2040 to ensure delivery of significantly improved social, economic and cultural infrastructure. My Department's part in this is the €1.2 billion plan for investing in our culture, language and heritage. The level of investment proposed under this plan will transform our cultural, heritage and language infrastructure across the country. Next year, we will see a very significant increase in capital spending by my Department, which will rise by €21 million to €75 million. This will allow for the very important planning and early-stage implementation phases of a number of Project Ireland 2040 culture, heritage and language projects.

In broad terms, the total allocation for 2019 of €339 million is broken down along the following lines. There is almost €190 million for culture, which is an increase of 13.5%; over €54 million for the conservation and protection of Ireland's built and natural heritage, which is an increase of 15%; over €54 million for the Irish language, the Gaeltacht and the islands; and €40.4 million for North-South co-operation, including support for two North-South implementation bodies, namely, Waterways Ireland and An Foras Teanga.

The funding package I have secured for my Department for 2019 allows for increases across each of the hugely important programme areas. I will discuss these in more detail. Almost €190 million, including almost €42 million in respect of capital, has been allocated to culture. This significantly increased capital allocation will allow for the planning and early stage implementation of works at a number of our national cultural institutions under my Department's ten-year capital plan as part of Project Ireland 2040. The transformation and renewal of our national cultural institutions is already under way. I note that work has commenced on the National Library's refurbishment and the National Archives will begin moving files off-site shortly in advance of starting its redevelopment work. Many other cultural institutions are at an advanced stage with their proposals, including the National Concert Hall, the Abbey Theatre and the National Museum of Ireland. Our capital investment programme under the national development plan envisages expenditure of €460 million over the decade of the plan. In addition to this, in 2019 our national cultural institutions collectively will receive an increase of more than €2 million in current funding. We also will be providing the funding for the essential preparatory work for Galway 2020. This increase in funding also provides for increases to key institutions and agencies that deliver arts, creativity and culture across the country and to further develop the core programme areas to increase citizen engagement with creativity. The Arts Council, for

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example, will receive an additional €6.8 million in 2019 to enhance its support for artists and arts organisations. This allocation is more than double the 2018 increase and brings Government support for this very important body to €75 million. The Government and I welcome the very positive reaction of the Irish arts community to this news. The allocation to Fís Éireann will increase to over €20 million and will greatly assist in the implementation of the audiovisual action plan and further our ambition to enable Ireland to become a global hub for the production of film, TV drama and animation and double employment in the sector. I also acknowledge the announcement by the Minister for Finance with regard to the extension of section 481 by four years to December 2024. The Minister will also introduce a new short-term tax incentive for productions based in certain regions. Both measures will support jobs, investment and growth in this hugely important sector.

2018 has been a hugely significant year for Creative Ireland. We have seen wonderful events like Cruinniú na nÓg that we want to expand. We are committing an €1.5 million to Creative Ireland to allow it to expand further and faster. This additional allocation will enable the expansion of Creativity in the Community programmes, work on creativity with primary and secondary schools and, hopefully, an even bigger Cruinniú na nÓg. We are also delivering in terms of Global Ireland 2025. We are delivering in terms of Culture Ireland because we want to make sure that we are competitive on the international stage. We have incredible events like the Venice Biennale and the GB18 programme. I will give €100,000 to Culture Ireland for 2019. This is in addition to the extra €500,000 that was allocated to Culture Ireland last year. Next year will be another milestone year and I am providing an additional €250,000 for commemorations.

With regard to heritage, there will be a capital investment of €285 million in sustaining and protecting our landscapes, monuments, buildings and wildlife over the coming decade. This will translate into total funding over €54 million for my heritage programme, €39 million in current expenditure and €15.6 million in capital funding. There are various different allocations in terms of the Irish Heritage Trust, an interpretative portal for the national monuments, traditional buildings skills and the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage in Dún Laoghaire. Additional capital funding will allow for more than 520 additional built heritage restoration projects next year.

The Gaeltacht, the Irish language and the islands were given a total of €54.3 million. In addition to funding for Foras na Gaeilge, an additional €3 million in capital funding and €2 million in current funding was provided. With regard to North-South co-operation, there is provision of €40.4 million to Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency. In conclusion, the proposals I have outlined are really significant for my Department and have been widely received in a positive way. I look forward to rolling out our ambitious plans.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I cannot be responsible for Government time. I did warn the Deputies so somebody will have to-----

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I did my best.

Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Pat Breen): In this budget, the Government has a set target with regard to jobs, investment, innovation and building resilience in the face of Brexit shocks. In that regard, I warmly welcome the additional funding of €5 million announced in the budget for the local enterprise offices, LEOs. This brings the LEO capital allocation for 2019 to €27.5 million, which is a significant

increase of 22% on the 2018 figure. Since their establishment, the LEOs have been working in partnership with Enterprise Ireland and local authorities and have responded with impressive jobs growth and new ventures locally. At the end of 2017, 37,483 people were employed by LEO-supported client companies. As part of the new funding, business advisers who will focus on key clients with growth potential will be appointed on a competitive basis together with the provision of soft supports such as management training, mentoring and other targeting programmes to address productivity and innovation. Another significant measure open to all LEO clients will be the €300 million future growth loan scheme, which addresses gaps in the marketplace for loan terms longer than five to ten years.

Having regard to the challenge presented by Brexit, a key element in the additional funding will be the establishment of a new customs training programme for all businesses - exporters and importers - to be rolled out in conjunction with Enterprise Ireland. This will ensure that the businesses are adequately informed and have sufficient plans in place to manage what might be new trading relationships on the island, with the UK and more generally.

It is also crucial that retailers and small companies are familiar with the opportunities and challenges posed by the EU digital Single Market. This is why I welcome the doubling of funding from €625,000 to €1.25 million in respect of the initiative to stimulate the online retail sector to be administered by Enterprise Ireland and delivered via two competitive calls.

High standards are an important part of the essential toolkit for SMEs to open up new markets. In that context, I also welcome the additional funding provided to the National Standards Authority of Ireland. Creativity, design and innovation are key drivers of productivity improvement and export success in key markets. The additional funding of €1.8 million announced in the budget for the Design and Craft Council of Ireland is intended to expand marketing and developing programmes, to address serious risks from Brexit and the loss of craft sales to UK tourists.

A safe business is ultimately productive and profitable but the increased economic activity presents additional health and safety challenges. Consequently, I welcome the Exchequer funding being made available to the Health and Safety Authority for 2019 to enable it to pursue its overall goal of making healthy and safe workplaces an integral part of doing business in Ireland. Among other things, the funding will be key in increasing support and advisory activities to industry and enterprises, especially SMEs, with the emphasis on practical preparations for Brexit and identifying trends in the cross-Border trade in chemicals for domestic and industry users.

I further welcome the additional funding in the budget for the Workplace Relations Commission. This will facilitate the improved delivery of full range of its services to regional locations.

Collectively, the budget measures announced will provide my Department and the offices and agencies with the necessary supports and resources to continue to be centrally involved in strengthening the indigenous business sectors and in building resilience within the regions.

I did my best answering in the time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State did more than his best.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I cannot understand how the division of time has gone so extraordinarily wrong but I suppose these things happen.

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An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not a matter for the House; it is a matter for the Government.

Deputy Shane Ross: I agree.

I welcome this budget. I am happy that my Department will spend €2.3 billion in 2019, which is an increase of 17%. The Government projects which were recently announced will go full speed ahead in all three areas. These include BusConnects, the metro, tourism and sporting projects to which we committed much capital in the past.

Responses to announcements in my portfolio have concentrated mostly on value added tax, VAT, so I will begin by responding on this. The Minister of State, Deputy Brendan Griffin, the Independent Alliance and I fought strongly against the worst aspects of this. It was not helped by the big hotel lobby working very hard. One could not choose anyone less helpful to one's cause than those who have been gouging customers in Dublin hotels recently. They did not help their cause, or that of the bed and breakfast owners or small hoteliers who needed the lower VAT rate to maintain employment and prosperity by opposing the VAT proposals. I regret that they were not levied on their own and that the penalty extended so far down the ladder. That is as it is now, and that is where we are.

While we opposed taxes being increased in the tourism industry, it was not all bad news. We managed to negotiate with the Minister for Finance to allocate an additional €38.5 million to target those in the industry who might suffer from the increase in the VAT rate. We are pleased to have that and it will help the tourism agencies in product development and on other products which will hopefully benefit the industry, which is thriving still and defying gravity in terms of the currency movement in the UK. We negotiated that €38.5 million for the industry, which would not have been provided otherwise. I regret that despite the fact that we fought hard for it, others in this House did not and we should note Fianna Fáil's silence on this.

The Independent Alliance had a good budget. The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, negotiated €150 million extra for disabilities, the Minister of State, Deputy John Horgan, had the idea of the gambling tax which will raise another €15 million, and the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin "Boxer" Moran, ensured that money for flood relief schemes will be made available and that this will continue. That is a great tribute which puts our stamp on the budget. We also negotiated the social welfare Christmas bonuses with the Minister for Finance. I am proud that the home conversion grant will come into being following a trial last year of which we were particularly supportive. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government has assured us he will spell out the scheme details at an appropriate time after he has reviewed this and the Abhaile scheme before Christmas. I am also proud that the Minister for Finance included a sentence in the budget about property tax. The Independent Alliance has ambitions about property tax, namely that it shall not hit the vulnerable and that increases should be minimal, if at all, as a result of next year's revaluations. It hurts the vulnerable, older people and people on fixed incomes. I welcome the Minister's agreement to put a section in the speech which acknowledged their difficulties. Finally, I welcome the change in the inheritance tax which was achieved by the Independent Alliance.

I am sorry that I must stop but I must give my ministerial colleague her time.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As an independent progressive, I welcome the budget. It is one which favours public services, which through

childcare, welfare and income tax reforms favour low-income households. Childcare was once again a key part of the budget. The €89 million additional funding means Government investment will have increased by 117% since 2015. The benefit for those on lower incomes is significant. A lone parent with a net income of €26,000 and two young children will receive an annual increase of €1,404, a family with a net income of €30,000 with two young children, using 25 hours of childcare will receive an annual increase of €1,716 and at the higher income level, a family with three children and a net income of €53,000 will receive an almost fivefold increase of €3,796 annually. These measures not only ease the financial pressure on families but open opportunities for parents, particularly women, to enter education, training or work. These labour activation measures were sought by employers and trade unions alike. The CSO labour force survey for 2017 shows the participation rate for all working age women increased by 1%, and 2% for those aged between 25 and 44. This is evidence that our investment in childcare is impacting women's participation in the labour force. As we continue the transformation of childcare, it will help and support others to follow the same path.

Childcare is key to the budget but it is only one of several progressive measures. Each helps level the playing field by investing public funds to ensure all children have an equal opportunity and experience equality of outcomes. We must reduce child poverty to do this. The latest CSO figures show that one in every five children lives in homes with an income below the poverty line while one in ten lives in consistent poverty. The increase in social welfare rates, increasing the qualified child payments, the extension of the fuel allowance, the increase in lone parent's disregard and the increase in the back to school allowances all benefit these households.

For the first time the budget also distinguishes between the different costs all families face as children age. It introduces different qualified child payments for children of different ages. Expenditure on public services have also been substantially prioritised over tax reductions. As a result, those on lower incomes benefit most. Welfare dependent individuals will receive an additional €5.50 in disposable income per week.

True progressives also have a global view and I also welcome the decision to increase our overseas development aid to the highest level in a decade. As a nation, we should be proud of the work undertaken in our name in some of the most impoverished and dangerous places on earth.

One of my Department's main missions is to protect and support the most vulnerable children. We are building on the record-breaking €750 million secured for Tusla this year. In 2019, that budget will reach €786 million, an increase of €33 million. The additional funds will be used to progress key priorities including the implementation of recommendations made by HIQA following its investigation into the management of child sexual abuse allegations.

Budget negotiations are tough. That should come as no surprise. I went into mine firmly focused on delivering for our children and young people, in particular, those who are in vulnerable situations and those who are in low income households. This budget has delivered improvements for them. Of course, more is needed, not least of which is a greater focus on those with lower pay. The OECD recently noted that Ireland has the second highest proportion of full-time employees in low pay in the EU. It shows 22.5% are low paid. Our childcare changes will benefit many in that situation, as will other budget measures. I look forward to continue working with my colleagues, and, indeed, those on the other side of the House, as well as campaigners and advocates, to come up with further proposals to address this and other challenges.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We now move to the Sinn Féin. There are 20 minutes, commencing with Teachta Peadar Tóibín, atá ag roinnt a chuid ama le na Teachtaí eile.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister, Deputy Zappone, mentioned that she is a progressive Independent and underlined “progressive” a number of times in her speech. In the previous four budgets, through tax and USC, the Government has cut incomes in the State by €2.3 billion. That might be okay in happy days when there are no extreme difficulties affecting the State but the Minister and her colleagues preside over a Government which allows for vulture funds to pay a tax rate of 2.5%, they allow for banks, which are making billions of euro of profit in this country, pay no tax for 20 years, and 80 persons who have a net worth value of over €50 million in this State pay a tax rate at the same level as somebody on the average industrial wage. That is not progressiveness by any definition whatsoever. Hundreds of millions of euro have been foregone by the Government.

This year, the Government had €1.5 billion to focus on what it might think of as progressive objectives. In the middle of the worst housing crisis in the history of the State, only €80 million of additional funding out of €1.5 billion was focused on the building of housing. When it came to the private landlords, it was a little different. There was an increase of €121 million in additional HAP payments and that will be swallowed up by landlords with increased rents where there are no effective price controls. In addition, there was a landlord bonus of €4 million in tax breaks given.

In these progressive times there are more workers but 100,000 of those workers are living in poverty at present. International comparisons show that one in four Irish workers now lives below the poverty line. Also in these progressive times, one in five of the population of the State is on hospital waiting lists. I would say, rather than being progressive, this Government is one of the most divisive Governments in the history of the State.

I noted during the budget debate there was little talk of the national debt. The interest we pay on the national debt is the fourth largest spending category of the Government, behind social protection, health and education. There is nothing progressive about that either.

Arts funding was mentioned by the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Madigan, a few minutes ago. According to recent CSO data, artists are now earning 3.5% less than they did in 2013 in the pit of the crisis. They are getting breadcrumbs in funding from this Government.

Ní mór don Rialtas a adhmháil go bhfuil an dochar déanta aige ó thaobh na Gaeilge de freisin. Tháinig titim de 11% ar líon na gcainteoirí laethúla Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht de réir an daonáirimh is deireanaí. Níl ach 500 páistí idir trí bliana d’aois agus ceithre bliana d’aois sa Ghaeltacht a labhraíonn Gaeilge go laethúil lasmuigh den chóras oideachais. Is uimhir uafásach é sin. Tá an Ghaeltacht iomlán ag crochadh ar an méid chomh beag sin. Tá tromlach na réamhscoileanna sna ceantair Ghaeltachta ag feidhmiú trí Bhéarla.

The following will be of interest to the Minister, Deputy Zappone. A minority of children in the Gaeltacht have access to Irish language nionaraí. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs refuses to communicate with the Gaeltacht nionaraí that operate in the Irish language and with regard to the development of skills for those who work in that sector, none of the nionaraí function with Irish on its their curriculum. Currently, Irish is invisible in the early education curriculum, even in the Gaeltacht.

Tá an cás mar gheall ar infheistíocht dochreidte. Tá an méid airgid laghdaithe faoina leath an bhliain seo ó 2008. Tá an méid atá an tír ag caitheamh díreach mar an gcéanna agus a bhí sé in 2008 ach tá an méid atá á chaitheamh ar an nGaeilge laghdaithe faoina leath. Tá Foras na Gaeilge fós ag fáil titim airgeadais i mbliana. Tá eagraíochtaí leithéidí Chumann na bhFiann, Oireachtas na Gaeilge, Glór na nGael, Gael Linn, Gaeloideachas agus Conradh na Gaeilge go léir thíos mar gheall ar infheistíocht.

Sleepy Joe McHugh has done very little when it comes to the Irish language in this country. In committee a few weeks ago, I asked the Minister of State how many new Gaelscoileanna were developed in this State over the past while and Sleepy Joe McHugh shrugged his shoulders. He does not even know how many new Gaelscoileanna are operating. He came in here last night without a shred of paper, without a single fact on Irish language investment. The Gaeltacht is hanging by a thread and the Government is cutting that thread by ignoring it.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This budget has been a non-event for most people. Their experience is that whatever has been given has been taken away somewhere else. In agriculture, which is the brief I mainly look after, there has been additional funding given to some sectors. However, it is a time when farming is under significant pressure. In particular, those in the beef sector are suffering some of the worse prices ever. While that is outside the budget remit - I had questions this morning to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed - the Government is inclined to shrug its shoulders and turn its back when it comes to providing for the small farmer and the farming community. That is evident when we see the prices that have been returned. The Minister stated it is not his place to set prices but yet this State, through its taxpayers, invests hundreds of millions of euro every year in Bord Bia and other agencies to promote and market Irish food abroad. We have delegations going all over the world to get new trade deals so that Irish food can be exported but back at home the farmers who produce that food are on the bread line. If the State is providing such funds to market these produce, there is an obligation on the State that the primary producers get a fair return for it. This applies cross all sectors, but particularly across agriculture and fisheries.

The average farm income continues to fall. It has continued to fall for the past number of years. The measures the Government put into the budget come to €52 million, and only in the case of €44 million of that is it specified where in agriculture it will be spent. In my party's pre-budget submission, we stated that we would spend €62 million in the agriculture sector, and that was without having an additional €1 billion which the Government found only the night before the budget. If we had an additional €1 billion in the coffers, we would certainly propose an enhanced package for the agricultural sector, particularly to support the small farmers and the small family farms.

In the rural development section, the Government stated that there will be an additional €53 million next year in capital funding. This is funding that has already been announced and already been clearly earmarked through the national development plan and yet it is wheeled out again as if it is new funding. There are serious questions to be asked as to where the Government is going in this respect.

One of the big issues in many parts of rural Ireland is Brexit and what will happen in respect of that. Again, the Government has put in place a tiny amount of funding to ensure people can prepare for the impact of Brexit, particularly in the Border and north-west region. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle would understand this, particularly in his constituency. Brexit will have an immense impact and yet the Government seems only to say that it is engaged in negotiations.

However, there is no hard cash on the table and that is what small businesses need to ensure they can survive through the volatile time ahead.

Many other issues affect rural Ireland. With regard to the remit of the Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities, Deputy Finian McGrath, those who live with a disability in rural Ireland live with a double disadvantage because they cannot even access the services available. Many of them cannot travel to the services available. I had discussions earlier this week with the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, about school bus services and I welcome the additional funding of €9 million provided there. He tells me most of that will be for special needs children to get them to the particular places that they need to go. The school bus service that should be in place should provide for children in rural areas to get to school. Unfortunately, the service has been withdrawn continually because the rules change all the time. If one lives on a road on which fewer than ten children live, the bus will not go there. If this is up the road, that will not happen, and if that is up the road, the other will not happen. If one is not going to the closest school, one cannot get to school. The rules are affecting people in every rural area. It is not only a matter of children not getting to school but it is also about the ability of the parents to get to work. If a parent cannot get a bus to bring the children to school, he or she cannot take a job because the children need to be brought to school and collected.

All these issues arise despite the Government having had an additional €1 billion. When we produced our alternative budget, we did not include that €1 billion, yet we would have been able to put money in place for all the measures I am referring to. I wonder where the priorities lie. Housing is clearly not the priority. There is a crisis in housing throughout the country. Health is not the priority either because the health crisis is continuing. Sufficient resources are not being put in place. We need a budget that delivers for the people rather than vested interests.

The Government will be charged with continually looking after those who are already well looked after.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I am having a serious bout of *déjà vu*. I have been the Sinn Féin spokesperson on transport, tourism and sport since I was first elected in 2016. Every October since then, I feel I have been making the same speech. That is because, in every budget since the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, took office, almost nothing has been delivered for the transport sector. The major problems that existed in 2016 remain. We have had decades of infrastructural neglect and a decade of severe cuts on top of that. Local and regional roads are crumbling and the Minister refuses to invest in them. Iarnród Éireann is in dire need of infrastructural investment. There is no sign of that either. National infrastructure is decades behind. The Minister has shown complete disregard for his portfolio since taking office. His lack of interest is well known. Frankly, it is outrageous. He is the Minister but he certainly does not act like one. He is more interested in his pet peeves, such as judicial issues that do not concern him. Instead of meddling in other portfolios, it would be welcome if for once he looked after transport, tourism and sport like he is supposed to. Perhaps he was given the transport portfolio because the Government had no intention of investing in transport and believed it would be easy to play him. However, this is a Fine Gael budget and the Minister has allowed himself to get played by the Government.

The only achievement of the Minister that I can think of is the privatisation of public transport services. One would imagine, given the legacy in other states, such as Britain, that even he could see beyond ideology and recognise the merit of public transport remaining in public ownership. A total of 10% of Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann routes have been put out to tender. The

more lucrative routes among these were awarded to a foreign, private profit-making company. There is no reason for this other than ideology. Now another 10% of Bus Éireann routes is being put out to tender. Just as the Government has a mental block when it comes to social housing, it cannot get to grips with managing public transport. Private companies will not take care of social policy for the Government. Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus will happily manage public transport in the State if the Government only sees its way to investing in them sufficiently.

The transport budget announced this week is shameful. Was the Minister even at the negotiations? That is the first thought that entered my head. He must not have been at the negotiations given the budget. Did he sacrifice transport, tourism and sport for his pet projects, on which, incidentally, he did not deliver? One such project is the granny grant for one granny. There is no other explanation. The capital budget for transport, as announced, was €30 million lower, which is unheard of. We in Sinn Féin would have allocated €123 million more than the Government, with our capital mainly targeting local and regional roads, public transport accessibility and sport. We suggested our allocations before the Minister for Finance found €1 billion in the bottom of a sock.

Our roads are crumbling and have been for years but there is no money forthcoming from the Government to address this. It is another example of short-term vision. There is not even any cop-on because the longer one allows the roads to deteriorate, the more it will cost to fix them in the long run. Additional current expenditure is only €50 million but the Government has not explained where that money is going. When can we expect some detail on that? The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, should answer that because he is a member of the Government. Will any of the money go towards CIÉ public service obligation, PSO, subventions? Is there additional funding for PSO subventions? I have looked high and low and cannot find a reference to it anywhere in the budget proposals. Will the Government just continue privatising services so this will no longer be its problem? Perhaps it could even close some rail routes because it cannot be bothered to invest or tackle the serious problems facing Iarnród Éireann, including the serious safety issues that have been flagged on many occasions in the public arena.

We would have allocated an additional €71 million, representing a 25% increase on the figure for 2018, for PSO subventions in 2019. That is €20 million more than the entire €50 million allocation by the Government for the entire Department. It is because we value public transport. We know its merit and that it is the solution to many of the problems we face - not only congestion but also air pollution. The additional funding would increase service provision in rural areas and increase frequency where transport services are shockingly poor.

Housing and transport both required serious investment but the Government failed to deliver on both.

Deputy John Brady: Budget 2019 represents yet another budget in which the most vulnerable are failed to deliver for those who need it least. The clear priorities in this budget are landlords, vulture funds and banks. The rest, including our most vulnerable citizens, get the scraps from the table. The Minister for Finance referred to this as a “caring budget”. For whom is it caring? From March next year, young jobseekers aged between 18 and 24 will live on €112.70 per week, €90 less than those a few years older than them. This is despite the fact that young jobseekers, numbering almost 8,000, are among the largest cohort of our population who are long-term unemployed and this is despite the fact that Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government figures for August of this year show 875 young people aged between 18 and

24 are homeless. Where is the caring in this budget for them? Instead, the Government continues to discriminate against young jobseekers based on their age. There is no rationale for this. It is cruel and leading to mass homelessness and poverty. The Government has committed to lifting 100,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020. Budget 2019 represents the clearest signal yet from the Government that it will not even meet its own targets. This is because the Government made a choice to direct money towards landlords, banks and vulture funds instead of those who need it. This is despite the fact that thousands of children live in poverty every day in this State. Where is the caring in this budget for them? They lived in poverty before budget 2019 and will continue to live in poverty after it. Shame on the Government. Clearly its intentions are not focused on those who need money the most.

The increase in the qualified child payment is welcome. That the Government has finally acknowledged the increased cost involved in raising children over the age of 12 and its targeting of this age category are welcome. The payment needs to be built upon in every budget from now on.

The maintenance disregard for lone parents is also welcome but major issues still arise regarding the child maintenance process. This measure will not rectify this. Child maintenance should not be included as household income when it comes to means-tested payments, including rent supplement. Child maintenance should be recognised by the Government as income for the child, not as anything else.

There must be an end to lone parents being forced into the courts system to seek child maintenance from an ex-partner. I again call on the Government to examine Sinn Féin's proposal for the establishment of a child maintenance service such as the one in place in the North. Child maintenance, when paid, plays a role in lifting children out of poverty. We should not ignore that simple reality.

I ask the Government to consider not only our proposals regarding child maintenance but also a Bill I introduced in the House last week. It provides for the establishment of a social welfare commission, which would use evidence and input from stakeholders to set the income required by different household types that are in receipt of social welfare to ensure that these households are protected from poverty. The commission would report annually, ahead of the budget, on any increases needed for social welfare payments. Rather than fivers for everyone, we need targeted and specific measures to start delivering for the most vulnerable people in society, not for the banks, vulture funds and landlords who need them the least.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I thank my colleagues for their contributions on the budget. I always listen to constructive criticisms but my strong response is that major parts of this budget show that it is a caring budget. In addition, according to a number of independent economists it is the most progressive budget in recent years.

I had the great honour of being appointed Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities two and a half years ago. One of my main objectives was to increase the investment in disability services, which had seen much underinvestment during and after the financial crash. This objective has been achieved. There have been considerable increases in the disability services budget and I am delighted to have secured an additional €150 million for 2019. That brings the disability budget to €1.838 billion. That is a record amount of spending on disabili-

ties. This will allow us to tackle pressing issues such as assessments of need, emergency residential places, respite care, personal assistance and home support hours, among other things. These are my priorities.

Another of my objectives was to put the person with the disability at the forefront of our thinking. That is why this year the disability community and I pushed so hard to secure the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, ratification should mean something to the daily lives of people with a disability and the extra funding I have secured will support this objective. Of course, we are playing catch-up after the downturn, but I am confident that we have been, and continue to be, on the right track in improving the lives of people with a disability.

It is important to highlight the Government's record on these issues in response to the point that this is not a caring budget. I will outline some of the measures we have implemented over the last eight months or so. The carer's grant of €1,700 per family was restored to 101,000 families. Eligibility for the medical card has been extended to children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance, an extra 11,000 children, at a cost of €10 million. An extra €10 million was provided for respite care homes in 2018. Some €3 million was provided for the establishment of the decision support service in order to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. There have been €5 increases over three years in the disability allowance and carer's allowance. Above all, the historic measure was that, after many years and despite many parties talking about doing it, last April we ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The points raised by some of my colleagues are very important. When this amount of money is going into the services we must ensure it is spent on the people and families with disabilities. That is a genuine concern. I listened to Deputy Micheál Martin speaking earlier about families in rural Ireland. He made a valid point. In fact, I was discussing it this morning in my office with a group of parents from the Carlow-Kilkenny region. They made the same point. It is something we must examine. The services have to be designed around the person with the disability whether that person lives in a rural area or an urban one. Some people living in urban areas have better quality services than others and that is not acceptable. It is something I intend to tackle head on.

With regard to what is happening in our services, reform and investment are ongoing. There must also be accountability. At present, 8,399 residential places and 182,506 respite nights are being funded. Some 1.46 million personal assistance hours are being provided for 2,357 people. As regards day services, the service plan will deliver 24,856 day places, 42,552 day respite sessions and 2.93 million home support hours for 7,447 people. That work is ongoing. We have 130 new residential emergency places, 135 new home support services for emergency cases and 120 in-home respite supports for emergency cases. As regards new directions for school leavers, there are approximately 1,500 people with physical and intellectual disabilities leaving school each year at 18 years of age. They are going into day services or rehabilitation training and we provide day service support for them.

Another important issue on which I am trying to make quick progress is moving people from congregated settings. Some 170 people are moving from large residential institutions into community settings. The service fund of €45 million over three years is supporting this transition and innovation. The commitment to stakeholder consultation and engagement is key. The neuro-rehabilitation strategy will progress the demonstration project in CHO 6 and CHO 7 on

the managed clinical pathway. Most importantly, there is a comprehensive value improvement programme.

These are just some of the things that are happening in disability services. Over the last number of months I have been listening to parents with regard to the priorities for funding. I am delighted to have secured funding for additional therapy posts for assessments of need and therapeutic interventions. We know how important early intervention is in supporting children to reach their potential. The Government is fully committed to progressing disability services for children and young people with disabilities. Increased investment in this area will provide 100 additional specialist therapy posts, which will allow the HSE to put more resources into clearing the backlog in assessments of need. It will also free up resources to deliver therapies to children who are on lengthy waiting lists.

The work, investment and reform have started. We are implementing a caring budget.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, for sharing his time to allow me to contribute on budget 2019 with regard to local government. A significant increase of €60 million, from €125 million to €185 million, in direct support by the Government has been provided for in the budget for 2019. As with most other Departments, much of the expenditure relates to pay and pension matters. It is also worth pointing out that the direct contribution of the Exchequer to local government is but a small part of the overall fund. In 2017, the last year for which full figures are available, €477 million was collected through the local property tax. All of this money is spent in local authorities around the country annually. Commercial rates collection in 2017 amounted to €1.34 billion and development levies from that year totalled €212 million.

All of those figures will increase, some of them substantially, in 2019. This means that in excess of €2 billion will be expended by each of the 31 local authorities across the country under various headings in terms of their functions and the services they provide. One of the key announcements in terms of funding provided in the budget for the local government sector is the €12.4 million in 2019 for fire and emergency services, which is an increase of almost €2 million on last year's allocation following on from the reports conducted and in train in regard to the fire safety measures that are necessary and currently available and that should be available into the future in our local authority housing stock and public and private buildings across the country.

In the coming weeks, a local government reform Bill will be published. This Bill will focus primarily on the expansion of Cork city and the amalgamation of Galway City Council and Galway County Council. The budget makes provision for increased funding to ensure these measures can be executed. There will also be plebiscites in May 2019 in three local authority areas - Limerick city and county, Waterford city and county and Cork city - in regard to directly elected mayors. This involves a rebalancing of the functions and roles of the executives of local authorities and the directly elected member, which will lead to executive powers at local government level in Ireland being exercised, for the first time, by a person directly elected by the people, provided the people vote for this in the plebiscites.

A key measure also included in budget 2019 is the re-establishment of a fund for estates to be taken in charge. In 2013 or 2014, provision was made for a one-off €10 million fund for local authorities, available on application by them, to enable them to complete estates that were

almost finished. I refer in this regard not to ghost estates but to estates where footpaths, street lighting, street surfaces or wastewater facilities had not been completed. Many local authorities have continued this work from their own resources. I welcome that once again there will be support available from central Government for the taking in charge process for the many hundreds of estates built across the State during the Celtic tiger economy, most of which remain in private hands and not under the control of the local authorities.

There are several housing initiatives included in budget 2019. One of those initiatives, the serviced sites fund, will have a fundamental impact at local authority level. The local authority will take an equity stake with the buyer, to be repaid over time or when the house is sold, and the applicants will be selected openly and transparently by each of the local authorities providing the homes. While in many parts of the country housing land stocks are low, many local authorities have suitable housing lands, often located in smaller towns and villages around their areas. This serviced sites fund will be targeted specifically at those areas. When the purchasers of these houses have made their repayments and bought-out the house, this money will be retained in a separate fund by the local authorities and will provide a rolling fund for affordable housing into the future.

Another measure that will commence in January 2019 but of itself is not a revenue generation measure but will generate some revenue for local authorities is the vacant site levy. It came into effect this year but the collection period only commences on 1 January 2019. As mentioned by other members, this has led to an increase in the number of planning applications being lodged to build much needed residential accommodation in each local authority area across the country. It will also provide limited additional funding for local authorities into the future.

The budget also makes provision for an increase in the funding for housing adaptation grants to €57 million. This will enable up to 12,000 home adaptations to take place. These are vital grants administered by local government, often for the most vulnerable living in the most isolated parts of our communities. The increase in this allocation by central Government is welcome. Also, €13 million in funding is ring-fenced for specific Traveller accommodation schemes, including the provision of additional group housing measures and €32 million is provided for the remediation of a further 460 houses affected by pyrite. There was also an announcement of a similar scheme for mica-affected homes, particularly in the north west of the country.

I welcome the announcement this morning by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring, of pilot schemes to encourage more people to live in some of our provincial towns. Six towns are selected, one of which I am delighted to say is Callan in Kilkenny. It is hoped that new and refurbished accommodation will bring people to live in the centres of some of our market towns that have suffered so much over the last ten or 12 years.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): I will focus my remarks on sport and tourism. This morning, I received a telephone call from a hotelier in Killarney who, while very disappointed on the VAT front, was furious about the hypocrisy on the opposition side in regard to the VAT rate increase, particularly from Deputies Michael and Danny Healy-Rae who I note are not in the Chamber. During the debate on Tuesday evening, both Deputies criticised me for not having done enough on the VAT rate. God knows, I did all I could but, unfortunately, I was unable to have it extended for the fifth time.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It was a matter for the senior Minister.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The hotelier was infuriated when he learned yesterday that Deputy Michael Healy-Rae had not voted for the introduction of the reduced VAT rate in 2011. One would think from the pontification that took place here on Tuesday evening last that it was his idea. The hotelier was further infuriated when he read in this morning's *Irish Independent* that the same Deputy was at a book promotion event in County Kildare when the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, was making his Budget Statement.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The hotelier seems to spend a lot of time following up on what Deputy Michael Healy-Rae is doing.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Putting one's private budget ahead of the public budget is scandalous. The hotelier was right to be furious.

On the VAT rate increase, I fought hard to retain the 9% rate. Unfortunately, I was not successful. The reduced rate was in place between 2011 and 2014 as a temporary measure for three years. I fought hard to have it retained in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Unfortunately, I and others were not successful in having it retained this year. What we did get is a 26% increase in the tourism budget, which is an enormous increase. This money will be spent on international marketing of tourism and on our management of tourism in terms of product development, experience development and on ensuring there is a sustainable tourism industry here into the future. We have experienced an unprecedented growth in overseas visitor numbers and in tourism revenue. It is critically important that we manage this growth properly, that we work with the industry to ensure we do not kill the golden goose and that we continue to strive to make tourism a sustainable industry.

This level of investment will be critical to Tourism Ireland, an outstanding international tourism marketing agency, being able to target the best markets and ensure that visitors come here for longer and spend more and, thus, grow the revenue at a faster rate than the growth in visitor numbers. It will also allow Fáilte Ireland to target its investment in the regions and rural areas that need it most through products like the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. With a cross country break to the industry through a tax measure one can target investment through additional Government resources. This is very positive. The budget also makes available substantial funding on the capital front for greenways, which will benefit regional and rural areas. I am excited by the massive increase in funding for tourism because since the economic crash there have not been any substantial increases in this area. Now we have them and I am excited about that. I am looking forward to working with the agencies and industry to ensure a better and sustainable outcome as a result of this budget for the entire tourism industry and, more important, the 240,000 people who now work in it. When we introduced the temporary three-year VAT reduction in 2011, the industry was on its knees and we had a major unemployment problem. That has been completely transformed. We want to keep that going and ensure that every community benefits as much as possible.

In the area of sport the story is also positive. There will be a €15 million increase in sport expenditure next year, which is a 13% increase. It is the first time since the crash that the national sport governing bodies will receive additional funding. They will receive €2.3 million next year which is a major boost to them. They are happy with that and I am happy to have helped to deliver it. An additional €1 million will be allocated to the women in sports programme, which is critical, while an additional €1 million will go into local sports partnerships

to appoint disability officers throughout the country, which is a significant and positive step forward as well.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Hear hear.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Some €1.5 million will be allocated to our high performance athletes in preparation for the Tokyo Olympic Games. I am very pleased with that and I know that our high performance athletes are pleased with it as well. Those athletes inspire community participation and inspire people to get involved in sport, which has an overarching effect on everybody. Some €40 million will go towards the sports capital programme while the new large scale sports infrastructure fund will distribute €63 million to projects over the next four years. It has been a positive budget for tourism and sport and I look forward to working with everybody on the front line in both sectors in the coming year.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: This morning, telephone calls were made all over Ireland to cancel surgery for men, women and children. These calls are being made every morning. On budget day alone, all surgical appointments in University Hospital Limerick were cancelled; half of surgeries in certain specialties in University Hospital Galway were cancelled; in the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital all elective admissions were cancelled except for cancer patients; four of the 13 operating theatres in St. James's Hospital were closed; and 15 patients in Beaumont Hospital in need of urgent neurosurgical care were not transferred.

Today, thousands of parents are asking in desperation when their boys and girls will get help. In some counties, children with special needs have to wait three and a half years to see therapists.

Deputy Finian McGrath: We are on that Deputy Donnelly.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: In other counties, parents are being told there is no waiting list because there are no therapists. Children with scoliosis are not being operated on for three years. That means that their spines are being allowed to curve to 100 degrees, more than twice what happens in other European countries. In some cases, such as that of Aaron Daly and his daughter, Sophia, parents are being told that because they have been waiting so long surgery is no longer possible.

Today, doctors all over Ireland will meet patients who have life threatening and terminal conditions. In some cases, those doctors will know that had they seen them earlier, had the diagnostics been done sooner or had the patients not had to wait so long, they would be treatable. This is the reality of healthcare in Ireland today. This is what the budget needed to address and one would think that with a spending increase of €1.6 billion, it could have done that, but it did not.

As with so much from this Government, the health budget is spin. It is an optical illusion designed to make the Government look busy while disguising its failures. The Government boasts of significant additional spending. It states proudly that this is a Sláintecare budget, but that is absolute drivel. The total spending on healthcare will increase by €1.6 billion. That amount could have made a huge difference. It could have secured for tens of thousands of people the treatment they need. It could have built beds, hired clinicians and funded new drugs. It could have launched Sláintecare, which is the plan to modernise our healthcare system so that people do not spend years on waiting lists and can access healthcare, not if they can afford it, but when they need it. In spite of beginning the year with the largest health budget in the history

of the State, the Minister for Health will end the year with the longest waiting lists in the history of the State and will still have managed to overspend by €750 million.

Of the €1.6 billion in additional funding, €2 in every €5 will be needed to cover that overspend. Another €2 in every €5 is needed for pay agreements and to account for demographics. That leaves €1 in every €5 for improved services. Of that €1, between 10 and 15 cent is for Sláintecare. At least €600 million is needed to launch Sláintecare, but due to Government mismanagement, the strategy will get less than a tenth of that, which means that next year it will not be implemented in any meaningful way. Public spending on health has increased every year since 2013. Total spending on health has increased every year since 2010. In 2016, the Minister for Health inherited the largest health budget in the history of the State, one of the highest *per capita* spends anywhere on earth. In 2017 and 2018, that budget went up again. Somehow people are waiting longer than ever before to see doctors, to get scans and to be operated on. There is a recruitment crisis in our hospitals, consultant posts cannot be filled, six in ten general practitioner, GP, surgeries cannot take on new patients, nurses are considering strike action for the first time in 20 years and yet, on top of this, we heard on Tuesday that the Minister has also overspent by €750 million.

Now we are told that the money is not there. Some €750 million can be found down the back of the couch to pay for mismanagement. We are told money cannot be found to pay for children with special needs, children with scoliosis, life-saving drugs, the reversal of the FEMPI legislation for GPs, pay equality for new entrants or Sláintecare. The budget details were still being agreed on Monday. Given the severity of what was announced on Tuesday, one would have expected the Minister for Health to be at work fighting on behalf patients and clinicians. That is what the Fianna Fáil team was doing. However, the Minister was opening a playground in Wicklow.

The healthcare system is in crisis. Official figures put the waiting lists at in excess of 700,000. If we add those waiting for diagnostics and mental health treatment and children waiting for therapists, the total is 1 million. None of this is inevitable. Healthcare is not some unfixable black hole. Between 1997 and 2010, Fianna Fáil increased healthcare spending. It opened 1,600 hospital beds, added 40% more consultant posts, introduced the nursing degree and doubled student nursing places, launched the national cancer screening programmes, launched the national cancer strategy and introduced a massive increase in home care. Deaths from cancer fell by 11%, infant mortality fell by one third, cardiovascular disease fell by 40%, deaths from heart attack fell by half and deaths from stroke fell by half. The credit for this does not go to Fianna Fáil; it goes to the doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, scientists and all of the other amazing women and men working in our healthcare system. However, Fianna Fáil knew how to work with them to get results on behalf of patients. Waiting times fell from years to months, but that is not the case anymore. In 2011, the number of people waiting more than six months for a hospital appointment was less than 10,000; today, more than 35,000 people are waiting. For every person waiting more than a year for surgery in 2010, there are now 20 people waiting more than a year. How is it possible to mess things up so badly in healthcare, given so much money? If the €1.6 billion announced on Tuesday represented real new investment I would welcome it. If it had the foresight to reverse FEMPI measures for GPs and not tie them to a new GP contract, I would welcome it. If it comprehensively addressed the fact that we cannot recruit doctors in our hospitals, I would welcome it. If it was used to improve the working conditions for nurses, I would welcome it. If it was being used to build enough new community and hospital beds rather than cover overspend, I would welcome it. It does none

of these things. Next year our doctors and nurses will remain overstretched. Our hospitals will remain over-capacity. Our patients will continue to wait and suffer and every one of them deserves better.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am pleased to be given the opportunity to respond to the budget. I will restrict my remarks to housing, planning and local government in which the Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, is involved. I was appointed as party spokesperson on the issue in May 2018. Since May I have endeavoured, along with my party, to be constructive in my approach and in dealings with the Government. We are in the midst of a housing crisis bordering on a national catastrophe. This crisis affects every family in the State. It affects them in different ways. First, it affects the more than 10,000 people who have no homes to go to. It affects the 4,000 kids sleeping in hotels, emergency accommodation, cars and Garda stations. It also affects the thousands of other people who are sleeping on couches and blow-up beds in their parents' houses. It affects the tens of thousands of working people who at this moment and until this budget, under the stewardship of this Government and the last, had no hope of owning or purchasing their own homes and ended up paying exorbitant rents of €2,000 or €2,500 per month in some instances for substandard accommodation.

Fianna Fáil's approach to this budget is to bring about some real policy solutions in that area. I was looking back at where we started, for example with social housing provision. Before we entered the confidence and supply agreement in 2016, the budget allocation for social housing was €430 million. Fianna Fáil has a track record in delivering social homes and public housing and in actually building houses. What we have done in that period of time is to pressurise the Government and insist it increases that budget, as it is today after this budget, to €1.34 billion. That is a 300% increase in provision for social homes. They are real homes for real people in this country.

When one looks at the scale of the crisis, we have about 72,000 families, a number that is increasing every day, waiting on our social housing waiting list. We have another 36,000 to 40,000 families on housing assistance payment, HAP. I will return to that. They are all waiting for permanent housing. I am pleased and satisfied that we secured nearly an extra €300 million, or a 25% increase, in the allocation for public homes. Everyone will agree, it is not about money and not even necessarily about policy; it is about delivery. It is about building those homes and housing those families. One of Fianna Fáil proposals was to lift the local authority - I use the word lightly - discretionary cap. There was some support from the Government benches on that. It was raised from €2 million to €6 million. It is a start. Effectively, €2 million means that any public housing scheme being built in the greater Dublin area, and most of the country, of over eight houses has to be referred to the Customs House for a famous four-stage process, which means 59 weeks of kicking it between Department and local authority. None of us wants that. The increase to €6 million will mean that, on average, schemes of up to about 30 homes will go through a one-stage process and give more autonomy to local authorities. I will be very honest. Fianna Fáil wanted to go further than that. We wanted to lift the cap to €10 million. It is something we will do. When and if we are in government, we will give more autonomy to the local authorities and hold them to account if they do not deliver. I want to see an end to the blame game between the Minister, Deputy Murphy, and the local authorities. One is blaming the other and now and again when the Minister is under pressure he decides to throw his toys out of the pram and blame every local authority for not delivering. We are all responsible. The Minister is responsible because at the end of the day he is the line Minister but everyone in the House is responsible for bringing forward policy that will make things better. That is why the

affordable housing scheme is an important priority for Fianna Fáil. We believe that for people to have a stake in their communities and country, they need to have a home in it. They need to be able to put down roots and they need to have a secure environment to do so. The best way of doing that is by owning one's own home. The provision of €300 million over the next three years towards a real affordable housing scheme for working people is something that I and my colleagues, Deputy Michael McGrath and Deputy Cowen in particular, have pushed for. I am pleased to see it is in this year's budget.

It is a pity none of our colleagues from Sinn Féin is here because they seem to have a major problem with maths on this. Deputy Eoin Ó Broin, their housing guru, effectively saw it as an increase of €25 million in one year. The Deputy obviously did not read the detail of it properly. It is actually a real increase in one year of €75 million - in fact, closer to €80 million - and a new €100 million for the next two years, totalling €300 million. What we need to see now is delivery of those homes. Initially it will be on State-owned land. Nine local authorities, including Fingal, have answered the call from the Department. We need to see this scheme starting in 2019. It has the potential with this funding to deliver about 7,500 homes for working people. Fianna Fáil would like to see that expanded. I would like to see an expansion of the Part V scheme as well as affordable housing. I want to see the income limits increased. We have to look at them. The €75,000 upper limit for a couple is too low in many areas. There are working couples earning more than that but they are paying exorbitant rents and childcare costs and have no ability to save. That needs to be done. We will be watching that really closely. The regulation for this affordable housing scheme should come to the House within the next two weeks. I want to see that happen quickly and the scheme established and that we start building these homes for people. As I said, we would expand it further if we were in government but we are not. We are trying to use our position here in a constructive way.

I say to those who are not present in the Chamber - Sinn Féin, the Labour Party and Solidarity-PBP - that I brought forward an affordable housing scheme back in May of this year that was debated in this House and for some reason it cannot explain the Government voted against it. Fine Gael opposed it but it was defeated because Sinn Féin, Solidarity, the Labour Party and others decided they were going to vote against affordable housing for working people. We have lost seven or eight months on that. That is a matter of regret but now I want to move forward and see it implemented. I would like to see other parties coming forward with real and realistic proposals and suggestions for implementation. People are sick and tired of housing being used as a political football. They want to see results. They care that there are 10,000 people without homes and 4,000 kids sleeping in hotels. I have met mothers who have explained to me in great detail how when their kids are getting out of the car coming back from school they get changed in the car because they do not want to walk into a hotel with a school uniform on. The reason they do not want to do that is they know at six and seven years of age that the other guests in the hotel will know if they are wearing a school uniform that they are more than likely living and sleeping in that hotel. None of us wants to see that happen.

I called a number of weeks ago for the establishment of a time-bound task force on homelessness, particularly family homelessness. I was pleased to see in this budget, again at our insistence but, to be fair, with the agreement of the Government, an extra €60 million this year towards tackling homelessness and for emergency accommodation, and an increase up to about €130 million for next year. At the end of the day in all the areas of rent, affordable homes and public housing the big issue is supply and the other issue is affordability. Unless we get supply back up and running, we will never get to grips with this crisis. The Government needs to

show ambition in this regard, as does the Dáil. While an agency such as the Land Development Agency is required, the way in which this agency appears to have been constructed means we will not deliver a home within the next four years. We cannot wait four years; we need to do it sooner.

I was looking back at figures on home ownership. We have slipped to the lowest rate of home ownership since 1971. According to the latest figures from 2017, the average age of a person buying his or her own home is approximately 35 years. If one goes back to 1991, the average age was 26. The home ownership rate has now fallen to just over two thirds. It is a problem for many working people who pay rent but do not see any hope of getting out of it.

We also need to stabilise rents and ensure “landlord” is not a bad word. Some commentators bandy about the notion that landlords should be hung from every tree in this country, but that is not a practical measure and it should not happen. There are many good individual landlords in this market. I have a concern about the number of corporate, institutional landlords moving in which now own large swathes of this city and other cities around the country. We need to ensure individual landlords stay in the market because they are part of the solution, but we need to look at some way of incentivising longer-term leases to strengthen security of tenure for tenants. That can be done through the Finance Bill with additional measures we have discussed to ensure we keep landlords in the market because they have a role in this and they are part of the solution, albeit not the major part. People owning their own homes and public housing on public land are the major parts of the solution.

There are many aspects of the housing budget I welcome, many of which I am glad to say are Fianna Fáil proposals and policy positions. This coming year, however, it is about implementation. We need to see delivery on the ground. We need to see boots on the ground, sites started and people housed.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): I am pleased that budget 2019 has delivered for higher education. On budget day, I announced three different funding streams: a capital funding stream, the current core funding stream and a new funding stream called the human capital initiative, HCI, stream.

In current and capital spending, new programmes and initiatives will make a major difference to our third level landscape. I am particularly enthusiastic about the new multi-annual HCI scheme. It will be a transformative development for the third level sector. From January 2020, exactly 14 months hence, the HCI will be set up to invest €300 million over the period 2020 to 2024. This ring-fenced allocation of €60 million each year will be a key part of the Government’s strategic response to Brexit and other challenges facing the economy. The HCI will be funded from the surplus in the national training fund, and has been made possible by the reform of the fund. The initiative will ensure our higher education institutions can meet the skill needs of our growing and rapidly changing economy. It will mitigate Brexit risks, boost regional development, and realise the objectives of Project Ireland 2040 and our future jobs programme. Now that our economy is approaching full employment, we need to plan for the jobs of the future - jobs that will be crucial in 20 years’ time. These are challenges to which I am confident that our higher education institutions will rise. I am pleased the initiative has been so warmly welcomed by the Technological Higher Education Association.

Budget 2019 also provides an additional €57.4 million for new measures in current spending. This is in addition to the separate allocation of €41 million for pay restoration and pension

costs. Excluding the latter two items, this means that current spending on higher education has risen by 10% since 2016. We will create places for approximately 3,500 new students. We will also continue to move forward on the reforms to the higher education funding allocation model. We will provide €10 million for innovation and performance funds, and €5 million for building, teaching and learning capacity. There will be €5 million in the new research and innovation fund for institutes of technology. There will be an enhancement and strengthening of services in mental health and counselling, as well as an action plan for safer campuses. Overall, higher education current expenditure will be €1.76 billion in 2019.

On the capital side, we plan to spend €138 million in 2019, compared with €70.6 million in 2018, which is almost twice as much. We will spend €532 million over the next five years. The key projects we have announced recently include the science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, facilities in Dundalk Institute of Technology, a new engineering building for Limerick Institute of Technology, LIT, upgrades to the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology Castlebar campus, a future-technology building at Dublin City University and a new sports science, health and recreation building at Institute of Technology Tallaght. More will follow. Project Ireland 2040 provides for a near-trebling of the higher education capital budget compared with the past decade, from €0.8 billion to €2.2 billion.

Budget 2019, in current and capital spending, is hugely significant for higher education. It turns the corner in restoring our institutions to a strong footing to meet the needs of our economy and society. I listened carefully to the many voices in this sector. I have met the presidents of all the institutions, visited the campuses and seen the facilities, and spoken to the stakeholders and the students. I know what is needed. I am pleased that after a difficult decade, we are delivering.

I wish to acknowledge that our investment in higher education is based on resources provided by the Irish taxpayer. As Minister of State, my focus is on one key person: the student. I am determined that next year and beyond our taxpayers, parents and citizens will see value for money and excellent outcomes from the students at our third level institutions. We will all benefit.

Deputy Tom Neville: I echo the sentiments of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Mitchell O'Connor, about the engineering building in LIT. LIT is a fine establishment in Limerick. I studied there for a number of years and it is great to see it progressing under this Government.

I welcome the overall budget that was put before us by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe. The area of County Limerick, in particular, that will benefit from it is the engineering building of LIT but other projects that also have received a boost include Limerick Prison, which had a redevelopment, Shannon Foynes Port Company, which will share in part of the connectivity funding that has been announced, and Troy Studios. Section 486C, which provides for relief on tax, has been extended to 2021, and will have a knock-on effect on the film and television industry in Ireland. Our arts are something to be celebrated but although we are starting to learn, we do not use them enough to promote our tourism. We should migrate arts and sports over to other areas to foster communities and help people with mental health difficulties. That will help their emotional well-being and mitigate against stigma. There is a huge crossover between the arts and mental health, and I will continue to push that.

I also welcome the fact 800 new gardaí will be recruited. Rural crime has been at the top

of the agenda for the past number of years. I live in a rural part of Ireland. The closure of the Garda College in Templemore had a major effect on parts of rural Ireland but it was reopened by the previous Fine Gael Government in 2014 and we are starting to see those gardaí come through, which I welcome. I have the utmost respect for what gardaí do each day in their jobs. They are very much an integral part of the community and I want to see them facilitated. I impress on the Minister, and the powers that be, that a weighting be placed on rural areas as well as urban areas. I am a huge believer in community gardaí. That type of on-the-ground intelligence is paramount. It is often local people who are feeding these roving gangs information and intelligence on what is happening on the ground. That is something we have been told of over the last number of years. They are also using the motorway network. We have to pinpoint it there.

Returning to the arts, the €75 million includes an increase of €7 million. This feeds into Project Ireland 2040 and the Global Ireland 2025 strategy on pushing out our footprint in tourism and in the context of Brexit.

I refer to attracting other markets in agriculture, by trying to grow our footprint throughout Asia. That is still an untapped market for Ireland. I congratulate the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, on signing the deal with China on access to that market earlier this year. We need to start pushing into more markets like that. We need to use the businesses we have there to create more demand for Irish produce. Our produce in the food sector is second to none and we have a signature story to tell about our agriculture in Asia. Countries there look to the West for premium-type food.

I want to talk about the €55 million increase in mental health spending. The Joint Committee on Future of Mental Health Care is about to complete work on a final report next week or the week after. I ask that the report be implemented as soon as possible, especially on IT systems, waiting lists, referral paths and recruitment. Those are the major issues we have found. Mindfulness, prevention and early intervention are also important. They are not just buzzwords. They need to be delivered. I recognise that the Ceann Comhairle sympathises with this, especially the mindfulness aspect. It has not gone unnoticed.

There has been much discussion and debate on a carbon tax. As the Tánaiste mentioned earlier, we need to learn from what happened when we tried to change behaviour with water charges. Bringing people along with us is real leadership and that is particularly the case with carbon tax. Whatever political affiliation we might have, climate change is going to affect us all down the line. It is not about dividing, but it is about bringing everyone together on that. I welcome the formation of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, of which I am a member. There are many ongoing discussions. I find it highly educational as someone who does not have a background in the area.

On the politics side, we need to be able to bring the people with us when we put these things in place. We need to have alternatives and we need to invest in them. If we had put up the price of diesel, petrol, oil or coal, consumption would not have changed. It would just have been harder on the pockets of those going out to work, old age pensioners, those on disability allowance and those trying to use solid fuel over the winter period. The carbon tax was not going to work. I heard the Green Party stating it would have sent a message, but it was not going to work in practice. We have to study the practicalities for the people on the ground. We need to bring people with us but we also have to provide credible alternatives. I understand climate change is upon us and it needs to be worked on but how we do that is important. I do not want to fall into the trap of what happened with water charges, that is, putting a tax in place to change

people's behaviour. We have to have a bottom-up approach from our electorate. That will be a campaign in which it will be incumbent on all of us to play our part, regardless of political divisions in this House.

There have also been a number of initiatives announced in agriculture, which I welcome, particularly on the staffing and ICT needs on the regulatory side. That always needs to be worked on to make sure that applications get through as quickly as possible. I already mentioned the promotion of new markets. The existing stock relief has been renewed for three years to cope with income volatility. The extension to farms of income averaging with off-farm trading income is also welcome. A sum of €53 million is to be provided in capital for the first round of projects under rural regeneration and the development fund. Rural Ireland is getting more and more funding. I refer in particular to e-hubs in small towns. I remind the House that rural Ireland is not Limerick city, Cork city or even a big town. Rural Ireland is the countryside itself, the small market towns with populations of 1,100 or 1,500. Those are the type of towns where we need to start putting in e-hubs. Many of those towns, and surrounding areas, as a result of the deal that has been done with the Government, now have broadband access as well. I welcome all the money starting to pour into rural Ireland through the Minister, Deputy Ring's Department of Rural and Community Development.

There is the town and village renewal scheme, as well as funding from CLÁR. The local improvement scheme, LIS, has increased over the last number of years and I see it in County Limerick. There is rural regeneration, €60 million for Brexit support and 800 gardaí being recruited. In education, 950 special needs assistants, SNAs, have been announced, which is very welcome.

Turning to corporation tax, I am very much a believer in holding it at 12.5%. I hear Deputies talking all the time about corporation tax and how corporations are getting away without paying tax but there is never a mention of the number of people employed in these organisations who are paying tax. In Limerick, the number of people employed in those corporations, the downstream industries and indigenous industries that have been set up because of people being employed in, and acquiring skills from, these multinationals is nothing to be sniffed at. We have to be very careful about the message we send out. That is especially the case against the backdrop of trade tensions globally and Brexit. I welcome the loans in respect of the effects of Brexit. We must mitigate against those risks not only for small to medium sized enterprises but also the agricultural sector.

I recognise that in health we have had a €1.5 billion increase in spending. On waiting lists, I will continue to campaign for a highly efficient text messaging system for "do not shows" in outpatient appointments. That should be done. We can use technology much more to our advantage. We need to be proactive, informative and have an integrated communications process to notify people on these waiting lists. I refer, in particular, to people who may have been on the list for a period of time and may not be able to attend. The same could be done with utilities. A text message could be sent to people ten to 15 days before an appointment, telling them to telephone if they have to cancel. Somebody else can be slotted in then.

I would like to challenge the line that was used in respect of the arts by some Opposition parties. I refer to the Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market on copyright and content generation in the arts. Artists have been campaigning for this and Fine Gael has voted for the progression of this directive. Sinn Féin, however, has voted against it. I heard a Member say today that we are not giving enough to the arts. I do not understand why one thing is being

said in one jurisdiction and something else is happening in another jurisdiction. Clarification on that would be very welcome. As I said at the outset, rural Ireland has had its challenges over the past number of years, particularly with emigration and recession. We are, however, starting to see an influx of people.

I welcome the increase in the sports capital grant, €35 million for tourism generation and €10 million for greenways. The great southern greenway is in County Limerick. I have said before that we need to enhance and upgrade that, using the greenway for cycling instead of country roads. I hope that is done.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Neville has three minutes remaining.

Debate adjourned.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment: Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: We must now proceed in accordance with an order of the House today to a statement from the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment. Following the Minister's ten minute statement, we will go to each group for eight minutes for questions and answers.

We are all here to establish facts. All the players in this controversy are entitled to their good names and their reputations should not be trampled on.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten): When it comes to the national broadband plan, NBP, my absolute priority has always been to ensure that high-speed broadband is provided to the more than 540,000 households and more than 1.1 million people in rural Ireland who do not currently have access to this essential service, no more and no less.

I am absolutely satisfied there has been no interference in the procurement process by me. The political and media frenzy in the last week has been deeply unhelpful. Commentary by those who are not procurement experts that the process is dead in the water and that the final bidder does not have the capacity or capability to roll out the NBP is incorrect and has been deeply damaging. Commentary such as this is where the real risk and interference with the NBP arises. The use of this language is inflammatory, inaccurate and ill-considered. It calls into question the integrity, ability and impartiality of my officials and the external advisers who have managed this procurement process, and the integrity and capability of the last remaining bidder.

We cannot halt the procurement and engage in discussions with parties that had previously been involved in the NBP procurement process, namely, Eir and SIRO. This is simply not an option open to the Government, nor is it necessary, even if it were open to Government. If we had to reset the clock, it would set the NBP back years.

Insofar as the meetings are concerned, on 26 June I attended a meeting in Leinster House at the request of my officials with representatives of the remaining bidder. I was accompanied to that meeting by the Secretary General, the assistant secretary with responsibility for communications, the chief technology officer and my special adviser. I am making the minutes of that meeting available on my Department's website. The current position is that the final tender

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submission for the NBP was received from the remaining bidder in the NBP procurement process on 18 September. Since then, evaluation of the final tender submission has been ongoing by the NBP evaluation teams in my Department to assess the completeness, compliance and robustness of the submission and to evaluate the submission against the technical and commercial award criteria. The fact is that the NBP procurement process is subject to very strong oversight, where the Department has the assistance of expert external advisers and is supported by a procurement board and steering group with external expertise, and with an independent process auditor in place. I understand that the evaluation process is expected to conclude by the end of this month, at which stage a recommendation will then be made to Government. The real risk for the NBP now lies in loose language and irresponsible politics at this critical time in the NBP process.

I met with the Taoiseach last night and earlier today offered the following to allay the concerns of the Opposition about some of the issues that arose recently. This comprised a confidential briefing by senior members of the procurement team, including the project sponsor, programme director, chief technology officer and the process auditor to the Opposition spokespeople - the Secretary General of the Department will write to the Opposition spokespeople in this regard; a review perhaps by a former Secretary General of my role, if any, in the NBP procurement and to address, if there is a concern among the Opposition, that I would in any way second guess the outcome of an independent process recommended to me; and the assignment of responsibility for the NBP procurement to the Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Kyne, who already has responsibility for a number of functions in the communications area, or to another Cabinet-level Minister. This was not accepted by An Taoiseach, who asked me to reflect on my position.

It is clear to me, therefore, that the Taoiseach does not have confidence in me. That confidence does not exist, even though I, as Minister, have introduced the first climate change national mitigation plan and national adaptation plan; secured over €22 billion in the national development plan for climate action; established a climate action fund, with an allocation of €500 million, to leverage additional public and private investment in climate action measures; developed a much higher and credible profile for Ireland at EU and international level on climate issues; introduced a settled waste policy, including the introduction of incentivised pricing for waste disposal and a comprehensive suite of measures for food waste management; provided a new funding package for over 400 anti-dumping initiatives right across the country; established the mobile phone and broadband task force, drawing together the industry, Government Departments and the regulator; developed a comprehensive suite of measures to deal with mobile phone blackspots; had the lead role in developing a Government response to issues of online safety; funded the accelerated roll-out of digital skills and trading online supports for small and micro businesses; secured a rescue package of €30 million for An Post to address its severe financial difficulties and set it back on a path of recovery; provided additional funding for the broadcasting sector of over €17 million and legislation to address the funding issues for regional broadcasters; provided an increase of €74 million in funding for energy measures, including energy efficiency and new initiatives to help the most vulnerable who are suffering health issues due to poorly insulated housing; and introduced new and innovative renewable energy and renewable heat schemes.

I am left now in the impossible, stark position a politician never wants to find himself or herself in. Do I make the decision to resign or wait for the decision to be made for me? What do I do in circumstances where the Opposition has not sought my resignation? If I was a cynic,

which I am not, I believe this outcome is more about opinion polls than telecoms poles. It is more about optics than fibre optics.

The fact is that I have to meet investors, whether in telecoms, energy or any other sector. These are the people who provide jobs in this country. That is the context in which I had meetings with Mr. McCourt, and that is how it should be seen. The reality is that Mr. David McCourt has met with every single communications Minister, several members of this Government and members of the Opposition in recent years.

For my family, for my constituents, and more importantly for the 1.1 million people who are waiting for this essential service, a vital service for ordinary people in rural Ireland, I have given An Taoiseach my resignation. I wish my Cabinet colleagues well, and I would ask, most of all, that the NBP process is allowed to reach its conclusion over the next few weeks for the 1.1 million people in rural Ireland who need this infrastructure now more than ever.

Finally, I assure the House that the decisions I took as the former Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment were taken solely in the interest of bringing high-speed broadband, communication services and mobile services to every single home, business and citizen in this country, and for no other reason whatsoever.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: In circumstances where there is no Minister available to answer questions, I suggest that the debate be adjourned.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: As someone who sought this debate to try to shine a light on the status of the national broadband plan, given what has been revealed over the last couple of days, I certainly do not believe a discussion is relevant at this stage as there is no Minister here to address it. I feel great sympathy for Deputy Naughten given the decision he has had to take today. Nobody on this side of the House called for his resignation, notwithstanding the temptation that new politics presents. We sought to shine a light on a process that, as far as my party and I are concerned, is fatally flawed and fatally wounded. That came about as a result of the withdrawal of two of the main bidders in the early part of this year and late last year. It was on this that I wanted to focus attention, to try to ensure that at some stage a contract with the capacity to deliver broadband to 542,000 homes would be signed. Deputy Naughten recognised the priority of the Taoiseach in his resigning words; it is about spin. It is about a head, and it is not about providing broadband to 542,000 homes. The Taoiseach had an objective, namely, to ensure there was a contract signing with hard hats and high-visibility vests, something with which we have become all too familiar. That is his approach to providing homes to the countless thousands who suffer greatly. Unfortunately, form has won out over substance.

I have to say in Deputy Naughten's favour that he is a man of substance. He certainly made mistakes along the way, and he and I have battled in this House on Question Time, Leaders' Questions and on other occasions over the approaches he took. However, I know he is a man motivated by delivery. He has not been successful. He may not have had the support of the Government. He may not have had the necessary funds to roll out broadband services. It is a disappointing day for him and his family, and it is a political blow to his constituency. However, it does not solve the problem. In allowing the House to go into a period of reflection, perhaps we should have the Taoiseach in the House before the day is out, or tomorrow, Monday or Tuesday, to explain how he intends to breathe life back into the national broadband plan. This is not about a political head or showboating. Nobody from this side of this House or from my party sought or expected this. I wish Deputy Naughten well in his career.

Deputy Brian Stanley: What has happened here today is bizarre. The Minister became a prisoner of this process. I spoke to him many times, inside and outside the House and in committee, about the dangers of the process he was getting into. We entered into a tendering process, supported by Fianna Fáil at the start, that went down a completely privatised route. The successful bidder would own the infrastructure after 25 years, subvented by a blank cheque from the taxpayer over that 25-year period. That has led us to this.

Another factor has led us to this. On the day of the press conference announcing that 300,000 households and businesses would be serviced by Eir, which would be allowed to cherry-pick the 300,000 easiest-to-reach households out of the 840,000 that had to be serviced, I told Deputy Naughten that the process had been seriously wounded. That was the second major blow to the process. We are now left with 540,000 hard-to-reach households.

I am on the record saying this many times in the House. Unless there is massive bankrolling by the State and the taxpayer, that cannot be done. ESB and Vodafone's SIRO consortium pulled out. Eir pulled out because it got what it wanted. That firm has created a doughnut around every town in this country. I do not know if those on the Government benches have looked at the maps. Eir picked up groups of houses, but the harder-to-reach businesses, houses and farms are not in the loop.

Bit by bit this has collapsed, and now one bidder is left. At the second press conference in Buswells Hotel, I confronted Deputy Naughten and pointed out to him that if one goes to the market to sell something and there is one buyer, the buyer names the price. If any Members have ever gone to a mart or market, they know what goes on. That is how simple it is. This is basic economics. Then we were left in a situation where that particular consortium flip-flopped and changed. It has now changed to be unrecognisable from what it was just six months ago. Now there is one venture capitalist upon whom the future of the Government and the broadband plan hangs, not just that of Deputy Naughten. That is the simple fact. The Government has allowed itself to be boxed into this situation. That is where we are today. That is why Deputy Naughten was compromised.

I do not believe Deputy Naughten is corrupt. However, he made a serious mistake in meeting Mr. McCourt and holding discussions. Before the committee, he admitted to holding discussions with him from last February. Then there was the dinner to which Mr. McCourt was invited in Leinster House and two other meetings that were subsequently revealed. Deputy Naughten admitted to me yesterday that he went to New York at Mr. McCourt's invitation. Mr. McCourt sought to meet me this week. I refused, and I am only an Opposition spokesperson on communications. I have no skin in this game but I thought it was the right thing to do. It would be improper to meet him at this stage in the process. This tendering process is at a delicate stage. We have arrived at an unfortunate situation. I have sympathy for Deputy Naughten over what has happened. I have a series of questions. If Deputy Naughten has resigned, who is representing the Government? Where is the Taoiseach?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Where is the Tánaiste? Government figures should come here and speak to us as Opposition spokespersons. As a rural Deputy, I want those 540,000 households connected. People in Laois-Offaly contact me every day looking for broadband to be rolled out to their houses, and I am sure other Members' constituents contact them. People are travelling to Dublin every day who do not need to. They could work from home or have small businesses

beside their own premises. They do not have broadband. They cannot get it, and it is hurting rural Ireland.

We are also about to write a blank cheque. Some 80 people, contractors and direct staff, have been working on behalf of the Department for several years and they are paid to oversee this plan. We still cannot get this tender process in place because it is a legal, financial and logistical mess. It cannot be done. The poles they are going to string the wires on are now owned by a French capitalist, because Fianna Fáil, in the person of the then Minister, Mary O'Rourke, sold them off in 1999. We are now left in a situation where these poles are standing and the taxpayer is going to subsidise the wires on them. Deputy Naughten told us yesterday that we might use the ESB poles, which I suggested a year and a half ago.

We are left in an appalling mess. We have several questions and it is disappointing that we cannot address this in what is supposed to be the national Parliament. I believe that the process is legally flawed. It is legally and financially compromised and the taxpayer is legally and financially compromised. Moreover, this House is politically compromised if it keeps going along with this charade. We need to press the pause button. We need answers from senior people in Government about the viability and legal basis of this process, where we go from here and what we will do. I have put forward alternatives. We need to check out of this process. We need to stop here and now and hear from senior Government people about where this is going. I ask that the Taoiseach comes into the House this evening or tomorrow so that we can address these questions to him.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We came in here to ask a series of questions, primarily on the future of the national broadband plan, which is the most important piece of national infrastructure that has yet to be put in place for rural Ireland. It has been many years in gestation. Like others, I believe that it was a mistake to allow 300,000 premises to be taken out of the package to be provided under the plan. This meant that the viability of the plan was fundamentally undermined by a Government decision. It led fairly smartly to the withdrawal of a number of serious telecommunications companies that had plans to bid for that package. We had the unacceptable situation of only having one bidder and an ongoing pretence that this was somehow still a competitive process.

This was further undermined when the composition of the lead bidder kept changing and many serious issues arose, some of which I posed to the Tánaiste this morning. I refer to issues around Enet's move from being the lead bidder to being a supplier and ownership moving from the lead bidder to the State. These questions remain unanswered. What we have had here this afternoon is something much more dramatic, which is, in essence, a resignation speech from the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the likes of which I have not heard before. It was much more akin to the resignation speeches we are used to hearing in the House of Commons, from people such as Boris Johnson coming in to explain the lack of confidence he had in the Prime Minister in that instance and the Prime Minister in him.

A telling phrase was used by Deputy Naughten in what amounted to his resignation speech. Nobody on the Opposition benches called for his resignation and yet he did not feel he had the confidence of the Taoiseach. His assessment was that this was more to do with opinion polls than telecoms poles that might bring broadband into the homes of rural Ireland. These are very telling phrases from a member of the Government up to that point in time. A reasonable request is being made by Members that the Taoiseach come into the House to explain how the NBP, one of the most important structural and infrastructural projects still to be addressed, will be

implemented and advanced. He needs to explain this to us, if possible, this afternoon. I do not know about his availability. I certainly believe what has transpired in the past short while, when those of us in opposition came to ask questions about the future of this vital infrastructure and for the Minister responsible to simply announce his resignation and leave the House, means it has been an extraordinary day even in the extraordinary annals of this particular Dáil.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The situation we are in now is thoroughly unsatisfactory. We, as the Opposition, came in with a series of questions regarding the NBP process and the relationship and meetings between the Minister, Deputy Naughten, with David McCourt. The Minister chose to resign and leave the Chamber but our questions remain and it is entirely appropriate that the Business Committee should meet and someone on behalf of the Government should have to come to the House to answer the questions that remain because the national broadband plan process still remains on track and is still moving despite the numerous problems that beset it.

We had not called for the resignation of the Minister but we thought he had serious questions to answer. He has chosen not to answer them but to pre-empt them with his resignation. This latest step of the scandal arose from Question Time yesterday, when it was fair for anyone in the Chamber to say that the Minister was evasive at best in answering questions that arose from a reply to Deputy Dooley regarding a lunch in the Members' restaurant on 18 April, the same day, ironically, the Minister was dealing in the Dáil with the previous scandal in which he was involved. The Minister is not here to defend himself but he chose not to be here to defend himself. He had to be asked three times before he gave an answer that furnished any information about the fact he was aware Mr. McCourt was in the building on that day. We had not called for his resignation but if further information had come out about it, for example any information that suggested he had met with Mr. McCourt on that day, his position would have been entirely untenable.

In any case, based on the information that was in the public domain, it was clear the Minister had broken the Department's rules, specifically relating to the NBP with regard to his interactions with Mr. McCourt. The rules are clear that meetings will only happen when absolutely necessary in exceptional circumstances and the Minister and departmental officials should try to avoid such interactions. The Minister accepted an invitation to attend a meeting on the explicit basis that the meeting was to reassure Mr. McCourt that a series of concerns that had arisen regarding the bid tender had been resolved. It related explicitly to the bid; the Minister knew about this and agreed to have the meeting. It was entirely inappropriate and represented a breach of the rules.

It was also entirely inappropriate to host a birthday party in the Oireachtas for the daughter of the only bidder left standing for one of the biggest and most high-value tenders in the history of the State. The Minister will not answer these questions. That is fine. He has chosen to resign, but we still need someone to answer these questions. In the entire process of this broadband plan we have a litany of everything that is wrong with crony capitalism and capitalism fundamentally in Ireland. It is a process whereby something that should have been a public utility was put out to private tender. All the other bidders pulled out, the cost of the tender increased subsequently and listed in the background as either a major contractor or a partner is Denis O'Brien's Actavo, which has taken over from Siteserv. There just seemed to be open door access for people such as Mr. McCourt and his family to have birthday parties in the Oireachtas, in the halls of power absolutely inappropriately.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The resignation of the Minister, Deputy Naughten, is the crescendo of a totally failed and shambolic process of privatisation of a key infrastructural project for the State. He made reference during his resignation speech to the fact the Taoiseach did not have confidence in him. If that is the case, the Taoiseach needs to come in immediately to give us his side of the story. Why did he not have confidence in the Minister?

I certainly came in here - and all Members of the Opposition have indicated the same - with an open mind as to what the fate of the Minister, Deputy Naughten, should be but that he did have to answer serious questions about the contacts he had with David McCourt, whether they were appropriate and whether they breached the rules of the tendering process. I do not know the answer to these questions but I do know that the process of rolling out the national broadband plan has been a shambolic disaster, which has reached its culmination in the resignation of the Minister and him telling us that his boss, the Taoiseach, did not have confidence in him.

We need to know the answer and, more importantly, the people of rural Ireland need to know the answer, because they are the victims of this failed process. This has its origins in the decision to privatise Eircom in the 1990s. It has gone from one failure to another. Clearly the current process is completely contaminated. We are now left with only one bidder, with whom the Minister had these contacts, who is the subject of legal action by a company in the United States because apparently while he was negotiating with this company regarding a possible takeover, he was also negotiating with the ISIF, which then bought him out. Another component to the consortium, Actavo, is being investigated regarding the sale of Siteserv by the IBRC. What a mess. It is a mess that was produced from the process of privatising and outsourcing key infrastructural projects. My God, we would never have had the ESB if we had had this sort of process to establish a company to electrify the State. This is the mess we get into when we outsource and privatise key infrastructural projects. When we add it all up, the Government stands indicted. It is a shambles on national broadband, a shambles on housing, a shambles on the health service and a shambles on climate change as we saw in the recent report. Those basic matters have been left in a mess and now we have a bizarre twist of events with the Minister resigning because the Taoiseach had no confidence in him. The Government has some questions to answer.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: As everybody else has noted this is not the event we were expecting to debate in the Dáil today. The statement from the former Minister, as he is now, raises many more questions than it solves. It is interesting that the text of the speech circulated does not reflect Deputy Naughten's comments to the Dáil. That raises questions in itself. He said in his speech it is clear to him that the Taoiseach does not have confidence in him, which is correct, but he also indicated the Taoiseach met Mr. McCourt on numerous occasions, as had other Ministers and members of the Government throughout the process. We have very serious questions that need to be answered very quickly.

What is the relationship between this Government and Mr. McCourt that has caused the resignation of a Minister already? The Government Chief Whip is trying to rally Members and make it look like there are people on the Government benches today but everybody has probably fecked off and people do not know what is happening. He is busy trying to get Ministers to turn up so somebody might be able to answer questions. There is an entire Front Bench sitting here.

Deputy John Lahart: Ministers of State.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Will any of them be willing or able to answer the very serious questions that need to be answered very quickly? This is a very serious issue that demonstrates the Government is totally in hock to the likes of Mr. David McCourt and others like him. How many other Ministers have met people with an influence on the decisions made by the Department? I wish the former Minister well and this is nothing personal against him. Very serious questions need to be answered very quickly by this Government.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I agree with my colleague, Deputy Pringle. The Taoiseach should come into this House to answer questions about the incredibly poor attempt made to roll out broadband to the 540,000 households that have been left down very badly over the past eight years. That is the real issue today. It seems, from the former Minister's comments, that the Taoiseach has thrown Deputy Naughten under the bus on this occasion. He has tried to deflect criticism of this Government solely to this Minister but it would have served the House better if the Minister had explained exactly what contacts had taken place and where the process is right now. There should have been an explanation as to why Deputy Naughten felt at this stage the process could not be revived. There is an onus on the Taoiseach to come before us and explain why he has effectively demanded the resignation of Deputy Naughten as Minister. We need to know what the Taoiseach knows as well.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I sought this debate on Monday morning and it is a very different debate now, as others have said, from the one I anticipated. Nobody from the Opposition sought the resignation of the Minister, Deputy Naughten. Like others, I came here with a list of questions, and they will remain irrespective of who is the Minister. The process is central to what we are trying to unpick. We must be certain there is a process that we can stand over in the roll-out of national broadband. We have been here before and the problem is that questions get asked after an event. Up to now we have spent more than €500 million on tribunals and inquiries. People ask why this keeps happening and it is because we do not ask the questions in advance. We must interrogate the process properly. The process is laid out by the Department and it is not a general procedure; it is designed around the national broadband plan and how it is supposed to be managed. Did it deviate from the plan? Yes, and it did so substantially. How do we know that? The Minister has told us.

The Taoiseach had a meeting with the former Minister, Deputy Naughten, in September. He needs to come here and tell us about the briefing. Deputy Naughten has said the Taoiseach asked him to reflect on his position, and he said it was clear from this that the Taoiseach did not have confidence in him. We need to hear from the Taoiseach about the roll-out of broadband and what will happen now. We need to have answers to the questions that we are legitimately entitled to ask. We need to know whether he agrees with us about the questions that are out there.

I do not have personal animosity towards the former Minister, Deputy Naughten, but this is the second time there has been an issue. The issue earlier this year related to Independent News & Media. We must have confidence that when rules exist, we will abide by them. That is how to build confidence in a process. It is essential that the Business Committee meets today or else that the Taoiseach would come here before the close of business to take questions on the matter. We need to set out now a process to address the pertinent questions, including why we lost two bidders from the process, leaving just one, and why the competitive tension one might expect did not exist. There is also the question of how the consortium has changed since July, and we need to hear from the Taoiseach about what will happen from now on with this very large and vital infrastructure project. We must have some clarity on it as quickly as possible.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Earlier today we expressed no confidence in the Minister but it was primarily on the matter of climate change and we did not expect him to resign today only an hour later. I am sorry I was late in coming into the Chamber because I was attending a committee meeting and asking questions about broadband of our regulator. I was looking forward to asking questions about what we are going to do with the national broadband plan. These are the questions that needed to be asked today. It was not just about who the Minister met, why, where and when. That issue is complex and if Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin or others have a set position on what to do, it would be good to hear it. We will still have to resolve the question.

This is not an easy process. I was previously involved as a communications Minister in facilitating a competition for a national broadband scheme. It effectively ended up with a single bidder in the end. This experience tells me this is not an easy process but do it we must for the sake of rural Ireland. In my time as a Minister I met Mr. McCourt, who at the time was involved with some innovative investments in satellite telecommunications technology. I thought he was a good and innovative telecoms person so I will not speak ill of the man. I am providing that background information. I am not sure if Deputy Stanley has met Mr. McCourt or members of his team but I did and I know Deputy Dooley and others have done so. It is part of our job and we must become informed because we are helping to set policy. This is with the goal of addressing the question of what we do with the national broadband plan. Should we do it blind or should we try to get some understanding of it?

It was inappropriate for the former Minister to have a dinner with Mr. McCourt and pay for the lunch but this is a difficult process because politics is involved. Politics is involved with deciding whether to use Eir poles or the ESB poles. There is politics involved in getting access to land. Politics is involved because we are on both sides of any deal. We still own or have just bought Enet again. Managing the separation of proper independent decision making and making decisions for the public good, saving money and making sure we get the best outcome for the people was always going to be a difficult political issue. This Dáil, or the next one, will still have the responsibility of doing this and I do not think going back to zero is necessarily the best outcome. Some might believe that. If that is the case, fine, set it out and we will make that decision as a Dáil but that is still a key decision ahead of us.

I will be honest. As so often happens in this world, politics trumps everything. What has happened today politically trumps any part of the assessment of the technological or economic merits of what we do with our national broadband plan because what we heard today about a Taoiseach, in advance of this sitting, effectively saying “that’s it, you’re gone” by not expressing confidence is the real story today. The Minister’s lines could not have been more dramatic in terms of this being about opinion polls, not telecoms poles, and optics rather than fibre optics. They are about the most stunning words I have heard a Minister say as he walks out the door having resigned. What is really noticeable is the empty seat beside the Minister of State, Deputy Mitchell O’Connor. The absence of any Fine Gael Front Bench Ministers from the start of the former Minister’s speech says more than anything. I know the Government Chief Whip was here. I do not know if he is still here. I saw him talking to the Ceann Comhairle. Perhaps the Ceann Comhairle can provide some information. Will the Government make a statement before the House? This is politics now. We can put aside a lot of the technical details. It is the real politics of what is happening. The question one would ask this afternoon is whether we have a Government.

I feel sorry for the former Minister. We did not have confidence in him - despite his citation of all the great things he has done - because we think the Government is not delivering. It is a

“do nothing” Government in so many areas about which we have concerns. They are not all bad, obviously. They are good people, as is Deputy Naughten, but the future of the Government hangs in the balance this afternoon, which is the real story that we need to get to the bottom of and if we can, make sure that whatever we do, rural Ireland is protected in terms of whatever rural broadband plan we end up delivering for it. This is not easy. It is still a complicated political process.

An Ceann Comhairle: At present, we are functioning within the confines of the order that was made earlier today. This allows for statements or questions from Members of the Opposition. I must apologise to members of the Government because the order does not allow for statements from this side of the House.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Can we amend the order?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies Fitzmaurice and Eugene Murphy are offering. The Government Chief Whip has left the Chamber to see whether it is possible to bring a revised order back to the House. As soon as he returns, we will bring it to Members’ attention. Otherwise, we must work within what we have already ordered.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is regrettable that my constituency colleague basically has been forced to resign by the Taoiseach. That is the first thing I want to put on the record. I have listened with interest. It is nearly like how it is down the country; when someone dies, everyone says how great they were once they are gone. I was at the talks about forming a Government. We spent seven hours with each Department. I have listened to what has been said today. When Eir was looking for 330,000 extra connections, which were in towns, as Deputy Stanley noted, it was said that they would not be given to it. What happened afterwards was that when a proposal was put back, our good old friends - the EU - made the State give away the good apples on the tree and left the bad apples because we could not give state aid. This needs to be put on the record.

We are hearing things about what we could hang it on. Anybody looking into this, as many of us living in rural Ireland have done, know that if we were to hang it on ESB wires, we would need electrical engineers for every part of it so that is not going to happen. The only way we can do it is through the Eir poles. Legislation was to be brought in here.

Regrettably, today has shown that public relations and how things look are more important than delivery. A Minister has been forced to resign. There might be a hair’s breadth between looking for a resignation or not looking for it in some of the statements I have heard but the reality is that this evening, we must know where we are on broadband because the people of rural Ireland are the big losers today. I have heard a debate about a dinner. If any of the Members from rural parts of Ireland ever attended a mart, were about to sell an animal, had one buyer and did not sell it within the ring, they would go and talk to that buyer and see whether they could get more money. They would do a thing called horse dealing. We have become too politically correct in this country. One cannot look at or talk to a person. It is totally different if there are three or four different operations in a bidding process but the reality is that two dropped out and we had one left. Beggars cannot be choosers. If rural Ireland wants broadband, we have to persist with it. Yes, it will cost more but what do we want? Do we want a two-tier society? As I pointed out today, when four computers go on in a school near me in Kilcrone, it crashes. Do these children not deserve it? Obviously, the Taoiseach, in his better wisdom, has decided that these children in a rural part of Ireland do not deserve broadband and that it was easier to go

for the good PR stunt, make sure he does not have confidence in someone, get rid of them and probably call an election, as we have been hearing over the past couple of days, for 7 December. If that is politics, it stinks.

Deputy Michael Harty: This is a momentous afternoon, not something I had expected when I came into this House. I came in this afternoon to speak in support of Deputy Naughten as a person of integrity and honesty. I genuinely believe that. I do not believe for a second that he would act intentionally to try and influence or act inappropriately in respect of the allocation of a contract or contracts relating to the national broadband plan. I have been involved with Deputy Naughten over the past two and a half years and he has been in politics for the best part of 19 or 20 years. I do not believe for a moment that his involvement with Mr. McCourt was in any way meant to influence how those contracts were to be allocated. I believe the portrayal of his involvement with Mr. McCourt as having an ulterior motive is completely incorrect. I do not believe the former Minister acted inappropriately.

Obviously, the Taoiseach does not share my confidence. I disagreed with the former Minister on many issues, such as the attempted closure of 390 post offices, and I was deeply frustrated by the slow roll-out of rural broadband. I believe the procurement and tendering process was flawed as otherwise, why did Eir and SIRO pull out of the process? Deputy Stanley said that the allocation of the easiest 300,000 homes to Eir had a significant impact on why the other two organisations dropped out of the process.

I do not have confidence that the Government will solve these problems, including our health problems, and I do not believe it is going to deliver services to rural Ireland with regard to health, broadband or climate change. We have seen the resignation of the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, which must now call into question the ability of the Taoiseach to continue to lead this Government in a cohesive manner. That is the fundamental question that will be asked this evening. I believe the Taoiseach must come into the House and answer that question. Can he lead a Government in a cohesive manner into the future? I believe he cannot.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: As a constituency colleague, I am deeply shocked and upset by the former Minister's resignation. I visited his office a few moments ago. He and his staff are quite distraught. We are of different politics in Roscommon-Galway but I worked with the former Minister for the betterment of our county and constituency. The reality is we have lost our senior Minister. There is one person I blame for that and it is the Taoiseach because he obviously expressed no confidence in Deputy Naughten. He may have thrown Deputy Naughten under the bus but I remind the Taoiseach that the bus is still rolling down the road and he is wandering all over the road. This could be the rock on which he perishes. We have still made no progress on broadband, the constituency of Roscommon-Galway needs its national roll-out more than any other constituency in the country. It is causing small businesses to leave our constituency.

I regret what has happened. We had a good working relationship. I have known Deputy Naughten and his family for many years and it is a very sad time for them but there are many more questions to be asked about this scenario. Of course, it is all built around calling a general election and the Taoiseach is behind that.

Deputy David Cullinane: It must be said that this is quite unprecedented. Many Members came into the House with questions they wished to put to the former Minister, Deputy Naughten, not only on meetings he had but more broadly on the broadband scheme. Deputy Naughten

made a quite incredible statement. He was very angry and upset, did not take any questions, resigned as a Government Minister and left. He said he was essentially told to resign by the Taoiseach who does not have confidence in him. We do not know why the Taoiseach did not have confidence in the former Minister. He made a very explicit attack on the Taoiseach, referring to opinion polls and other matters. This is unprecedented.

We are left without answers to questions we have asked. It is important the Taoiseach comes in. I see that the Chief Whip had discussions with the spokesperson for Fianna Fáil on what might be next. He has not had any discussions with Sinn Féin, the Labour Party or anyone else. He seems to be running around like a headless chicken, and was probably caught unawares, as many on the Government benches were. It is only now that we have two senior Ministers in the House. We have never seen anything as chaotic as this in the House. It is quite disgraceful how this has been handled.

It is crucial that the Taoiseach comes to the Chamber today to clarify why he had no confidence in Deputy Naughten as Minister and the nature of that discussion and to clarify other matters. There are questions that need to be put and answered today. The only person who is now in a position to give us answers is the Taoiseach.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, to respond to the debate. I will then call the Government Chief Whip who has a business proposal to put to the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Kyne): I think I speak for everyone on this side of the House when I say that politics can be a cruel and frankly rotten business at times. While many Members who spoke after the former Minister, Deputy Naughten, paid tribute to him and wished him well, the fact is some did not. Some Members could not even manage to do that, and wish someone from this House well as they resign.

Deputy Joe McHugh: That is where we are at.

Deputy Seán Kyne: Sometimes I just wonder about the camaraderie in this place.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Yes.

Deputy Paul Murphy: He resigned because of Varadkar.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Sure the Taoiseach sacked him.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I sat here, close to Deputy Naughten, to support him as a colleague in the Department and as Minister of State since May 2016. I am as shocked as everybody by his statement. I take this opportunity to wish him well and, on this occasion, to think of his family and his mother. We all know the trials and tribulations of politics and how it can affect family life. I also acknowledge all those who support him in his constituency who will be upset for him on a personal basis and politically this evening.

Having worked with him since May 2016, I know his energy and his commitment not only to his own constituency but to rural Ireland. He has emphasised that on so many occasions and in all our work and dealings with the Department. I have attended many, if not the majority, of the management board meetings with him and all senior officials, including the Secretary General, which receives the updates from all the different sections. All Ministers and former

Ministers know how these things work. They would have gone through all the latest developments and the delays and frustrations he has had with the delays in broadband. His absolute commitment to broadband has been acknowledged by many Members at various times during parliamentary questions. He raised it so often in opposition and he really wanted the job in order to deliver broadband to rural Ireland. His commitment in recent times has been to the 540,000 homes and premises which were slated under the national broadband plan to get a high fibre broadband connection.

There is a capital provision in this year's budget under the communications section of €75 million. I was at the pre-budget discussions and negotiations with the former Minister, Deputy Naughten, and the Minister for Finance. Based on those discussions, I would have anticipated that once the plan was signed, as expected, later this year, there would be extra funds to ensure it would be rolled out from 2019. His commitment to this project has been absolute.

Members have talked about the number of people who are not connected. As the former Minister stated so many times, seven out of ten houses have access and by the end of this year, it will be eight out of ten houses. Much of that is driven by the national broadband plan. Members have said Eir has not done its work for a long number of years. However, because of the national broadband plan, it has signed up to the 300,000 commitment contract the former Minister signed it up to in order to ensure that it delivers to those houses and that progress is made and that if it does not deliver the State will fine it.

We should also acknowledge that this process started prior to the former Minister's appointment, in December 2015. It has been a prolonged, difficult process. I shared his frustration, as we all did, in regard to those people who continue to wait for connections in rural Ireland. However, from all my dealings with the former Minister, Deputy Naughten, he has shown a commitment to rural Ireland, to his constituency, counties Roscommon and Galway, and to the west of Ireland. People have had strong debates here about climate change and similar matters and I know what Deputy Naughten wanted to achieve in his Department and what he was striving to do. He had a real commitment to this whole area. It is regrettable that despite that energy and commitment that he felt the need to resign.

On a personal and professional level, I wish him the best of luck for the future. It has been a privilege to work with him in the Department over the last few years. I know the pressures he has been under for the last number of days. I attended the press conference with him yesterday. It goes with political life and we appreciate that. I know there are questions that he hoped to answer in regard to other matters and I am sure there will be another opportunity for that. The Whip will be able to outline that at another stage. I take this opportunity on behalf of the Government, before others arrive, to wish him well professionally and personally. I feel for him at this time, as a colleague and as a friend.

An Ceann Comhairle: I think it can be said on behalf of all Members that this is a sad occasion.

Deputies: Hear, hear

Deputy Brian Stanley: Absolutely.

An Ceann Comhairle: All of us who have known Deputy Naughten have known him to be a man who was decent, committed and a man of integrity. Whatever policy differences people might have, I do not think anyone could challenge that.

11 October 2018

I call on the Government Chief Whip to make a proposal on further business.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise Members that in light of Deputy Naughten's resignation as Minister, the Taoiseach has agreed to make a statement pursuant to Standing Order 45 in the House at 4.10 p.m. Normal business will continue following the conclusion of the Taoiseach's statement, if that is agreeable.

An Ceann Comhairle: I propose that we suspend the House for ten minutes until the Taoiseach arrives.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will there be questions following the statement?

An Ceann Comhairle: We will see at 4.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4 p.m. and resumed at 4.23 p.m.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: There has been a delay in the Taoiseach's arrival. I propose we suspend the House until 4.30 p.m., at which time the Taoiseach will be present.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: We have been asked to come back in here after a suspension of ten minutes for a statement from the Taoiseach. We should consider, if we are to suspend for a further period, whether there will be an opportunity, maybe of five minutes for each grouping to respond to the Taoiseach's statement. The groupings need not take the five minutes, if the Taoiseach has something underwhelming to say. However, we definitely should be given the opportunity to respond to what he has to say.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Hear, hear.

An Ceann Comhairle: Let me make it clear the Taoiseach has requested to make a statement under Standing Order 45, which does not normally provide for further debate. However, it is at the discretion of the Ceann Comhairle that other statements may be made, so I would propose that five minutes would be provided to each Opposition group to make a statement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Sitting suspended at 4.22 p.m. and resumed at 4.33 p.m.

Resignation of Minister: Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Taoiseach to make a statement in accordance with Standing Order 45.

The Taoiseach: The national broadband plan is the Government's plan to provide high-speed broadband to every home, farm and business in the country. It will be the biggest investment in rural Ireland ever and I believe that in time it will be seen to be as significant as rural electrification was decades ago, allowing people in all parts of Ireland to access public services

online and trade in the digital economy.

Since this Government of Fine Gael and Independents came to office, just over two years ago, the number of homes, farms and businesses connected to broadband has increased from 52% to over 75%. My aim is to get to 100%. Therefore, the overriding concern for me as Taoiseach and for the Government is to provide this infrastructure to the 540,000 homes, housing over 1 million people who have been waiting for it for far too long. This is my only interest when it comes to this matter.

In the interest of full disclosure, I want to put on the record of the Dáil that I met Mr. David McCourt on one occasion last March in the United States at a public event with the media present when I presented him with the Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, St. Patrick's Day Science Medal. This was reported in the media at the time. We did not discuss the national broadband programme.

Yesterday evening, I sought a meeting with the former Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten, at which I asked him to outline to me his interactions with Mr. David McCourt. I was satisfied with the explanations he gave. He subsequently contacted me, by telephone, shortly before midnight last night to inform me he had just remembered that he had a private dinner with Mr. McCourt in Mr. McCourt's home in 2017. This was organised by the Minister of State, Deputy Pat Breen, who was also present. Deputy Naughten suggested that, in order to protect the national broadband plan project, he be reshuffled to another Ministry or that responsibility for broadband be assigned to another Minister. I said that I would reflect on that overnight and meet him in the morning. I met Deputy Naughten this morning and during the meeting he informed me that he had at least three other private dinners with Mr. McCourt. There were no officials present and there are no minutes. He had not informed me of these additional meetings, either when we met yesterday or when we met last night.

I have no doubt that his intentions were honourable at all points but I do believe he left himself open to allegations of a conflict of interest and an inappropriate relationship with Mr. McCourt, which could have in turn brought the process into question, thus potentially jeopardising the project in its entirety. Ultimately, as Minister he had a decision-making role and it would have been his responsibility to bring to the Cabinet the memo to gain the approval of the Government for the awarding of any contract. As a result of this, I asked him to reflect on his position. He asked that he be allowed to explain his position to the Dáil, to which I agreed. I have since received his resignation in writing and I have accepted it.

I am assigning the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Richard Bruton, on a temporary basis to the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

I have sought a report from Mr. Peter Smyth, the independent process auditor for the national broadband programme, in order to assess whether or not the process has been compromised.

I deeply regret that these events have happened but I believe that, in resigning, Denis has acted in the public interest. I am determined to see the national broadband plan through to completion.

Sometimes there are days when I have to make decisions that may cause deep personal distress to others but are necessary for the good of the country. Today is one of those days. I have known Denis for over 20 years. We were in Young Fine Gael together and I have had nothing but respect for him as a person and a politician. I know today is a difficult day for Denis and

those close to him. However, my job as Taoiseach must always be to put the public interest first.

I thank the House for its patience and understanding regarding this unexpected turn of events today.

An Ceann Comhairle: I propose that we hear each of the parties and groups in opposition.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is with some sadness that we heard today of the resignation of Deputy Denis Naughten. I have known Denis personally for quite a long time. I knew his late father, who was a Member of this House also. Obviously, it is a very difficult and sad day for the Deputy and his family and supporters.

That said, we did raise very legitimate issues over the rolling out of the national broadband plan, which was announced as far back as 2012. Precious little progress has been made. The tendering has been tortuously slow and the result is that many people have been deprived of broadband. More fundamentally, we raised yesterday a very basic question. The Taoiseach confirmed today in his remarks that Deputy Naughten, as Minister, would have been the ultimate decisionmaker in terms of bringing a memo to the Cabinet with a view to having a decision made on the tender on the bid. That is the very point I made yesterday in this House, and I was attacked for making it. I made it in good faith. Officeholders and the decisionmaker on such a substantial tender have to be insulated from any perception of favouritism or of being open to lobbying or being canvassed. That was the context of the dinner in the United States and of people's reservations and misgivings about it. The Taoiseach has now given the Dáil additional information on a further series of meetings with Mr. McCourt.

We continue to have very significant issues around the bidding process, not least being all the transactions that seem to have taken place, coincidentally, in terms of change of ownership. There has been a fundamental change in the composition of the consortium. The original Enet bid and the make-up of that consortium do not bear any real or substantial resemblance to the final consortium that is now in play for the award of the tender. While there might have been a certain desperation on the part of the Government - I do not know the motivation behind it - to get some type of deal over the line given the delay, it is extremely important that we get it right and that what is happening here is proper. That is the fundamental point and the House must uphold it. That is and will continue to be our focus in the coming weeks.

I recall meeting the officials in the Department in the aftermath of the 2016 general election when we were all exercised about broadband. They were at pains to point out the sensitivity regarding this issue. They said they would be issuing the tender documents around that time. That is why many of us were flabbergasted that the Minister, the ultimate decision maker, would meet with a lead member of one of the consortia. Not only I but many people from different perspectives could not get our heads around that. It is a very difficult day personally for Deputy Denis Naughten, but given what the Taoiseach has said and in light of all that has now been revealed in terms of the series of private dinners and so forth, I believe he made the right decision. I do not know the reason or motivation but there are serious questions about this bidding and tendering process from our perspective, particularly the latter part of it. There was the exit of SIRO and Eir, it was down to one bidder, the composition of the bidder changed hands, people were selling shares and so forth. This does not sit well when one examines it, even if there may be explanations. There were new players coming in and other players leaving.

I only have five minutes and I appreciate the time. However, when members of the Opposi-

tion raise legitimate questions they should be listened to and perhaps answers could be given or there could be some effort to try to understand where people are coming from in trying to get to the bottom of these issues.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This is a quite a fiasco. In a depressing way, it serves to underscore the unhealthy and inappropriate relationships in what I classify as the insider class in this State, the cosy dining relationships between influential and wealthy people and senior politicians. Then the same people bid for business contracts and the relationships unfold. Tribunal after tribunal has demonstrated the toxicity of those relationships-----

Deputy Michael Creed: The Deputy only takes notice of the outcomes of some of them.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----yet they prevail. The Taoiseach said that he feels compassion for Deputy Denis Naughten and I understand that on a human level, but the real casualties here are, first, the 542,000 households that still await this fabled broadband and, second, the process itself. The Taoiseach has conceded that the process may well be compromised. He will ask Mr. Peter Smyth to carry out a review. Given that the Minister had repeated dining engagements with Mr. McCourt, there is no doubt that the process has been compromised. It is now simply a question of degree. Of course, due process will be observed and the review will be carried out. However, the terrible vista under the Taoiseach's watch is that his Minister's relationship with the sole remaining bidder might have compromised the entire exercise and set the clock back to zero. That is profoundly shocking.

The Taoiseach mentioned that the Minister of State, Deputy Breen, was also party to these arrangements. Can the Taoiseach confirm that he is still a Minister of State?

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Has the Taoiseach spoken to him? What is the situation with Deputy Breen? Deputy Denis Naughten has resigned.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no provision for questions and answers.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I will pose the question and the Taoiseach might avail of the earliest opportunity to answer it. There was no option for Deputy Denis Naughten - it was either walk or be told to leave. That much is clear. However, there is still a question regarding the Minister of State. In fact there is a question around the entire Administration at this stage. Day by day it becomes more ragged at the edges. What is happening with the Minister of State? When will the review process by Mr. Peter Smyth be concluded?

Finally, the Taoiseach may have made the right decision after the midnight call from Deputy Denis Naughten, but the cosy nudge and wink politics between the Irish political establishment and very wealthy people is clearly alive and well.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Politics is a human endeavour and on a personal basis this is a difficult day for Deputy Denis Naughten and his friends and family. After the mire of controversy more than 20 years ago that led to the Moriarty tribunal, we repeatedly set out strict codes of conduct for how to handle any contract of the State and certainly any major procurement, right down to individual projects. It is crystal clear to everybody that decision makers, and ultimately the Minister is responsible in a Department, cannot have direct contact with bidders. In the last 24 hours I spoke to a person who was involved with procurement. The person said

that they would actually cross the road if they saw somebody involved in the bidding process coming towards them. That level of care has been seared into the public service in respect of the awarding of contracts as a result of the very damaging things that happened in the State 20 years ago. It was disquieting, to put it at its mildest, that there was this series of contacts. On a personal basis, I know Deputy Denis Naughten to be a most honourable man and I have known him for many years. He did the right thing by standing aside.

The Taoiseach said that rural broadband, the project of the national broadband plan, is the most important infrastructure project for the Government. It is the most important infrastructure project for Ireland, particularly rural Ireland, but where are we now? As I said last year, allowing 300,000 of the potential clients of the broadband plan to be taken out by Eir was a fatal blow to the plan. Subsequent to that many of the bidders withdrew. The Taoiseach is left with a consortium that resembles Lanigan's ball because at any given point one is not sure who is part of it. I was really confused when the lead bidder, Enet, suddenly became a supplier and the lead bidder became a consortium led by a US-based finance house. For the people of Ireland, the most fundamental question is: what is the current position of the broadband plan? The Taoiseach's response so far is that a review of the probity of the process to date is to be carried out by an ethics person. That is not good enough. There must be a clear direction from the Taoiseach very quickly on how this plan is to be put back in place. There is no need for an expert in probity.

The Tánaiste is sitting beside the Taoiseach. It is odd that this morning the line taken by the Tánaiste was strongly in defence of what happened despite that the Taoiseach effectively fired former Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten, last night when he asked him to consider his position. We now need to accept that what has happened to date has undermined the broadband plan and we need to work collectively to get the plan back on track. The most important outcome in terms of this debacle must be that the many people in rural Ireland, including in my constituency and across every county, who are crying out for equality in terms of broadband connectivity will be connected. I hope that Deputy Bruton, who has been appointed as Minister on a temporary basis, will quickly acquaint himself with all of the elements and come back to the House in the coming days with a set of solutions regarding the provision of rural broadband.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am sharing time with Deputy Boyd Barrett. I have no personal animosity towards former Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten, but if what the Taoiseach has said is correct - and I have no reason to believe it is not - then his position was untenable. The fact that the former Minister had multiple private dinners with Mr. McCourt and did not disclose them to the public or this House on the many occasions he was asked about his contact with Mr. McCourt meant his position was untenable. This raises a much broader question about the relationships between the economic elite in this country and some top politicians and the ability of the former to have access to the latter. It definitely raises questions in respect of the Minister of State, Deputy Breen, whom the Taoiseach referred to as having organised the dinner. Did the Minister of State also attend the dinner with the then Minister and Mr. McCourt?

The Taoiseach referred to the need to put the public interest first. Above all, this relates to the question of broadband. In order to put the public interest first in the context of the national broadband plan, we need to call a halt to the fiasco that has been this process. It has utterly failed in terms of delivering value for money and delivery of access to broadband for people in rural areas. It should have been provided as a public utility by a public body. This is the process that should now take place.

The other fiasco that should now be put out of its misery, in my opinion, is the Government. The Government now has no effective majority. If Fianna Fáil abstain, if the so-called Independents vote against the Government and if Deputy Denis Naughten comes to the Opposition side, the Government does not have a majority. We know from what happened last week in terms of the budget that the Government also has no orientation to dealing with the fundamental crisis people face, namely, that relating to housing. This is the reason it passed a landlords' budget and the reason it did effectively nothing in terms of the question of social housing. In my opinion, this Dáil should now, as quickly as is possible, pass the abortion legislation and should then be dissolved and we should have an election and let the people decide.

Deputy Finian McGrath: What did Deputy Paul Murphy mean when he referred to “so-called Independents?”

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I came into the House with an open mind. I do not have evidence to question the integrity of former Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten, but what the Taoiseach has revealed about private meetings between the former Minister and Mr. McCourt means there was no doubt but that he had to resign. It is somewhat shocking that it has taken until now to reveal that these meetings took place. Despite the fiasco regarding the rural broadband plan and the tendering process we are only now discovering that these meetings took place and that the Minister of State, Deputy Breen, also attended those meetings, which means he also has very serious questions to answer. It is clear that the Enet bid is hopelessly compromised on the basis of these meetings and other issues that have been raised, with one part of the consortium being investigated in the context of the sale of Siteserv to the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, IBRC, and legal action being taken in the United States against another part of that consortium regarding its communications with the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund while it was involved in negotiations with that body. The whole process is hopelessly compromised.

The Taoiseach stated that he is as committed to rural broadband as the State was to rural electrification. I put it to him that if rural electrification had been handled in the shambolic way in which rural broadband has been handled, we would still be reading by candlelight. The plan is a disaster. Rural electrification was provided through a State company. That is how we transformed this country. The shambolic process of privatisation, outsourcing and the inevitable problem of the relationships of private sector interests with the State has once again been revealed. We saw it revealed in the context of the Moriarty tribunal and in the relationship between Governments and the IBRC. Incredibly, the more things change, the more things stay the same. We now see that again in the context of the national broadband plan. The Government has to go in order that these issues can be debated by the people.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The real losers in this process are the people of rural Ireland, particularly those who do not have broadband and may now never get it. These same people would also have lost out if the Government had proceeded with the current plan in that the Irish people would have ended up paying through the nose for a system that probably would not work. I agree with previous speakers that the Government needs to implement a rural broadband system that will be in the ownership of the people and will be for the people, not the wealthy and other individuals who have a direct line to Ministers.

The Taoiseach stated that he met Mr. McCourt in New York. Is it likely that over the next few days we will hear of further meetings between Mr. McCourt and the Taoiseach and other Ministers in this Government, which appears to be the way in terms of the broadband process? The Taoiseach stood by former Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten, when he said that he had no

part in the discussions on the matter and that his officials were making the decisions. We all know that is not how the system works. A secondary school student knows that a Minister is a corporation sole and that he or she is responsible for everything that his or her Department does. However, the Taoiseach and his Government appear not to know that. We need a process the people of rural Ireland can stand by, one that looks after and protects them. Unfortunately, this Government will not do that.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I am not going to try to defend the mistakes made by former Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten. One of the most nauseating aspects of this strange place is the headhunting that occurs. More often than not, it is linked to political expediency rather than the serious problem of how the system operates. Personal attacks in the context of head-hunting, when there is so much more to an issue, are not nice.

Deputy Michael Creed: What about Nóirín O'Sullivan?

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow Deputy Wallace to continue without interruption, please.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Government threw Deputy Fitzgerald under the bus. We were very critical of her as Minister for Justice and Equality but we did not go after her head. The third interim report of the disclosures tribunal was published earlier by Mr. Justice Charleton. It is an excellent report. It does no harm to Deputy Fitzgerald or to the Comptroller and Auditor General - the same Comptroller and Auditor General that the Government allowed the Department of Finance and the then Minister for Finance to challenge.

He did a wonderful job on his investigation into how the process was handled on Project Eagle and he got bugger all support from the Government. What the Government has done has changed bugger all. It can get rid of the former Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten, for making mistakes and it can also get rid of other Ministers but what changes? How are things being done differently? The National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, has cost more than €20 billion but the Government does not want to know and is prepared to turn a blind eye to it. The malpractice is frightening and the Government does not want to know.

I gave the Taoiseach the benefit of the doubt and I still respect him but the Government's failure to deal with the housing crisis is mind-boggling. The way the Government is approaching the crisis will not sort it out and is unfair to the people of Ireland. I honestly believe the Taoiseach should dissolve this Parliament, call an election and let the Irish people decide where we will go from here. God knows what the mix will be afterwards but the Taoiseach should give people a chance to decide. This has been a dog's dinner of a place since 2016. The confidence and supply arrangement is nonsense, rubbish. Fine Gael could even form a proper coalition with Fianna Fáil or Sinn Féin afterwards but it is in the interests of the people that the Government go to the country and let it decide. This is the craziest building on the planet.

Deputy Barry Cowen: We need a dress code in here.

Deputy Michael Harty: This is an extraordinary afternoon. The additional information about three meetings comes as another shock. I assume the former Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten, assured the Taoiseach that there was no impropriety in what was discussed at the dinners. However, the perception is that influence could have been exerted on the allocation of the contracts. If that is the case, and we have not yet heard from the former Minister about the issue, it made his position untenable and we have to accept that. Surely the position of

the consortium must also be called into question because if the Taoiseach contends the former Minister acted in an inappropriate manner, he must also believe that the consortium acted in an inappropriate manner and can no longer remain as the bidder for the national broadband plan. That would leave rural Ireland waiting for broadband for many years to come, which would be a most unfortunate outcome of this process.

Also, if the Taoiseach believes Deputy Naughten acted with impropriety, he must also believe that those who arranged the meetings acted inappropriately. This calls into question the position of the Minister of State, Deputy Pat Breen, a constituency colleague of mine. I would not attack the Minister of State on a personal level but if he has been involved in this process, he also has questions to answer. Most important, the Taoiseach has questions to answer on his ability to continue to lead this Government in a cohesive manner. His position has been undermined in this process as well. The issues are much wider than rural broadband and the former Minister, Deputy Naughten. They go to the heart of Government and the Taoiseach must explain how he can continue to govern in a cohesive manner.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: On a personal level this is obviously a difficult day for Deputy Naughten and his family. He did not have any option but to resign given the information that we now have. I question the Peter Smyth report process and what exactly Mr. Smyth will examine. I echo the point made by Deputy Harty. I cannot make any sense of the consortium that has been in place since July. It raises obvious questions, including why the other two consortia dropped out of the tender process. What will Mr. Peter Smyth examine? Does it not raise questions that the remaining consortium is made up of subcontractors, including Nokia and Actavo, formerly Siteserv, that have no equity, or that the main bidder became a partner? None of this makes sense. It will be important to find out whether the previous consortia had the same access to the former Minister? That will tell us if there was an issue with the process early on because the previous consortia cited regulatory and governance issues. It is important that we get to that.

I also echo the point made about probity in connection with the Minister of State, Deputy Pat Breen. We have to hear from the Taoiseach on that. Gone are the days when decisions were made based on personal relationships. We put systems in place for very good reasons. Those systems must be abided by and we must have a transparent process that we and members of the public can have confidence in. Failing that, we will repeat the mistakes of the past. Please let us learn from history in respect of this experience and previous experiences. We need to hear from the Taoiseach on what this process involves. It must be a wider process in regard to engagement with the House because all of us are interested in it. There is not one Deputy who is not interested in the roll-out of the national broadband plan. We all agree that it is essential but it must be done in a way that people can have confidence in it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We all have personal sympathy for the former Minister, Deputy Naughten, but there was an immediate and collective realisation in this Chamber, when the Taoiseach detailed in two or three sentences four previous dinners, that this was not optics and the Minister had to resign. That is regrettable for him and his family but there was no doubt or question about that when we heard that. I do not know if the Taoiseach will be able to answer the question that arises concerning the Minister of State, Deputy Pat Breen. Whatever about the propriety of arranging the dinner in the first place, when the Minister of State became aware that there was controversy surrounding the dinner in Manhattan, why did he not inform the Taoiseach or the Dáil? That is the question the Taoiseach must answer first and foremost. The failure to reveal that information surely means the Minister of State's position is in question.

The Department also has questions to answer. My experience in a similar role and position, about which I spoke earlier, was that the Department guarded me every moment of the day and night. Who knew about the other dinners? Did the Department know? Everyone asked at the time why the Department allowed the Minister to go to the dinner in New York? What were officials thinking? I am interested to find out what the Department knew because, as Deputy Catherine Murphy correctly said, we must learn the lessons from the Moriarty tribunal. While I am not drawing a direct analogy because the circumstances are different, that Department, more than any other, should finally answer some questions. In my experience, the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources was incredibly sensitive to the issue of processing tenders.

More than anything else, the question that now arises is what will happen next? I suggest that after the Dáil adjourns, we have a meeting of the Business Committee because we should have a special Dáil session on Tuesday to debate an issue raised by several previous speakers, namely, what will happen to the national broadband plan. To be honest, from what we have heard it is incredibly difficult to see how the plan can be delivered in its current format. We should give ourselves the weekend to consider the complexity of that issue and come back and debate it on Tuesday. Rather than leaving it to Mr. Smyth to investigate the issue of propriety, we should consider what we are doing with rural broadband. As I said earlier, that is the key question we must address.

An Ceann Comhairle: Under Standing Order 45, the Business Committee can consider the Deputy's proposal as soon as possible.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Schools Building Projects Status

Deputy Clare Daly: It is a hard act to follow. The unsuitable accommodation in the school has been well-flagged with the Minister and his Department. It is ironic that in the aftermath of Storm Ali conditions deteriorated further. The issue was raised in the Seanad yet here we are a few weeks later on the eve of Storm Callum. Parents and pupils are wondering if they will have a school to go into at all because 58% of the school, which accommodates hundreds of students, 30 teachers and six SNAs, is housed in 20-year-old crumbling prefab buildings, four of which had to be evacuated in the last storm. These buildings are beyond repair. There are holes and gaps in the roof, fallen gutters and exposed electrical wires. It is beyond belief that children are sitting with coats on and cannot get warm in the winter and are too hot in the summer. There needs to be action. The report on the technical site visit that was made is supposed to be in its final stages. We have not been given a clear indication of what will be done. They need their new premises.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It is freezing cold in the prefabs. Parents are concerned that the coming storm will do away with the prefabs altogether. That might not necessarily be a bad thing. They leak when it rains and they are impossible to heat because the electrics are overloaded. The parents dread sending their kids to school if they think it is going to be cold because their kids' teeth will be chattering during the day. Over 50% of the school's children are accommodated in prefabs that were put in as a temporary measure in 2000. I am inundated, as

I am sure my constituency colleagues are, with requests from parents. The results of the technical review have not been made known to the school. It is still waiting on it. Another storm is approaching and parents are fearful about sending their children to the school, which is the only school they can attend in Balbriggan. It is a place where the population is growing. It is an issue that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I visited the school on a number of occasions. All our colleagues know the school. Since 2003, the Department has spent €1.16 million on prefabs. We would have a new school built with that. The school is unhealthy and unsafe for the kids. My colleagues have mentioned the technical assessments. The technical assessment was carried out in February. I submitted another parliamentary question to the Minister in September. The reply stated that a technical site visit was carried out. We know that. It happened in February. The parents and the principal, Pauline Costello, and her team are losing patience. They are exasperated by this. We need to get a resolution. It is a cross-party issue as well as an issue for those of no party. Representatives from the Dublin Fingal constituency want a proper school facility for the kids and the staff of St. Molaga's. It needs to be fast-tracked. I hope the Minister can give the commitment to us today that after all this time waiting - some of the prefabs have been there for 19 years - we can move ahead with a proper permanent building.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank Deputy O'Reilly for submitting the Topical Issue matter in my absence last week. I appreciate my constituency colleagues facilitating me. I echo the sentiments of my colleagues. I found myself thinking about what I was going to say. I have been in Third World schools and they are of a better standard than the prefabs in St. Molaga's. It is essential that the fast-track process for the school is completed and that we can somehow manage to get a plan. If we have to copy and paste it, let us copy and paste it. There are so many school extensions or permanent prefab replacement programmes across the State, which we have spearheaded over the last seven years, that I am sure it would be possible in this instance to complete it. The weather forecast for this evening is very windy with strong to gale force winds with severe gusts. The school is in a coastal location. It is in an orange alert zone. The Department has issued warnings to those schools to be vigilant. As Deputies Clare Daly and O'Reilly said, I am pretty sure the parents' concerns are justified in worrying about whether those prefabs will be there in the morning.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I thank the Deputies for raising the issue. I understand the concern. It has also been raised by Senator James Reilly. There is acute concern. The Deputies are right there was a visit by the Department to the school in February. That was followed up by a technical site visit in April. The agreement has been worked out on the exact scale of what is required, namely, an 18 primary classroom and two ASD classroom units. The work has been ongoing in doing the masterplanning of the site, which I understand is complex. The purpose of the building project is to provide additional accommodation as well as the replacement of the current temporary accommodation. The development of the project brief must have regard to the continuance of the existing school while construction is under way. Due to complexities of the school's existing site, issues to be considered in the development of the project brief included identifying the preferred location of the buildings having regard to the challenging site, decanting considerations and construction traffic access. The project brief is expected to be completed by the end of next week, having regard to the complex technical assessment process involved.

The Department will be in contact with the school with regard to the next steps. The completion of the project brief will facilitate progression of the project into the architectural plan-

ning process, which includes the appointment of a design team. It is in a position to move forward. The project brief will be completed at the end of next week and it will then move into the architectural planning phase. I am acutely aware that the school suffered damage to three of the old-stock prefabs due to adverse weather conditions. Repair works were being carried out on those. In addition, my Department gave approval for additional temporary accommodation, pending the delivery of the major project. That included two mainstream classrooms and one special education teaching space. Clearly the priority now is to get the permanent project under way. I assure Deputies the Department will endeavour to have that proceeded with as rapidly as possible.

Deputy Clare Daly: Obviously, the Minister has a different definition of the word “rapid” from anyone else. One can talk about the site being complex and requiring a careful master plan but the site has not changed. It is the same site. The school was opened in 1987 when Balbriggan had a population of 5,000. It now has a population of 22,000. We are the ones telling the Minister that they need a permanent site. For us to be told it is complicated and we need to look at it is really not good enough. It could be the case that after the storm tonight the school may not even be there and that the inadequate situation they are in, which is appalling, might not even be there to be dealt with. We need the plan yesterday and unfortunately I do not think the Minister’s answers are adequate.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: The Minister’s answer is not good enough. Deputy Clare Daly is right. There is a really strong possibility, given the poor weather that is forecast, that parts of the school will be unusable. The prefabs are practically uninhabitable as it is. I do not think the Minister has any words of comfort to give to the parents other than they must wait. Telling the parents, the teachers and the principal, Ms Costello, that they must wait is not good enough. They are in intolerable conditions but all the Minister has said is that those intolerable conditions are set to continue. A plan must be put in place because we could be dealing with a serious situation. Some 52% of the children are in those prefabricated buildings, which are already uninhabitable.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Like my colleagues, I am disappointed with the response. The Minister has stated the technical assessment process will be completed by the end of next week but I wonder if that answer was given because the matter was raised here today. This concerns all of us, party politics and affiliations aside. I do not know whether the Minister has visited the school but if not, I invite him to come with us to look at the school. There are other schools in north Dublin that require attention, but this school and Hedgestown national school are in desperate condition. The response is completely inadequate and I ask the Minister to redouble his efforts and tell his officials this matter must be fast-tracked because his response gives no comfort to anyone.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I have some photographs that the principal was kind enough to send to all the Members. We are frequently tweeted at about this by people. On the last occasion, during Storm Ali, the roof almost completely came off, the skylights fell in and the classrooms had to be abandoned. The storm this evening and tomorrow has potential to cause significant damage to these 18-year-old prefabricated buildings.

When I was elected in 2011, I remember we replaced the prefabricated buildings in Scoil an Duinnínigh in Kinsealy, which had been in prefabricated buildings for 24 years. Successive Governments had failed the community.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is not correct.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I would hate to think this school would be left any longer. It is not acceptable any more.

Deputy Richard Bruton: While I understand the Deputies' concerns, the project brief is an important phase in any construction project. There is no way to avoid appointing a design team. A design will have to be drawn up and planning permission must be obtained, which has its own process to go through. The Department will have to be satisfied the design achieves the objectives. We do not want to have any second-rate construction here and, therefore, the process must be completed. As I said, it involves construction of 12 new classrooms, two autism spectrum disorder, ASD, units, as well as refurbishment of existing accommodation.

This project is proceeding to the next stage. The Department seeks to minimise the delay in all those stages but it must be robust in each of the processes. We do not always control issues such as site conditions, planning delays and so on. While the Department will seek to push this project on as quickly as possible, I cannot give timelines or dates. I am sure the Deputies will understand these processes must be completed. To say the answer is not adequate ignores the fact that this is the way we do every school project. We must do it in a robust way but we will seek to complete each of those stages as rapidly as possible in view of the acute concern that the Deputies have expressed. I also acknowledge the concern of parents, principals and staff alike.

Special Educational Needs Service Provision

Deputy Joan Burton: On Monday evening, Deputies Jack Chambers, Coppinger and I attended a packed meeting of parents, professionals, education providers, the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, and public representatives in the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Blanchardstown, Dublin 15, representing people from Dublin 15 and Dublin 7. The committee which called the meeting comprises a group of parents of children with autism and professionals who have worked with children with autism in the area for more than ten years.

The parents who called the meeting on Monday night in Blanchardstown are firmly of the view that an innovation is required in the form of an ASD special school for Dublin 15. Dublin 15 and the adjacent parts of Dublin 7 along the Navan Road have a population of approximately 120,000, which is considerably bigger than either Limerick or Waterford, but there is no special school for children with severe ASD. There are 32 primary schools and 11 secondary schools in Dublin 15, but at primary level there are only 18 ASD classes with approximately 108 students and only eight secondary school ASD classes with approximately 32 students. The parents firmly believe that a special school is required for a portion of children with ASD who have complex presentations of autism and who present with significant needs. The majority of children with moderate to severe autism are non-verbal, are unable to cope with mainstream classroom settings and do not benefit from integration. There was a unanimous opinion on that at the meeting of more than 150 people.

Will the Minister agree to meet representatives of the parents and the professionals at the meeting and the local Deputies to enable us to have a discussion about when we can get this urgently required school for children with ASD?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Like Deputy Burton, I attended a meeting of parents, profession-

als and people involved in this new campaign. Many of the parents said that evening that six year old children had been expelled from a school through no fault of their own but because they have severe behavioural difficulties. As a country we have progressed in this area over the past 20 years, with ASD units established and special needs assistants provided for, but ASD, as the name suggests, is a spectrum disorder. With children with moderate to severe diagnosis, sometimes the classification we have in our education system does not match their requirements. We have had a policy of inclusion from the Department but that has resulted in some instances in the exclusion of many children from exercising their right to an education.

Parents in Dublin West want an autism special school established in order that there is a proper educational healthcare mix of occupational therapists, teachers and speech and language therapists in order that the children's behavioural difficulties can be dealt with and their educational rights can be provided for. To hear parents saying their child was put on a reduced day, or that their child was eventually expelled because the education system we have cannot cater for them, where their child is then left lingering at home without any hope, prospect or opportunity to be the best he or she can be in his or her life, is a tragic circumstance in our education system and it must be rectified. Parents in Dublin West who may want to go to a special school often have to travel more than 30 km. Dublin West is a constituency close to the Minister's, and we have a population the size of many other cities in the country. The parents' campaign should be supported by the Minister and his Department. As Deputy Burton said, the parents would like in the first instance to present the data, facts and their own stories to the Minister in order that his officials can meet and support what the parents are trying to establish and that the children are given the best chance in life. That is what we are looking for and we hope to work with the Minister on it.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter. It is an area in which huge investment has been made in my own time and, to be fair, in that of my predecessors. Since 2011, as Deputy Burton will know, we have increased spending on the support of children with special needs by 43%. It has risen consistently, therefore, even in the most difficult times, to €1.8 billion. It is a provision that is based entirely on the assessment of need, that is, not on any budgetary restrictions. Based on a professional assessment, the NCSE decides how children with ASD should best be provided for. I do not have the figures with me but, roughly speaking, more than 60% are provided for in mainstream classes. The remainder are split evenly between ASD special classes within mainstream schools and special schools. In recent years, however, because of the advice that the inclusion model is the optimal model, the expansion and explosion of provision has been in special classes. The number of special classes has trebled since 2011 and continues to grow every year. It is the NCSE that advises me and the building units of my Department as to the appropriate need. There have not been many additional special schools. I am not aware of any new special school being created in recent times but that is not to say that it cannot be, if the NCSE believes that is the best approach.

The main expansion has been the effort to integrate children with ASD within units in mainstream schools. That is better for their development. If the NCSE advises that a special school would be an alternative placement, then the NCSE, through its special education needs organisers, SENOs, would seek an appropriate placement. The decision has to be made on additional provision year by year. One new power, of which the Deputies will be aware, that we took in the recent Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016 was to give me the power, in certain circumstances and on the advice of the NCSE, to require a school to open an ASD unit where a school may be reluctant to do so.

Deputy Burton is right. There are 18 special ASD units in the area. There will be a need for additional units and we are providing in the 2019 budget for additional ASD classes to be opened throughout the country in areas where they are identified as being needed. I am sure Dublin 15 would be an area where that would be the case. I am not, however, the one who makes the call as to whether a placement for a particular child is best in a special school, a special class or in a mainstream setting. In any event, we provide support, as Deputy Burton knows. In my own relatively short period in the Department, we have appointed 1,800 additional resource teachers and 4,000 additional SNAs to support the integration of children into our school system. We will provide the best support advised by the NCSE and based on the individual assessments of each child. That is what we seek to deliver.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Department has to take responsibility for the education of these children. The parents have no difficulty with the ASD special units. We all know they have done very good work for the children for whom they are appropriate. It must be borne in mind, and this may come as a shock to the Minister, that for the school year 2017-2018 there were, as far as we know, 56 students on the home tuition grant in Dublin 15 and more in Dublin 7. That is an astonishing figure. These are children who have very specific needs. Their school and mainstream teachers are unable to cope with the behavioural issues. These include flight risks, self-harm from time to time, sensory overload - parents stress that in particular - and violent outbursts at times as the children are unable to express themselves effectively. The meeting with parents the other night would have brought tears to the Minister's eyes. I urge him to meet the parents and the professionals. I know that would constitute a change of policy but this is a section of our children. They have been left out and deserve a chance to get the education appropriate to their lives.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It would be worth the Minister's while meeting these parents so that they can describe to him the challenges their children face daily. As Deputy Burton has mentioned, 56 children are on a home tuition grant. Many of them have been excluded by our education system because it is not fit for purpose for them. I recognise there is a policy of inclusion in ASD units and some children thrive within those units. That is not the case for people with severe autism who are non-verbal and are not receiving the appropriate healthcare and educational interventions. Teachers cannot even cope with the difficulties in managing the children in that setting. We need to have a policy response. We are not doing that at present within the current policy construct that we have through the NCSE.

I ask the Minister to meet the parents to see what their proposal is. They want the best for their children. He mentioned the assessment of needs process. We know that takes years. Our whole community healthcare intervention is not appropriate. The parents want the proper mix to be delivered for children with very complex needs. We should not be expelling six year olds from classrooms in primary schools and leaving them on home tuition grants to linger without any opportunity or prospect in life. That is not the Department that the Minister wants to run. A meeting would open his eyes. It certainly opened mine on Monday to see the depth of this problem and the sheer numbers of children left at sea in our education system.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I assure Deputy Jack Chambers that we are providing a policy response all of the time. As I outlined, since 2016 we have delivered 1,800 extra resource teachers, 4,000 extra SNAs, 500 additional ASD units, and 30 additional National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, staff. We strengthened the inclusion service of the NCSE itself to support parents, teachers and students. We have also reformed the way in which resource teachers are allocated to make it more in tune with the needs of pupils, and that is being done

on the advice of the NCSE. We are starting to pilot, and it may include some of the areas mentioned by the Deputies, the integration of certain therapies into schools to deliver additional therapies, be that speech and language or occupational therapy. In addition, this coming year we are commencing the implementation of the NCSE's recent report on how SNAs should be delivered in a broader context of having a regional centre that can provide a range of therapies, including nursing supports and other appropriate supports.

The advice of the NCSE to me has been that this is the way we should develop the suite of policies to support children best. I am always open to policy change but I do have to rely on the NCSE. It has not let us down in respect of the advice and the inclusive way in which it evaluates needs. Here in the House, we have taken additional powers. I now have the power, on the advice of the NCSE, to instruct a school to do things. That is a power we never had before. I am always open to initiatives and, as a result of this debate, I will ask the NCSE to assess the needs in Dublin 15 and adjoining areas, and to look at the proposal coming from the parents.

Medical Products Supply

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ó Caoláin who wishes to discuss with the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, his continuing refusal to accept the BeNeLuxA initiative concerning nusinersen, Spinraza, now that Ireland has joined the initiative. Is the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Finian McGrath, taking this Topical Issue matter?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: May I ask for clarification on why the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, is not here? It is less than half an hour since he was sitting in the front row on the Government side of the House, then he left. It is the Minister, Deputy Harris, who should be taking this Topical Issue matter as the Minister for Health. I say that with no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is my understanding that when a Minister is not in a position to take a Topical Issue matter, he or she informs the Deputy and a Minister with delegated responsibility-----

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I have had no such courtesy extended to me on this Topical Issue matter. I have been in correspondence with the Minister, Deputy Harris, on this matter and I have engaged with him. I am very disappointed that he has failed to present here this afternoon. I will continue, however. The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, is a parent. The Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, is not yet a parent, or so I understand. I hope he will know the joy and the stress of parenthood. I believe he can imagine the distress a parent or parents would struggle with if their child had a life-limiting condition and despite impassioned appeals, their Government and its agencies refused to make a proven, life-saving drug available to their child. Can the Minister of State imagine if it was his child? There are 25 such children across this State, and they and their parents are suffering grievously. I am reliably informed that some 70 people would benefit immediately if this drug was approved. Spinraza, also known as nusinersen, is a first-of-its-kind treatment licensed in the EU to treat spinal muscular atrophy. Spinal muscular atrophy is a rare neuromuscular disorder characterised by loss of motor neurons and progressive muscle wasting which can be fatal. It is fatal. Only today I spoke with a parent who lost a young child and I heard once again the serious pain and hurt that will remain with that gentleman and his family, and many other families, because of the absence of any medicinal support.

The American biopharmaceutical company, Biogen, manufactures nusinersen-Spinraza, but the drug is not available in Ireland. In May 2017 the European Medicines Agency granted market authorisation for Spinraza, and in October 2017 the HSE received a reimbursement application. In December 2017 the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE, completed a health technology assessment of Spinraza and did not recommend reimbursement at the price submitted. The Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, in a reply to me by letter on this issue on 25 September said that he did not have any statutory power or function in terms of reimbursement of medicines. I would ordinarily accept this. However, it is quite clear that the primary obstacle in this instance is price. We have clearly seen this previously with Orkambi and other orphan drugs. Yet again, the patient - and more worryingly in this case - very ill and vulnerable young children - is caught in the middle of a price war between big pharmaceutical companies and the Government.

Significantly, we have been part of the BeNeLuxA initiative since June this year. I do not know if the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Finian McGrath, will be able to elaborate on the text he has been requested to deliver by the Minister, Deputy Harris, but I have questions to ask, now that we are part of the BeNeLuxA initiative. The BeNeLuxA initiative has secured a negotiated arrangement for a significantly reduced cost for the provision of Spinraza. We are now in tandem with Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Austria. We are part of that grouping, and I want to know if we can now be added to the negotiated arrangement for Spinraza? If the answer is “No”, why is this not possible? Has the Department of Health explored joining the arrangement for Spinraza, or endeavoured to establish a new agreement in tandem with either this particular initiative or with other countries? Can the Minister of State update the House today on where the nusinersen or Spinraza process stands and where it is likely to lead us in the short term? We need a result in the short term in this instance.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I apologise for the absence of the Minister, Deputy Harris, who is unavailable this evening. I will represent him in this debate. I wish to thank Deputy Ó Caoláin for raising this very important issue. Spinraza is indicated for the treatment of 5q spinal muscular atrophy, SMA, a disorder characterised by progressive muscle atrophy and weakness. I appreciate that this debilitating and progressive condition places enormous pressure on SMA sufferers and their families and carers and that access to potentially beneficial drug treatments is an extremely important issue for people with SMA. Today, I met a family, Paul and Lorraine O’Malley from Mayo, and their lovely daughter, Grace, and I was really impressed by their compassion, sincerity and their urgent need. It is important that I record that in this House.

As Deputy Ó Caoláin will be aware, Ireland signed the existing BeNeLuxA initiative on pharmaceutical policy on 22 June 2018. This agreement is in line with the Minister for Health’s stated objective to work with other European countries to identify workable solutions in an increasingly challenging environment and to secure timely access for patients to new medicines in an affordable and sustainable way. In July 2018, two members of the BeNeLuxA initiative on pharmaceutical policy, Belgium and the Netherlands, completed a joint negotiation for the reimbursement of Spinraza. However, this joint negotiation process commenced when Ireland had just opened negotiations with Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and Luxembourg with a view to joining the existing collaboration between these four countries. As a candidate country, Ireland was not notified, due to confidentiality arrangements, that negotiations were occurring for the reimbursement of Spinraza, and we were not party to the negotiations and proceedings that occurred.

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

The HSE received an application for the reimbursement of Spinraza in July 2017. The NCPE conducted a health technology assessment on Spinraza and did not recommend the reimbursement of Spinraza at the submitted price. The application for the reimbursement of Spinraza is currently being considered by the technology review committee on rare diseases and the HSE drugs group. It is due to be considered by the HSE leadership team shortly, following which the final decisions will be notified.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Minister of State's response rehashes much of what the Minister, Deputy Harris, put in his letter to me just a few short weeks ago. There is absolutely no question as to the clinical effectiveness of Spinraza. This is a proven medicine and one that has been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency. It is outrageous that we are going through a process that is independent of an exercise that happened to have commenced before we became members of the BeNeLuxA initiative, and that we are not actively and proactively pursuing access to that arrangement. In the reply the Minister of State has just put on the record of the House there is no answer to my question as to whether Ireland can be added to the BeNeLuxA agreement for Spinraza, and if not, why not? Is the door closed to us for some reason?

What are the terms and conditions of our becoming a member of the BeNeLuxA initiative? Were we not to be a beneficiary state, lining ourselves up with those countries for more affordable access to expensive medication? That is why we joined in the first place, and this is an ideal test of the effectiveness of the decision and the arrangement in place.

Despite the talk of decisions to be notified and processes that are under way, this all comes down to pounds and pence or euro and cent. Children's lives are ticking away as we speak. The Minister of State is quite right. He has met one of those families, as he indicates. He has seen, as I have seen, the huge worry and the strain in the eyes of all those parents. Those beautiful children deserve a better response than the "We will see" answer that the Minister of State offered again today. I urge him to use his position at the Cabinet table, special member of same that he is, to press for this immediately.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I do not doubt Deputy Ó Caoláin's sincerity on the issue, particularly on Spinraza as a proven drug. The Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring, and I are on the same page in that regard. The HSE is the decision-making body on the reimbursement of medicines under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. It is the HSE that will make the final decision on whether Spinraza will be reimbursed, taking into consideration the statutory criteria specified under the Act.

I commend Deputy Ó Caoláin on raising this issue. Paul, Lorraine and Grace O'Malley have a very difficult day ahead of them tomorrow in Temple Street Hospital. I wish Grace well with her operation tomorrow.

Again, there is a moral and ethical debate going on here concerning quality of life cost. Price should never be an issue when it comes to children's health. I urge common sense on this issue. I was directly involved in the campaign at the time of the Orkambi debate. We all rallied around the families affected by that. I accept that the Deputy's views are strong and sincere. I know the families are suffering and I will bring all the issues raised back to the Minister, Deputy Harris.

Post Office Closures

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I know that events earlier today have determined that the Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, is here to take this matter. For the record, his area is natural resources, community affairs and digital development. Is that correct?

Deputy Seán Kyne: Yes.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I thank the Minister of State for coming along. The decision to close 159 post offices was taken without consultation with this House, the people's representatives, the Seanad or even county councils throughout the country. A private trade union, the Irish Postmasters Union, IPU, and An Post, a commercial semi-State company, designed a process for the closure of post offices nationwide without any consultation with the people's representatives. I was critical of the then Minister, Deputy Naughten, and the Government generally for allowing this to take place. It is a bad precedent. The IPU did a splendid job on behalf of its members in negotiating a retirement package and it is entitled to do that. An Post is entitled to balance the books because it has a commercial mandate. However, neither of those entities speaks for communities. Neither has the authority to decide what services communities need or aspire to. That is our job, a job that the Minister of State's Government has abdicated.

The Government set up a flawed process whereby it sought to close post offices on the back of a retirement package. While people are quite entitled to apply for the package, and that is fine, a flawed process was applied subsequently. A conurbation with a population of 500 people or more was to have a post office within a radius of 15 km. The bodies I have named determined that themselves. On we went and 159 closures followed. In particular I refer to Cliffoney, Gorteen and Ballinfull, County Sligo. Cliffoney was given a reprieve, even though it falls below the criteria, because common sense prevailed and An Post realised it is a thriving and growing village with a substantial number of people living in it. We did not see that in the cases of Ballinfull or Gorteen.

Here is the most troubling aspect of this. In August, An Post informed people in Ballinfull, to take one example, that they could make submissions for a review up to and including 28 September. They did so. The submission was put together very professionally and ran to 51 pages. It was posted on 27 September. It arrived with An Post on 28 September. Saturday and Sunday passed and, most peculiarly, on the Monday morning they got an email to say they had been unsuccessful. What is more, the decision was taken on 24 September, three days before they had sent their submission and four days before it arrived at An Post. Even if it was considered over the course of the weekend, there is no question that any time was spent on a submission of that nature.

As is outlined in that submission, if anyone would only read it, 21 townlands with a total population of 1,036 are serviced by the Ballinfull post office. It is all laid out in detail, but no

one in An Post or in any independent review had any interest in that. Gorteen on the other hand has 512 inhabitants. It is a small town rather than a village, yet its post office is to be closed. The process was rigged from the beginning. As to the independent reviewer, he was only allowed to adjudicate against the criteria set by the IPU, a trade union, and An Post itself.

As we have been shown by the decision on Ballinfull, taken three days before the submission even arrived, the Government is standing over a Mickey Mouse superficial process. It is sending communities to go out and act like fools, myself among them. They put together well-thought-out submissions with the facts on population and a community's commitment to its post office, and it does not matter. The recipients do not care. The IPU and An Post run the country. They decide who is going to get services. We have made fools of communities throughout the country. In the Ballinfull case I can show written proof that the community was disrespected to the degree that the decision was taken well before they even sent in their submission. That is an insult in the extreme. I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's response.

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Kyne): I thank Deputy MacSharry for raising this Topical Issue matter. I address it on behalf of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. I thank postmasters throughout the country for the dedicated service they have given to rural and urban communities over many years. As Members are aware, some postmasters have taken the difficult decision to leave the business in recent weeks. I understand the concerns of older people in the communities and that this is an anxious time for many of them. We have all watched the gradual demise of the post office network over many years. More than 500 post offices closed during the economic boom in this country between 2002 and 2007 while no action was taken and the post office network was allowed to fall into decline. No new investment or services were put into it. The Government did not want that to continue.

The postmasters in this country and the communities they serve deserve a clear future and for a plan to be put in place for the development of and investment in the post office network and its services. We have set out a clear path and future for the post office network. Almost two years ago, the then Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten, was presented with a future for An Post and the post office network that was uncertain and very bleak. There was a very real possibility that the company would go under. The potential for a complete shutdown of postal services with the loss of thousands of jobs was undeniable. Immediate action was needed to ensure the survival of An Post and the post office network. That was necessary to protect the jobs of the 9,000 people working in An Post throughout the country.

Two years later, critically important decisions have been made. An Post has been stabilised because of the actions that have been taken. The company is changing from a 19th century model to one that has relevance and can have resonance in rural and urban areas in the 21st century. While the future is not as bleak for An Post, the underlying challenges remain. Mail volumes continue to decline. E-substitution and the move to online payments and online banking continue to have an impact on the post office network. There is widespread acceptance that the post office network requires modernisation to build, maintain and protect the service that meets the needs of communities throughout the country. An Post's renewed vision for the post office network centres on the availability of new services in a modernised and revitalised network. These services must include a better range of Government, financial and e-commerce services for shoppers and small business.

Since taking office, the former Minister, Deputy Naughten, drove the offline avenue with his

officials, Cabinet colleagues, the management team in An Post, the Office of Government Procurement and other agencies. Government approval was recently given to examination of an offline avenue for all Government online services. This work has started, and Deputy Naughten's successor will update the Government on progress before the end of the year.

6 o'clock Investment of €50 million in the network, equivalent to €45,000 per post office, is based on getting communities to use the enhanced services that their local post office will provide through a modernised network. These measures are meaningless unless the public use the services the post office provides. Key to the survival of the network is the willingness of all of us to use it.

Essential to delivering on the renewed vision for the post office network is the agreement reached with the Irish Postmasters Union, IPU. In their negotiations with An Post, postmasters and postmistresses sought the modernisation of the network and a voluntary redundancy package for those who wanted to leave the business. It is important that the decision of those who wish to leave the business is respected. The decision on whether to accept the package was one for individual postmasters.

An independent appeals process has been put in place to enable communities to have a decision relating to their local office reviewed. This is part of a protocol that the then Minister, Deputy Naughten, specifically sought. In addition, any retailer in the locations of the 159 post offices can apply to An Post to be considered to take over some or all of the services of the closing post office. If a retailer looks to avail of services, and if An Post decides, for one reason or another, not to provide them, that decision can be also submitted for review through the independent process. An Post has confirmed that it has extended the deadline for receipt of appeals under this process to Wednesday, 31 October.

I understand the Deputy has raised concerns about the outcome of a specific appeal. It is important to point out that the review process is independent and neither the Minister nor his officials have a role in it. It would, therefore, not be appropriate for me to comment on individual cases. I understand, however, that the former Minister, Deputy Naughten, raised the matter with An Post and was assured that the contents of the detailed appeal referred to by the Deputy were taken into account before the final determination issued. I will ask officials in the Department to take on board the information the Deputy has provided if it is in addition to what they were previously led to believe.

It is widely accepted that the post office network has been facing many challenges for some years, with a continuing decline in transaction numbers, primarily driven by the move to online payments and online banking as well as e-substitution. Standing still is not an option for the network. After years of drift, there is now a clear direction for An Post and the post office network.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I know the reply was prepared by somebody else but, quite frankly, it was shocking. It is a rigged process. The independent appeals process is totally rigged. An Post privately came up with the 500 people and 15 km criteria. I have proved to the Minister of State that Ballinfull was not remotely looked at. In fact, An Post's first response on Ocean FM, given by one of its senior representatives, was that it was a typo in the letter. An Post has come back a little from this and now states it considered everything. It did not. Ballinfull was thrown under the bus and there are 1,000 people there. An Post also will not clarify how it calculates population for a substantially rural area. Ballinfull is not a village. The post

office served 21 townlands with more than 1,000 people. Gurteen is a substantial village, it is a small town really, but we are not listening to the people there either. This decision was taken by the IPU, a trade union, and An Post.

We know An Post has a commercial mandate. It has to be subvented. Every year, the 8,700 rural post offices in the UK receive a subvention of £130 million. The amount here would be only €10 million. We are talking about a very small amount of money. It is not about cost, it is about realising there is value to rural Ireland. We have a culture whereby people live in rural Ireland. The Varadkar vision for rural Ireland needs to be more than milking it for every photocall it is worth and then shutting it down. In practice, this is what is happening. We had the shameful launch of Ireland 2040 in Sligo. The Government must think the people are stupid. It sent people off to work for six weeks on putting together a detailed report, as Ballinfull and Gurteen post offices did. We have proved that Ballinfull post office was not even considered because the response was out on a Monday morning and, according to the date, the decision had been taken the previous Monday. Gurteen and other places throughout the country can reasonably assume they were going through a superficial process because the decision had been already made by somebody else.

The former Minister, Deputy Naughten, is gone but the rest of the Government is responsible now. What will they do about it? Two weeks ago, a motion was passed democratically in the House to preserve the 159 post offices and provide a subvention. What has happened to it? It probably got thrown into a room along with all of the other motions we pass in here because the Government tends to ignore the will of Parliament while stating an issue is a matter for An Post, the HSE or somebody else but not it.

The Minister of State mentioned earlier about previous Governments allowing post offices to close. He is right. They got their answer in 2011. They were nearly wiped out. Since then, we at least have been trying to learn from those lessons. What is clear from the response of the Minister of State today is the Government has not.

Deputy Seán Kyne: That is the first time I heard it was the closure of the post offices that almost wiped out Fianna Fáil in 2011. It is an interesting twist on the history.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: It was in the speech of the Minister of State.

Deputy Seán Kyne: It is Government policy that An Post remains a strong viable company in a position to provide a high-quality nationwide postal service and that it maintains a nationwide customer-focused network of post offices in the community. The Government remains fully committed to a sustainable post office network which is a key piece of economic and social infrastructure for rural and urban areas.

The postmasters of this country and the communities they serve deserve a clear future and a plan to be put in place for the development of, and investment into, the post office network and its services. Such action was not taken by a series of Governments over many decades. We have now set out a clear path and future for the post office network. The decision on whether to accept the voluntary redundancy package was one for individual postmasters, and it is important those decisions are respected. Where a post office closes it is important to note that 70% of the business transfers to a neighbouring office. The reality is that by facilitating those who wish to exit the business neighbouring offices will be further supported, thereby ensuring a sustainable network for the future.

Innovation and change are being embraced and new services to meet new needs for the future are being developed. Politically, our responsibility is to lead that change, to strengthen An Post as a public company delivering a public service and to support the decisions required to translate that aspiration into effective action. The post offices being closed are ensuring the viability of the remaining post offices. The Deputy and others have commented that they should all be subvented now to prevent their closure but we must ask whether we should subvent all of the other post offices that closed, for example, in Sligo and Leitrim. In Sligo, there were two in 2005, one in 2006, another in 2007, two in 2008, one in 2009 and four in 2010. In Leitrim there was one in 2005, three in 2006, two in 2007, two in 2008, one in 2009 and two in 2010. Should we reopen all of these and put at risk the viability of all remaining post offices?

I will raise with my officials the issues raised by the Deputy in this specific case, and if something has gone astray we will ask officials to look at it.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.05 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 16 October 2018.

11 October 2018