



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 7 Márta 2019

Thursday, 7 March 2019

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the European Parliament Elections (Amendment) Bill 2019 without amendment.

Estimates for Public Services 2019: Messages from Select Committees

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2019: Vote 31 - Transport, Tourism and Sport.

The Select Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2019: Vote 16 - Valuation Office; Vote 23 - Property Registration Authority; and Vote 34 - Housing, Planning and Local Government.

The Select Committee on Children and Youth Affairs has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2019: Vote 40 - Children and Youth Affairs.

The Select Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2019: Vote 33 - Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Brexit Preparations

1. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she has submitted a request or is preparing to submit a request at EU level to revise state aid rules as set out in EU Regulation No. 1407/2013 to protect exposed enterprises and exporters from Brexit; the status of progress being made at EU level to increase state aid thresholds to support enterprises in the event of a hard no-deal Brexit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11388/19]

Deputy Billy Kelleher: In the context of the hard Brexit that we may be facing on 29 March and the need for the State to be able to respond immediately in the event of a catastrophic impact on businesses that export to the UK market, has the Government made a formal request to the EU to revise state aid rules?

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. My Department, with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, has been working closely with the Commission and DG Competition since November 2017 through the Irish-EU technical working group on state aid. The objective of the group is to scope and design schemes to support enterprises impacted by Brexit in line with state aid rules. This includes exploring all opportunities under EU Regulation No. 1407/2013, the *de minimis* regulation. Much has been achieved by this working group, including the development of the future growth loan scheme under the general block exemption regulation and the expansion of Ireland's rescue and restructuring scheme to include temporary liquidity aid and increase its budget to €200 million. We have fully utilised the provisions of the state aid framework to enable the investment by Enterprise Ireland of €74 million in Brexit-impacted businesses in 2018.

The group is working closely with DG Agriculture and Rural Development to explore the range of opportunities under the agriculture and forestry state aid guidelines. As part of that, state aid approval was received in February for capital investment by Enterprise Ireland in an Irish cheese producing company, Carbery Food Ingredients Limited, to help it towards financing a €65 million diversification project to mitigate the impacts of Brexit. The future growth loan scheme, along with the Brexit loan scheme, which was launched in 2018 and is operated under the *de minimis* regulation, and the temporary restructuring support will provide a stabilisation package for enterprises impacted by Brexit with a view to allowing them to transform and grow.

On 24 January, I met the European Commissioner for Competition, Margrethe Vestager, at my Department. The meeting focused on the severe challenges that Irish businesses would face as a result of Brexit and the need for appropriate and timely State supports. It was agreed that Irish officials would continue to work closely with the Commissioner's team in addressing any state aid issues that may arise, including the *de minimis* regulation, to ensure a rapid and appropriate response as the ultimate shape of Brexit and its firm-level implications become known.

The Commissioner emphasised that the Commission stood ready to act urgently in mitigation against the impacts of Brexit on Irish firms. My officials have since met DG Competition as part of the technical working group and we are looking at a number of areas, including opportunities under the *de minimis* regulation.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: We appreciate all of the efforts that have been made to date in terms of business supports and encouraging people to Brexit proof themselves, but the larger issue is that all of the loans mentioned fall within current state aid rules as they stand. What is being proposed is not outside the norm of state aid obligations. We must have a system in place that will allow for an immediate increase in the ceilings permitted for business lending. During the 2008 crash, for example, we moved the ceiling from €200,000 to €500,000. That had an impact on companies that were very exposed to the financial crash. We may experience a similar situation with companies that are wholly dependent on the UK market. Two developments could happen: a rapid devaluation of sterling and the closure of the market due to tariffs. These companies cannot wait months for us to renegotiate state aid rules. The rules must be flexible enough for us to act immediately. Will the Minister ask the European Commission to allow these changes to be made in advance of a crisis?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: In November 2017, the Commission approved a rescue and restructuring scheme for Ireland for undertakings in difficulty, with an undertaking considered to be in difficulty when, without intervention by the State, it will almost certainly be condemned to going out of business in the short or medium term. They are viable but vulnerable companies. The scheme was put in place and, in May 2018, extended to include temporary restructuring support for enterprises with acute liquidity needs. In February, the Commission approved an amendment to the scheme's budget size from €20 million to €200 million. To date, no enterprise has sought rescue and restructuring aid for temporary restructuring support, but we stand ready.

I was pleased when we received confirmation a week or so ago that Carbery Food Ingredients Limited could get funding of almost €6 million. Enterprise Ireland can now provide supports of almost €6 million to that company, giving it the investment it will need for its €65 million project. The Carbery example is a significant transformation for a food company in that it is moving away from the UK market.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: We are all trying to support businesses. However, what is important is not the amount of money that is available in the pot but the amount that can be made available to an individual company out of it. If there is a rapid devaluation of sterling, Irish companies that are wholly dependent on the UK market will be in an immediate crisis situation in the first week of April. We should not have to go to the EU to renegotiate the state aid rules, outside of what is there already, to be able to inject liquidity into those companies to provide cashflow in the short to medium term. The issue is not the amount of money that is available but the amount that can be given to individual companies. I ask the Minister to consider that issue because it is critical.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The rescue and restructuring fund, with a pot of €200 million, is already in place and applications will be considered on a case-by-case basis. If something untoward occurs and companies need assistance, that fund will be there to support them. We are still engaging with the Commission to secure further flexibility in any schemes that we may have to roll out. We are very happy that we have made good progress with the EU Commissioner for Competition, Ms Vestager. When I met her at the end of January she said very

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clearly that she stands ready to help us. My officials are working very closely with a group of officials in the Commission and have made good progress.

Deputy Kelleher is right to point out that companies may be exposed to currency fluctuations. We have been asking them to hedge their currency exposure and EI has been working very closely with some of the food companies in particular that are very exposed because of Brexit. A number of supports have been provided. The dairy industry in particular has been working very closely with the Government and has announced an investment of between €700 million and €800 million.

Oireachtas Joint Committee Recommendations

2. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the actions she has taken to date in response to the findings and recommendations of the Joint Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation's cost of doing business report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11342/19]

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: What action has the Department taken in response to the findings of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation's Report on the Cost of Doing Business? I am specifically interested in what the Department has done to help Irish businesses to deal with the serious problem of insurance costs. Massive insurance premia and the refusal of insurers to cover some sectors entirely is resulting in businesses closing down and people losing their jobs. What is the Department doing to address this escalating problem for businesses?

Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Pat Breen): I thank Deputy Quinlivan for his question. Any proposals that can contribute to keeping the costs of doing business down are to be welcomed, including those contained in the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation on the costs of doing business. In terms of maintaining our cost competitiveness, both the public and private sectors must proactively manage the controllable portion of their respective cost bases, drive productivity and continue to take action to minimise costs.

There are a number of areas addressed by the committee's report that come under the remit of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, including employment permits, the work of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, access to affordable finance for SMEs and supports for business productivity. The Department is taking action on a number of issues relevant to the recommendations set out in the report. We have reviewed the policies underpinning the current employment permits regime to ensure that it is fully supportive of Ireland's emerging labour market needs, including skills and labour shortages in certain sectors. The Ministers for Business, Enterprise and Innovation and Justice and Equality announced yesterday that the spouses and partners of highly skilled workers coming here from outside the EEA will now have immediate access to the labour market, effective from 26 March. We have also amended the employment permits regulations to allow for the granting of general employment permits to certain chef grades, which has been welcomed by the hospitality sector.

The work of the Personal Injuries Commission, whose second and final report was published in September 2018 by my Department, the implementation of the report on the cost of motor insurance and the complementary work of the cost of insurance working group all should help

to reduce insurance costs for businesses. We were pleased to bring through the Oireachtas the Personal Injuries Assessment Board (Amendment) Act 2019, which was signed into law by the President on 25 February 2019. We propose to commence that Act shortly. This is important legislation as it enhances the role of the PIAB to benefit users of the service and society more generally and it forms an integral part of the Government's response to facilitate cost savings.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

We are committed to ensuring that SMEs have access to appropriate and affordable finance and the Department supports ongoing key SME access to finance initiatives including the credit guarantee scheme, the Brexit loan scheme, the future growth loan scheme and the microenterprise loan fund scheme. All these schemes have been developed to meet the specific needs of SMEs and to provide them with finance at lower costs and on better terms and conditions than available on the marketplace.

In addition to the wide range of existing supports provided by the Department and agencies, budget 2019 allocated additional funding for the Department to boost business productivity, for example, a doubling of the retail online pilot scheme to €1.25 million. An additional €2.75 million was also awarded to Enterprise Ireland for its SME regional innovation and technology clusters programme and €5 million to the local enterprise offices, LEOs, to support a broad range of indigenous microenterprises to prepare for the challenges and opportunities associated with Brexit. Budget 2019 provides €8 million extra for the Department's Brexit response and the expansion of our global footprint.

It is also important to be aware of the role that the National Competitiveness Council, NCC, plays in relation to competitiveness. The NCC is an independent advisory body that reports to the Taoiseach and the Government, through the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, on key competitiveness issues facing the Irish economy and offers recommendations on policy actions required to enhance Ireland's competitiveness position. The reports published by the NCC, which include the Costs of Doing Business Report, Ireland's Competitiveness Scorecard and Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge effectively monitor the cost of doing business in Ireland.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: We are in a really absurd situation here. Opposition parties, business groups and citizens have been pleading for years with the Government to do something about the rotten insurance system in this State but the Government refuses point blank to do anything serious about it. The insurance system in Ireland is broken. It is bleeding ordinary motorists dry with ridiculously high premiums that are not seen anywhere else in the world. The situation is so bad that businesses are closing down because their insurance premiums are increasing by 300% and 400% in some cases. This is pure greed on the part of insurance companies but they are being allowed to get away with it by this Government. It is ridiculous that when asked about the cost of insurance, all the Government does is cite the cost of insurance working group. We need action, including new laws and we need to challenge the insurance industry on its behaviour. We certainly do not need endless reports. Has the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation met insurance companies to find out why some of them are refusing to insure entire sectors, as we are seeing with play centres across the country?

Deputy Pat Breen: We are all aware of the negative impact of high insurance costs on consumers and business. Consumers are entitled to a fair and reasonable price for insurance. Of course, motor insurance falls under the remit of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport,

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while responsibility for the insurance industry more generally is a matter for the Minister for Finance. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has no direct responsibility for insurance. As I said earlier, however, much work has been done by my Department and the Department of Finance on the PIAB. The Personal Injuries Assessment Board (Amendment) Act was signed into law in February. Anecdotal evidence suggests that insurance premia have fallen in recent times, including motor, home and business insurance. Insurance is just one of the many costs faced by businesses, which also include rates. The Government is working on the issue. The Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy D'Arcy, has been engaged on the matter for some time, as has my Department. The measures that we have put in place will assist business owners.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The Government is not as active as it should be in addressing the cost of insurance. Businesses and their employees are losing out but there seems to be no urgency on the part of the Department of Finance to take the radical action needed. It is up to the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation to stand up for Irish businesses on this critical issue. Commenting on the latest update from the cost of insurance working group, the Alliance for Insurance Reform said the following:

This the time for real action because the insurance crisis is affecting Irish charities, sports clubs, festivals, voluntary groups, playgrounds, local authorities and businesses right now. Playing with the statistics looks like moving the deck chairs around the Titanic.

These damning comments stem from the alliance's frustration at the Government's lack of urgency, particularly on the part of the Departments of Finance and Business, Enterprise and Innovation. The latter needs to take the lead role on this issue because jobs are being lost and businesses are closing down. This must be a priority for the Department.

Deputy Pat Breen: I commend the work done by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation and in particular, its report on the cost of doing business. It is a positive indication of the commitment of the members of that committee that it produced a report containing 50 recommendations. Not all of the recommendations relate to the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation but we have taken action on those that do. We are very conscious of the high costs of doing business in certain areas. Indeed, Deputy Eamon Ryan has also submitted a question on the costs of doing business in this country. Insurance costs contribute to the overall costs of doing business here, including labour costs, rates and so on. It is very important that we highlight problems in the insurance sector, as has been done by the Minister of State, Deputy D'Arcy, and others. The legislation to which I referred earlier will contribute to bringing down the cost of insurance. As I said already, if one compares the cost of insurance in 2017 with 2018 and 2019, one will see that it is falling. We hope that it will fall further as a result of the various measures that the Government has put in place.

Regional Action Plan for Jobs

3. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the regional spread of additional jobs added over 2018. [11389/19]

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I wish to ask the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation about the regional spread of additional jobs added over 2018. We have raised this issue a couple of times. There is no point in us saying there is a regional balance in job creation through IDA

Ireland as more than half of the new jobs created are in the Dublin area, while the rest of the country is being neglected. Perhaps the Minister might elaborate on what she intends to do to address the regional imbalance.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Since the launch of the regional Action Plan for Jobs in 2015 there has been an increase of 266,900 people in employment across the State, with 166,400 people at the end of 2018 in the regions outside Dublin entering employment in that period. Overall, the recently published 2018 quarter 4 CSO labour force survey employment figures are very positive. The survey shows that employment continues to grow strongly, with 50,500 jobs created in the year from the fourth quarter of 2017 to quarter 4 in 2018. That brings total employment to 2,281,300, the highest number at work ever recorded. During this period, the number employed increased, while the unemployment rate decreased in all regions. While the number in employment increased in six of the eight regions in the last year, the exceptions are the mid-west and the Border region. We remain committed to achieving an overall jobs uplift of between 10% and 15% in each region by 2020 and bringing or maintaining unemployment levels in each region to within at least one percentage point of the State average.

Unemployment has fallen in every region since the launch of the regional Action Plan for Jobs. Only two regions, the midlands and the south east, are outside the unemployment target set for 2020. Earlier this month I announced very good results from the local enterprise offices throughout the State. Overall, they supported the creation of 3,656 net new jobs in 2018. All regions saw increases in IDA Ireland employment during 2018, with the midlands region experiencing the highest growth, at 14%. Two thirds, or 64%, of new Enterprise Ireland jobs created in 2018 were outside Dublin. The north west saw the largest level of increases, at 9%. In April 2018 I asked all of the regional Action Plan for Jobs implementation committees to start a process to refresh and refocus all regional plans to ensure their relevance and impact to 2020 in order that they could continue to deliver jobs across the country in every region.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

It will also help the plans to be robust to address the challenges we face, including Brexit. The outcome of the refresh process is nine new regional enterprise plans to 2020 which build on the very strong progress made in employment creation under the regional Action Plan for Jobs for the period 2015 to 2017. I am in the process of launching the new plans, with eight plans launched to date.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: We can quote statistics all day long, but when one drills down into the macro statistics, we have to accept that there are pockets in Ireland that have not benefited. In Deputy Eugene Murphy's constituency of Roscommon, for example, some 900 people leave the county every morning to travel to work in Dublin. There is a huge regional imbalance. I put it to the Minister that 51% of the jobs created last year were in the greater Dublin area and that 45% of GDP is generated in that area. There is a huge disparity between rural Ireland and Dublin. When one city generates 45% of GDP, there is a major problem. It is a problem for rural parts of Ireland and equally a problem for Dublin because it is congested and spilling in on top of itself. We need to have system in which there is a genuine focus on shifting job creation from the Dublin area to the peripheral areas. That is not happening at the speed and with the timing needed to ensure rural Ireland will get its fair share in the upturn which we all accept is happening.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I am absolutely committed to increasing employment in the

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regions. The jobs plan is working. Job creation in the regions is my number one priority. In 2018 more jobs were created in IDA Ireland client companies outside Dublin than at any point in the past 17 years. Every region of the country saw foreign direct investment driven job gains. There are now more than 132,000 people employed in IDA Ireland client firms outside the capital. This represents nearly 60% of all IDA Ireland supported employment. That is just one example. More than 215,000 people are now employed by Enterprise Ireland supported companies, while 60% of all new jobs created by Enterprise Ireland client companies in 2018 were outside Dublin. Two thirds of all Enterprise Ireland supported employment is now outside Dublin.

The Deputy made reference to the west. Deputy Eugene Murphy is sitting beside him. The western region includes counties Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. I have visited the region in which there has been huge investment under the regional enterprise development fund. Huge work has also been done by the local regional steering committee.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I can throw out statistics across all day long, but the simple fact from the CSO labour force survey for quarter 4 of 2018 is that 51% of the jobs created were in Dublin. I am referring to gains. In the Border region there was a 0% gain. There was also a 0% gain in the mid-west. That is the harsh reality of life in rural Ireland, as I do not need to tell the Minister who is a Deputy for a Border county. She knows it intimately. The reality is that Dublin is attracting all of the inward investment. As I said, 51% of the jobs created last year were in Dublin, while 45% of GDP was also generated there. That is an unsustainable policy to continue to adapt. If we do not do something quickly and radical, we will have a situation where Dublin will become a dysfunctional city because it will not be able to sustain itself. It does not have the infrastructure or transport capacity required. There are housing problems, as well as a lack of services, including education services. We need to refocus for the benefit of Dublin and rural areas to ensure a regional balance.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I agree that we need a strong city and regions. That is why I launched the regional enterprise plans. There are nine plans in total and I have travelled around the country to work with local stakeholders, including the local authorities, local enterprise offices, the agencies, the regional skills fora and Enterprise Ireland which are all coming together. The chairmen have put forward some really good plans. There is, therefore, a lot of good things happening in the regions. I was in The Hive in Carrick-on-Shannon in which 80 people are employed. This is a locally driven enterprise centre with plans to increase employment to 150. I was in the Food Hub in Drumshanbo which is the home of Drumshanbo Gin which is exported all over the world. All of these projects have been supported from the regional enterprise development fund in my Department. It is additional to all of the other funds that find their way into rural Ireland in which there is a huge amount of investment. I could start to list all of the areas and funding received. For example, the mid-east region has received €32 million. The mid-west region has received €50 million-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister will not have time to read the list.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: There is huge investment. We need local people who are working very well together to come up with the good ideas and we will give them the money. That is the way to support job creation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As Deputy Michael McGrath is at the Business Committee meeting, we shall move on to Question No. 5 tabled by Deputy Eamon Ryan.

Dáil Éireann
Retail Sector

5. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if her attention has been drawn to the recent closures of long-standing small retailers in central Dublin and other cities and towns; the measures she has considered to support such local businesses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11397/19]

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Recently when I was walking down Grafton Street, I realised another shop had closed, one that was part of our culture and heritage and the streetscape. I am referring to Fitzpatrick's shoe shop in which I used to buy my shoes. In Temple Bar the Eager Beaver shop which I have been into during the years and is a brilliant business is also shutting down. Walton's music shop was closed last year. This is not just happening in Dublin. My colleague Senator Grace O'Sullivan recently lamented the closure of the Sam McCauley chemist shop in Waterford. Liam Ruiséal's bookshop and Sheehan's greengrocer shop in Cork are also closing. A friend has told me that the number of butchers in Galway has gone from 15 to three. *The Limerick Leader* is running a big story about Cruise's Street and how it is an example of how the high street is not working. Is the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation monitoring this change in the retail sector? What is she doing about it and what can we do to support small Irish retailers?

Deputy Pat Breen: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue.

My Department established and convenes the retail consultation forum to enable key issues affecting the retail sector to be discussed - it is a very important forum - with a view to identifying practical actions which could be taken by the Government or the industry to support sustainable jobs growth in the sector. The retail sector is the largest private sector employer in the country and 90% Irish owned. It supports jobs in every city, town and village and the Department very much understands its importance.

A Framework for Town Centre Renewal was developed in 2017 by a working group of the retail consultation forum, setting out a practical step by step action plan for stakeholders to work collaboratively to enhance their local town or village. The framework also encourages towns and villages to establish digital platforms in response to the changing retail environment. At a collaborative level, using the framework, town groups can work together to improve footfall and customer experience in town centres through various measures such as enhancing accessibility, public spaces and tackling vacant property.

The framework also serves as a support document for towns and villages applying for funding streams under Project 2040. These include the €2 billion urban regeneration and development fund and the €1 billion rural regeneration fund which can be leveraged to support the regeneration and viability of town centres.

Digitalisation has increased the scope for competition in the retail sector, as reflected in the growth in online shopping and changing consumer preferences in how people shop in town centres. Sustaining physical retail outlets requires adaptation and many retailers now offer multiple sales channels to sell their goods from physical stores to social media, mobile apps and websites. Last September, we launched a new pilot online retail scheme to be delivered by Enterprise Ireland with a total fund of €1.25 million. The online retail scheme will support retail businesses of 20 employees or more which are ready to grow their business strategically online. At least 50% of the total number of grants awarded under the scheme will be prioritised

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for retail SMEs with their headquarters outside of County Dublin, subject to applications meeting the minimum standards. On 1 March 2019, 11 successful applicants from the first call were announced in Skibbereen and we look forward to announcing a second call later this year.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

In addition, I highlight local enterprise offices, LEOs, as the first-stop-shop front line service assisting in delivering business growth and jobs for the small and microenterprise sector in Dublin and all across the country, including the retail sector.

LEOs actively promote the trading online voucher scheme, TOVS, on behalf of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. The scheme offers matched financial assistance of up to €2,500, along with training and advice, to micro companies of ten employees or fewer that want to establish an online presence for the first time or that wish to expand a basic existing website to incorporate a more substantive online trading capacity. From the start of the scheme in July 2014 to date, over 5,000 micro companies have availed of the scheme. Other soft supports offered by LEOs, such as training and mentoring, are applicable to the retail sector and this includes retailers employing more than ten people.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I have a fear that if we simply watch as the switch to online happens, we will end up with derelict high streets. It is happening already to varying degrees and different towns are affected in different ways. We will end up with only multinational and large retailers and no small indigenous retailers. According to Retail Ireland, the four crippling factors are labour costs, rates, insurance and rent. We cannot control all of those but the Government has levers on some. Could it look at differentiated rates? A real craft business, like the baker, butcher, candlestick maker or repairs service, could have a different rates base. Alternatively, rates could be based on volume of turnover and not just on the retail asset valuation. Currently, high streets like Grafton Street in Dublin are starting to have only mobile phone shops on them as those are the only retailers that can afford the rates and rents applying. What can we do specifically to support small retailers or, in the alternative, to create more mixed streets rather than the retail streets they have been historically?

Deputy Pat Breen: I outlined to the Deputy the urban and rural regeneration schemes. I take the example of Ennis in my county where Parnell Street was like the streets the Deputy referred to. It was rundown and not that many people shopped there. Clare County Council applied for funding under the urban regeneration scheme and received more than €1.3 million to regenerate and reinvigorate Parnell Street in Ennis. As someone who comes from rural Ireland, I acknowledge what is happening in our towns and villages and how large multiples are taking over in our larger towns. As the Deputy pointed out, online shopping has increased and consumer habits are changing a great deal. That is why it is important for us to encourage existing retailers to go online. Governments can put all the supports they like in place to assist retailers and encourage shoppers, but in the end, it is the consumer who makes the choice. That has to be said. It is important, however, that we ensure that we re-energise rural Ireland. That is why I outlined the schemes the Government has put in place and will continue to put in place through my Department and that of the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I support the application of the urban and rural regeneration schemes to the centres of our towns. This is critical. Many of our 19th century towns are dying on their feet. We cannot turn back to the 19th century, but we should make sure it is not just *laissez-faire* with everyone shopping in the multi-storey, out-of-town shopping centre while main streets

die. We need to get people back living on those streets as that will help local retailers. Those people will walk to the local shop. If the Minister of State does not have the figures, he might ask his Department to follow up with a written reply on how much of the funding allocated so far under the urban and rural regeneration schemes has been allocated for schemes like the one on Parnell Street in Ennis. I would allocate the entire fund to that one project alone. If we do not, the centres of our towns and cities will die. We should prioritise that for investment. I am keen to know how much of the total funding thus far has been applied to that purpose. It is the best form of spending as it helps local business and will get people back living in the centres of our towns and cities.

Deputy Pat Breen: I am delighted the Deputy acknowledges the importance of the rural and urban regeneration schemes. They are very important, together with the town and village renewal scheme. Another example of urban renewal scheme is in Clare's second largest town, namely Shannon. Clare County Council applied, somewhat hastily, for funding under the urban regeneration scheme to put a heart into Shannon. As the Deputy knows, it is a new town and does not have a streetscape like other Irish towns. There is just a shopping centre in the centre of the town. The Deputy focused on town centres. It is really important to have a heart and life in the centre so people can live in town centres and in the areas outside that as well. Clare County Council did not get the funding for which it applied as the project did not live up to what the urban regeneration scheme should be as it was for a theatre. However, we received €100,000 for the project. Since then Clare County Council has met the senior development planners in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, they are developing a plan and are consulting with the locals to focus on the economic prosperity and assets of the region.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Pat Breen: A project will be designed with in-house and outside consultants. The project will be put into category 1 and the application will be made by the end of the year under the urban regeneration scheme.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ryan for a final question. A lot of Members are waiting and we have to observe time.

Deputy Pat Breen: I hope they will get money for that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We must observe the time limits.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: County Clare is a good example. Friends of mine live in Scarriff and Kilrush and these are examples I give the Minister of State of towns that are dying on their feet. Scarriff is down to a single main street retailer. The risk is that this will happen in every single Irish town, that we will be left with one multiple outlet. While these are good businesses, typically run by local families, and I do not doubt them, one cannot have a 19th century street with just one shop. What will we do with the rest of the street? It may mean putting families back into the centre, which might lead to a second shop opening because those families will walk to the shops rather than drive. That is the reality of what has happened. The Minister of State can point to the example of one project in Shannon but I can point to ten examples of towns in Clare which are dying on their feet. It is happening right across the country. A more proactive engagement on the part of the Government is required, not just with the fund under discussion, but by way of a range of policies to change the rates structure and help with rents

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for smaller businesses and local Irish retailers. They need support.

Deputy Pat Breen: The Deputy mentioned two towns. Scarriff received funding under the village renewal scheme while Kilrush received funding of €1.7 million recently for the Vandeleur gardens project, which will build a showcase for craft shops etc. Clare County Council also has plans to regenerate Frances Street in Kilrush. The rural enterprise scheme also has an important contribution in re-energising our towns and villages. That is why the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring, has put many projects in place under the urban regeneration scheme with millions of euro invested in counties. I have outlined the Ennis project to the Deputy but there are other places around the country which got money also. I will try to get the figures on the urban and rural renewal schemes for the Deputy. We have been trying to create an environment so we can sustain our rural towns and villages. There is no doubt that they will change given the way in which digitalisation is changing the way we do business, but the fact that we have a Minister who is working to enhance our towns and villages is a sign of the Government's commitment to them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): We will go back to Question No. 4. Deputy Mattie McGrath was held up at a committee but has now arrived.

IDA Ireland Site Visits

4. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the visits by the IDA to County Tipperary and each county from 2016 to 2018 and to date in 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11390/19]

Deputy Mattie McGrath: How many visits has IDA Ireland made to County Tipperary in comparison with other counties from 2016 to date? According to the findings of the South East Economic Monitor, IDA Ireland-supported jobs are among the highest paid in the country, with 75% of all such jobs having incomes in excess of €35,000. While 8.8% of the population resides in the south-east, just 5.4% of all IDA Ireland-supported employment was there until recently. That is 61% of the fair share.

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Increasing the level of foreign direct investment in regional Ireland, including in County Tipperary, has been a priority of mine since I was first appointed Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation. As an elected representative of Cavan-Monaghan, I know how important it is to create new jobs and economic opportunities in regional areas. That is why I am committed to achieving the best possible spread of FDI across the country and to working with our enterprise agencies to generate employment and investment outside our main cities.

We are making good progress in this regard. More jobs were created in IDA Ireland client companies outside Dublin in 2018 than at any point in the last 17 years. Every region in the country saw FDI-driven job gains and there are now over 132,000 people employed in IDA Ireland client firms outside the capital, representing nearly 60% of all IDA Ireland-supported employment. It is important to note this represents the highest number of people employed in IDA-supported companies outside of Dublin in the history of the organisation. These positive results clearly show that Government policy is working and demonstrate the huge strides that have been made in terms of boosting FDI related job creation across Ireland.

As for Tipperary in particular, we want to grow its stock of FDI in 2019, just as we want to increase investment in every other county in the country. Tipperary is already home to ten IDA Ireland client firms, which collectively employ more than 3,700 people. This client base includes well known firms such as Abbott Ireland, Boston Scientific and Merck, Sharp and Dohme. Last year saw a net total of 55 new FDI jobs created in Tipperary.

A key focus for the agency in the county in 2019 is supporting further job growth in companies already present there. Experience, gained over decades of FDI in Ireland, shows us that overseas companies already *in situ* are the most likely to generate new employment opportunities. IDA Ireland staff work closely with client companies to explore the potential for further such job creation and they are certainly doing that with client firms in Tipperary as well.

The agency is also working hard to secure new investors and overseas firms for Tipperary. Site visits are an important part of this. There were eight such visits to sites in Tipperary in each of 2016 and 2017, with five visits taking place last year.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I very much welcome the fact that there is foreign direct investment in Clonmel and south Tipperary. They are great companies providing great employment and spin-off activity. As I said, 2017 was a very good year for IDA Ireland in the south east, with a significant deficit reduced by almost 200 jobs. The number of IDA Ireland-supported jobs increased by 10.9% in the south east, an impressive performance against a mere 5.3% increase nationally. However, since 2011 the south east has only accounted for 5% of the net jobs created nationally. While there are foreign direct investment jobs in Clonmel, Tipperary town and west Tipperary have none. The Minister referred to eight visits each year. Were any of those visits to Tipperary town? Other Deputies here have promised that big things were going to happen with IDA Ireland, but we now know a certain premises in Tipperary town is not even on the list. It is worrying that while there are jobs in the county town of Clonmel and some in Cashel, they are not in Carrick-on-Suir, Tipperary town or Cahir. We need a balanced spread to those areas. Dublin is getting the lion's share of everything and Tipperary is not getting the spin-off.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: There are no incentives for a company to locate in Dublin. The incentives apply when companies locate outside Dublin. I wish to have a strong city but I also wish to have strong regions because both are necessary. It should not be a case of Dublin against the rest of the country. I am from rural Ireland too and we want jobs in the regions. That is certainly a priority for me. However, experience shows that FDI-driven job creation is more likely to come from firms already in the country. Moreover, we must remember that site visits are only a preliminary step in encouraging investors to locate in Ireland. The final decision as to an investment location tends to come much later and always rests with the firm concerned.

Negative comments about an area are very unhelpful when attracting FDI. We must focus on the strengths and potential. The regional enterprise plans are focusing on the positives while addressing the weaknesses. I was in Tipperary recently to launch the regional enterprise plan. We cannot forget that FDI only forms one part of our enterprise base. Indigenous firms are responsible for a significant portion of employment.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I know the Minister's constituency quite well. It is similar to Tipperary with regard to employment. Worryingly, of the 3,530 jobs announced in IDA Ireland's 2018 mid-year performance update relating to 21 publicly announced projects, out of a total of 139 projects, no project was expected to generate employment in the south east. A year

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and a half ago, statistics from the EUROSTAT yearbook report demonstrated that over 50% of Ireland's GDP, the total value of everything produced in the country, is generated in Dublin. This is despite the fact that approximately 60% of the population live outside Dublin city and county. The figures point to the disproportionate levels of economic activity that are concentrated in Dublin. I did not say there were any incentives for companies to come to Dublin, but everything is coming to Dublin. We must shift the balance. Otherwise we will choke the environment, given the housing crisis and everything else. It is clear that the rest of the country, particularly rural Ireland, is being left to stagnate while Dublin is bursting at the seams. Something must be done about it, especially for places such as Tipperary town and west Tipperary.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Companies supported by Enterprise Ireland employ 5,921 people in Tipperary, and 136 new jobs were created in Tipperary in 2018. The local enterprise office also had a very good year with 160 new jobs created in Tipperary in 2018. As I said, I recently launched the regional enterprise plan at Lisheen Mine. I was pleased to allocate funding of over €4.6 million to the Irish Bioeconomy Foundation in the old Lisheen Mine. It is a wonderful facility. When I was there I also visited the AgriChemWhey project to see what it is doing. It is building a first-of-a-kind industrial scale biorefinery. It is a flagship project that is focused on the development of an integrated biorefinery for the conversion of residues from the food processing industry to high-value sustainable foods and products. That is a €30 million project funded under Horizon 2020. In addition, Tipperary town received €600,000 under the regeneration project. There is a great deal happening there. The regional enterprise plans have a ground-up approach and there is a special focus in the plan for the mid-west on Tipperary. I realise there have been problems there and we want to address those problems to ensure that jobs are created throughout the county. As I said, Tipperary town gets a special mention.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we move to the next question, please do not to take advantage of me if I am too flexible with regard to time, as Deputies are waiting to ask their questions. I am sure Deputy Ó Cuív will set the standard.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

IDA Ireland Portfolio

6. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will consider transferring the non-urban properties owned by the IDA to Enterprise Ireland in view of the fact that most non-urban business developments are indigenous; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10962/19]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: When IDA Ireland was split and Enterprise Ireland was separated from it, for some reason all the properties were left in the ownership of IDA Ireland even though the chance of foreign direct investment going into some of the locations owned by IDA Ireland is very small. If there is to be proactive use of these sites it would be much better to transfer them to Enterprise Ireland.

(Deputy Pat Breen): The availability of marketable serviced land and buildings in advance of demand remains a key element in IDA Ireland's ability to compete for mobile foreign direct investment. Not only does such a supply of properties help the agency to secure significant

investments, it also allows projects to begin at an earlier date by diminishing difficulties associated with land acquisition, planning and construction. That is why the IDA's property services are important when it comes to supporting enterprise and job creation in Ireland.

While the IDA itself is focused on inward investment, the agency manages its property portfolio for the benefit of both its own clients and those of Enterprise Ireland. IDA Ireland's property team, for example, works closely with Enterprise Ireland to support the needs of indigenous companies that may be seeking appropriate properties. There is also ongoing engagement between the two agencies about the property needs of their respective clients. This includes plans to develop campus style property solutions to support development and business-to-business collaborations.

As regards IDA Ireland's wider work in regional development, IDA Ireland does its utmost to encourage its clients to locate or expand outside of the main cities. This is just as much a priority for the agency as it is for the Department and the Government. Indeed, IDA Ireland is continuing to target an increase of investment of 30% to 40% in every region by the end of its current strategy in 2019. The agency's staff are also working hard to showcase the benefits of regional areas to firms considering investing or expanding in Ireland. At the same time, as I have said previously, we must recognise that the final decision in terms of where to invest is always a matter for the company. It is also the case that regardless of what efforts IDA Ireland or the Government make to underline the undoubted benefits of regional locations, certain overseas companies will only consider investing in large urban areas for operational reasons. That is a commercial reality. It is, nevertheless, important that the agency has a supply of available sites that can be offered to IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, EI, firms considering making job-rich investments. This helps to encourage investors to initiate projects, particularly in the regions. It should be stressed that IDA Ireland works closely with city and county councils to ensure that its property acquisitions are in line with local area, county and city development plans.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House.

I want to emphasise that IDA Ireland-owned sites are never intentionally left idle or vacant. The opposite is the case. IDA Ireland is doing everything possible to market these properties to investors and to convince them to locate there. It actively brings regional locations and suitable sites to the attention of all its clients, whether existing companies in Ireland that are looking to expand or first-time clients overseas. More generally, we are achieving real results in deepening the spread of regional foreign direct investment, FDI. IDA Ireland's 2018 results bear out this assessment. Last year, the agency delivered 113 regional investments, with 56% of net new jobs created outside of Dublin. Moreover, the last four years have seen over 44,000 new FDI-driven jobs created outside the capital. We will continue to do our utmost to reinforce and strengthen these positive trends and to further job creation across the entirety of the country.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I thank the Minister of State for putting so much effort into answering everything but the question I asked to be addressed. I accept that a great deal of time was spent on drafting the reply but it does not address the issue.

IDA Ireland owns all of the sites. I acknowledge that if Enterprise Ireland needs a building, it will be facilitated by IDA Ireland but many of the IDA Ireland-owned sites in rural Ireland are not being proactively managed. I am in the happy position of being able to compare IDA Ireland's performance in my constituency outside of Galway city with the performance of Údarás

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na Gaeltachta. The latter proactively manages sites and puts them to multiple uses that create employment because it has an overarching responsibility in that regard.

I ask the Minister of State to discard the script and to try to answer the following question. Should consideration be given to the transfer of sites to Enterprise Ireland to ensure they are used for indigenous development rather than foreign direct investment?

Deputy Pat Breen: Deputy Ó Cuív should have listened to the reply. I will repeat what I said, without the script. IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland work together. This collaboration is extremely important for job creation in Ireland. Without it, and the co-operation of the local enterprise offices, we would not be in the position we are in now where unemployment is at 5.6%. The IDA may have idle sites but they are important to IDA Ireland because there may be companies, whether overseas companies or indigenous companies, who want to locate in a rural location, as has happened in many instances in the past, including in Galway. The Deputy is missing the point. These agencies are professional and, as I pointed out earlier, they do work together. In terms of job creation, 57% of the IDA Ireland-created jobs were in areas outside of the greater Dublin area. In terms of Enterprise Ireland, the statistics are even greater. The collaboration of these agencies is extremely important.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I ask the Minister of State to outline IDA Ireland's planned engagements in regard to its business parks in Roundstone and Ballinrobe and whether Enterprise Ireland has been actively developing digital hubs in the same way that Údarás na Gaeltachta has been doing in these IDA Ireland-owned properties that are not used for any other purpose. If the Minister of State does not have that information to hand, he might come back to me on it.

Deputy Pat Breen: I do not have the information in regard to Roundstone and Ballinrobe but I will ensure it is forwarded to the Deputy.

The Deputy asked about digital hubs. They are an extremely important part of the creation of jobs in the regions. If the Deputy had listened to my earlier reply he would have heard me say that Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland work closely with the local authorities and city councils in this regard. For example, in my own county, digital hubs were recently opened by Clare County Council in four small towns. We are providing digital hubs to benefit people in rural areas. The provision of digital hubs is a priority. The Government is currently preparing a national digital strategy and we will be launching the future jobs initiative on Sunday. This is a priority area for all of us, including the regions.

I reiterate that there is collaboration on these issues between the two main agencies, IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland. They are working hand in hand but Enterprise Ireland is focused on the indigenous sector and IDA Ireland is focused on foreign direct investment. If there is an IDA Ireland-owned vacant site in a rural area and Enterprise Ireland is actively seeking a site in that area, the agencies will work together to ensure the site is made available.

Regional Action Plan for Jobs

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next question will be introduced by Deputy O'Dowd.

7. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the status of the regional enterprise plans; her views on the way in which the plans can support job cre-

ation in rural Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11166/19]

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Will the Minister outline the status of the new regional enterprise plans and her views on the way in which they can support job creation in rural Ireland, particularly County Louth?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this question. In April 2018, I asked all of the regional action plan for jobs implementation committees to start a process to refresh and refocus all regional plans to ensure their relevance and impact out to 2020 in order that they continue to deliver jobs across the country in every region and can be robust to address the challenges we face, including Brexit. The outcomes of this refresh process are nine new regional enterprise plans to 2020, which build on the very strong progress made on employment creation under the Regional Action Plan for Jobs 2015-2017. I am in the process of launching the new plans in every region, with eight plans launched to date and a ninth plan, for the south east, scheduled to be launched by the end of this month. Shaped from the bottom up by regional stakeholders, and overseen by my Department, the new regional enterprise plans to 2020 complement national level policies and programmes emanating from the top down and there is strong alignment with Ireland's national enterprise policy, Enterprise 2025 Renewed, and the forthcoming future jobs Ireland initiative.

The principle behind the regional enterprise plans is collaboration between regional stakeholders on initiatives that can help to realise the region's enterprise development potential. These stakeholders include local authorities, the LEOs, the enterprise agencies, the regional skills forum, tourism bodies, private sector enterprise champions, the higher education institutes and others. These new plans, therefore, have a strong relevance for rural Ireland, with actions focused on areas such as skills development, tourism, the food sector, agritech, the marine and maritime, regional enterprise co-working and remote working spaces, talent retention and place-making. I hope that successful initiatives being driven through these plans can be shared as best practice in all regions in rural Ireland.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister's reply and her recent visit to Drogheda. The problem in County Louth is that the county is in the IDA Ireland north-east region but the land available for development in the region is one field outside of the town boundary and thus in the Meath IDA Ireland mid-east region. Will the Minister address this issue and will she arrange for IDA Ireland executives in Louth and Meath to market this site jointly to ensure that we have people working in the town? Every day, 7,000 people leave Drogheda for work outside of the town. These people would love to work in Drogheda. There is land available in the north-east region but because it forms part of the Meath IDA Ireland portfolio, we do not know who is marketing it. I ask the Minister to address the issue.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I acknowledge that the Deputy was at the launch of the north-east regional enterprise plan in Cootehill. I take his point about the regions. I want to encourage collaboration between the regions and IDA Ireland, which as the Deputy will be aware, operates on a national basis. I accept that we need to address the issue of people from the north east having to travel to Dublin for jobs. That is recognised in one of the objectives of the north-east regional enterprise plan, which states: "Leverage the full extent of talent residing in the North-East to drive new enterprise investment and growth." There needs to be an audit of the skill set and we want to sell the fact that these people are available in the region for any potential investors that may be interested. These regional enterprise plans make a difference. I attended a number of events in Dundalk, where there is also much happening.

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Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister's commitment to the region. Without doubt, it was a first-class launch and it is an excellent plan. My question was whether we could arrange, through the Minister's good offices and the IDA, to discuss the Drogheda site, which is in the Border region but in the mid-east administrative region. It is important to address that.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Yes, I will do that. The site to which the Deputy refers is in the mid-east plans, which I also launched. In places such as Naas, the creation of co-working spaces is being considered in order that people can work, for example, a couple of days from home and a couple of days in Dublin. This is the sort of action that we want to facilitate, as can be seen in the future jobs initiative. We want more people to have a better work-life balance, which may involve working from home or working from a centre close to them and then travelling to Dublin for a day or two per week, or whatever they need to do. I will ask the IDA to examine the site the Deputy raised.

IDA Ireland

8. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her views on the performance of the IDA in terms of attracting investment and creating jobs in the regions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11163/19]

Deputy Peter Burke: What are the Minister's views on the performance of the IDA in respect of attracting investment and creating jobs in the regions, and will she make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As Minister, regional development is one of my top priorities. I am focused on sustaining existing employment in the regions while also working to grow significantly both job creation and investment in every county in the country.

The recent annual results of IDA Ireland have shown that we are making significant progress in increasing jobs supported by foreign direct investment, FDI, in the regions. In 2018, for example, 56% of all net new jobs created by the agency were in locations outside Dublin. Similarly, every region in Ireland posted net gains in jobs last year. More than 132,000 people are employed across 681 firms in IDA Ireland client companies outside the capital, with 58% of all IDA Ireland-supported employment outside of Dublin. This represents the highest number of people employed in the regions by IDA Ireland clients in the agency's history, with 2018 seeing more IDA Ireland jobs added in the regions than at any time in the past 17 years.

IDA Ireland works daily to promote regional cities and towns to potential investors. Since the beginning of IDA Ireland's Winning strategy in 2015, 407 investments have been secured for the regions, while almost 27,000 net jobs have been added in locations outside Dublin. To put that in context, an average of 102 investments annually have been won for locations beyond Dublin, compared with an annual average of 69 under the previous strategy. This is a testament to the focus that IDA Ireland has placed on regional investment and the whole-of-government action to enhance our regional offering.

It is important to emphasise that FDI forms only one part of investment in regional locations. Indigenous enterprise is responsible for a significant portion of employment growth, especially outside Dublin. Companies supported by Enterprise Ireland, EI, created more than 9,000 net new jobs last year, with every region benefiting from these increases in employment.

There are now more than 215,000 people employed in EI-supported companies, and 64% of these jobs are located outside of Dublin.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The local enterprise offices, LEOs, have also performed well, with 3,656 net new jobs created in 2018. This brings the total number of people employed in LEO-supported companies to 36,666, with 83.7% of these jobs located outside Dublin.

I remain optimistic about the job creation potential of Irish companies across the regions. To date, I have launched eight of nine regional enterprise plans that my Department has spearheaded with regional stakeholders. The final plan for the south east will be launched in March. These plans will play an important role in encouraging regional investment and job creation throughout the regions. I emphasise that creating jobs in the regions will remain a key objective of IDA Ireland, EI, the LEOs and my Department. We are collectively focused on delivering the fairest possible spread of investment throughout the country. The energy and resources we have invested in regional growth is producing results, as the evidence illustrates. We will continue to do our utmost to encourage further such job growth in all parts of Ireland in the time ahead.

Deputy Peter Burke: I welcome the Minister's detailed response. The year 2019 is the 70th anniversary of the creation of IDA Ireland and it is important that a Minister from regional Ireland controls this economic portfolio. It is no small feat that job growth of 66% has been obtained outside of Dublin and the Minister has had a considerable part to play in that regard by driving regional Ireland through initiatives such as the regional enterprise development fund, which has provided significant funding to encourage people to get on the road and ensure that investment in the area continues.

I am from a large regional town, Mullingar, where there is a 70-acre, fully serviced IDA Ireland park. It is one important area in which we seek investment, although I acknowledge that the council, in conjunction with IDA Ireland, is applying for planning permission for an advance factory unit. Any movement in that regard would be helpful to shorten lead times for investors in the locality.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I know about the IDA Ireland park in Mullingar and I agree that it is a fine site. I assure the Deputy that IDA Ireland will continue to market all of its sites to potential investors.

On regional investment and growth, I launched the regional enterprise plan for the midlands in Mountmellick on 6 February, which will build on the recent strong performance of job creation in the region. At the end of 2018, more than 3,400 people were employed in IDA Ireland-supported companies in the county, which was 53% more than in 2011. Recent job announcements include 200 jobs at Neueda Technologies in County Westmeath, as well as 100 jobs at Red Seal Cups and 200 jobs at Avery Dennison, both of which are in County Longford. The Deputy will be familiar with the fact that Center Parcs, for which I launched the recruitment process last year, will open in the coming months. That will create more than 1,000 jobs in the midlands, which will be a game-changer for the tourism industry in that county.

Deputy Peter Burke: I welcome the important initiatives that are ongoing in the regions, such as Center Parcs that the Minister mentioned and other important investors who have entered the locality. I am hopeful that, in a post-Brexit era, the regions will be competitive as they

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will offer a viable option for investors to locate. Given that with Project Ireland 2040 we want the regions to grow twice as fast as Dublin, it is important that we continue that trajectory. I hope that IDA Ireland will put sustained pressure on the midlands to ensure that we continue attracting investment. It is important for all sectors, public transport and quality of life, and the regions have much to offer people. I am grateful for every effort that the Minister is making and for her ongoing support for Mullingar.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I acknowledge that the Deputy works hard to attract and promote investment in his county and region. It is important that we put forward the positives and tell the good story. Success brings success and we want to see more investment in the regions, which is a top priority for me. I do not want it to be a case of regions versus Dublin or Dublin versus the rest of the country because that is not good for the country. Rather, both should work together because strong regional support will lead to strong cities.

I was delighted to open officially Revive Active's new manufacturing facility with the Deputy in Mullingar a few weeks ago. The facility will create more than ten new jobs locally, which is good to see. More than 3,500 people are employed in EI companies in County Westmeath, which is up from just over 2,000 in 2011. Good things, therefore, are happening in the county and I want to continue to work with the Deputy to ensure that we attract investment into the regions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: B'fhéidir nach bhfuil cead agam ach ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh Scoil Loreto as Baile na nGallógach, Milford i gContae Dhún na nGall agus tá súil agam go mbainfidh sibh sult as bhur dturas anseo go dtí Dáil Éireann.

Before I call Deputy Deering, I call Deputy Clare Daly, whom I almost overlooked. How could I have done that?

Employment Rights

9. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the steps she has taken to recognise and ensure the rights of seasonal migrant workers through employment legislation. [11077/19]

Deputy Clare Daly: My favourite Leas-Cheann Comhairle overlooked me. Shocking.

Deputy Pat Deering: I can wait.

Deputy Clare Daly: This question relates to the gap in legislative protection for seasonal migrant workers. I am aware that this is not solely the responsibility of the Minister. There is also a role for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection. We are talking about incredibly vulnerable workers on short-term contracts who come into the country. I am aware from the replies to previous questions that some of the recruitment agencies operating outside the State are exempt from regulations. What are our intentions in that regard?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy for observing the time limit.

Deputy Pat Breen: As Deputy Clare Daly pointed out, employment rights are a matter for my colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina

Doherty. Ireland has a very thorough employment rights framework. All migrant workers in the State, including those who are here on a temporary basis, are afforded, under employment rights legislation, the same employment rights as Irish citizens. Migrant workers from the European Union and the European Economic Area, EEA, do not require an employment permit to work in Ireland. My Department has policy responsibility for the Employment Permits Acts and administers the granting of employment permits to non-EEA nationals to work in the State. Under the Employment Permits Acts, additional protections for non-EEA workers include minimum annual remuneration levels. The original employment permit is issued to the employee. Information on employment rights is on the reverse of the employment permit.

There is no seasonal employment permit for non-EEA workers. The review which was published in September last year set out seven overarching guiding principles that provided a clear framework for the State's employment permit system. Specifically, it provides for a system with the flexibilities required to ensure it will remain supportive of the labour market at all stages of the economic cycle. The review recommended the introduction of a seasonal employment permit. My Department is assessing the options for introducing a permit, guided by best international practice. If introduced and in line with current practice, seasonal non-EEA workers will be covered by employment rights legislation in the same way as other workers. The Workplace Relations Commission's investigative and enforcement powers also apply and work to discourage abuses of the employment permits system. I expect to do something temporary for now.

Deputy Clare Daly: I believe this is a time bomb. In the next period there will be explosive revelations about the mistreatment of seasonal migrant workers as a consequence of the lack of regulation. These workers are often very vulnerable. The issues that have been highlighted include the use of unregulated agencies; improper and possibly unlawful charges and levies being applied to the workers concerned by employers or agencies acting outside the jurisdiction; workers being enticed from their families and homes based on earnings and contracts, expectations which are not fulfilled when they arrive here; apparent collusion between agencies such as banks, medical providers, accommodation providers and even State services in the provision of national insurance numbers and the inoperability of the joint labour committees for agricultural workers in any meaningful way. These are critically serious issues where there is a legislative gap and need to be attended to. I am concerned about the Minister's belief everything is okay. Everything is not okay and I am sure many Members of this House know what happened in the jurisdiction across the water where there was a significant tragedy before action was taken. The situation is not dissimilar here.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I was about to compliment the Deputy on observing the time limit, but I will not.

Deputy Pat Breen: The Leas-Cheann Comhairle has to give her leeway after missing out on her.

Deputy Clare Daly: Exactly.

Deputy Pat Breen: Traditionally, seasonal workers have mainly been involved in labour intensive industries such as horticulture, the hospitality sector and tourism. Statistics show that they have come from EU member states and do not require a permit. As rightly pointed out, there is an issue with non-EEA workers. There is a demand for seasonal workers, as the Deputy rightly pointed out and the Department has seen first-hand. That is why we are putting interim

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measures in place to see what we can do within existing regulations. In the longer term we will need new employment permits legislation, a matter with which the Department will deal. We will try to deal with the issue under existing legislation.

Deputy Clare Daly: The problem is that there is a regular flow of migrant workers, specifically in the agri-food sector, who are tied into accommodation agreements which they have no choice but to enter into. They then find themselves stuck in bad accommodation, with money being deducted from their wages and no way to question the legality of these arrangements. There are serious issues related to the enforcement of regulations, as the Minister indicated to me previously. While agencies registered in Ireland are not permitted to charge employees a recruitment fee, those operating outside the State can and do. I remind the Minister of State that it took a significant tragedy in the United Kingdom when 21 migrant workers died in Morecambe Bay before the law was changed. We need to look urgently at these issues. We are dealing with people who in many instances come from deprived backgrounds, with a low standard of education and poor English language skills. The matter needs urgent attention.

Deputy Pat Breen: With regard to the employment permits my Departments issues for non-EEA nationals who work in the State, they have protection under the Employment Permits Act under which they are entitled to minimum annual remuneration levels. Information on employment rights is on the reverse side of all permits issued to employees. I acknowledge the issue the Deputy has rightly raised and the example in the United Kingdom. We are working to have these rights for the seasonal workers who come here, particularly from non-EEA countries, and trying to deal with the issue under current legislation. In the longer term we will ensure we will have full legislation in place, given the high demand for seasonal workers.

Regional Action Plan for Jobs

10. **Deputy Pat Deering** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the status of the regional enterprise plans; her views on the way in which this will benefit County Carlow; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11204/19]

Deputy Pat Deering: I ask the Minister the status of the regional enterprise action plans and how they could benefit County Carlow especially which is part of the south-east region and has been lagging behind in the last period.

Deputy Pat Breen: Both the Minister and I have met the Deputy on many occasions. In April 2018 the Department asked the regional action plan for jobs implementation committees to start a process to refresh and refocus all regional plans to ensure their relevance and impact up to 2020 in order that we could continue to deliver jobs across the country in every region and be robust in addressing the challenges we faced, including trade wars and Brexit. The outcome of the refresh process is nine new regional enterprise plans to 2020 which have been built on the very strong progress made in employment creation under the regional Action Plan for Jobs 2015 to 2017. We are launching the new plans, with eight already launched.

County Carlow is part of the south-east region which has been included in the regional enterprise plan to 2020 for the south east which will be launched in March. The regional enterprise plan for the south east will be focused on a number of strategic objectives, each of which will involve a focus on County Carlow as part of the south-east region. Objectives for the south east will include putting a focus on enhancing the existing environment for enterprise activity

and company growth and building regional economic resilience; effective marketing of the region as a place of choice for talent and investment; developing skills and talent in the region; and regional place-making. The strategic objectives and actions included in the south-east plan will be set out, with the core objectives of the enterprise agencies and the local enterprise offices in County Carlow and the wider region. In this way, the plan will add value and support the work of the agencies on the ground in the south east through a collaborative approach.

It is encouraging that the unemployment rate in the south-east region which includes county Carlow, with counties Kilkenny, Wexford and Waterford, reduced from 11.7% in quarter one of 2015 to 7.7% in quarter four of 2018.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The focus for County Carlow and the south east in the period to 2020 under the new regional enterprise plan will be to maintain an emphasis on employment growth, aiming to outperform the rate of growth achieved since 2015 to date, and to ensure sustainable, quality jobs will be created and maintained the region. The aim will also be to reduce the regional unemployment rate to within 1% of the State average by 2020.

It is important to note that the Government has put several funding streams in place to support regional development, including my Department's regional enterprise development fund; the rural and urban regeneration and development funds under Project Ireland 2040; and the town and village renewal scheme.

Under the €60 million competitive regional enterprise development fund, REDF, the south-east region has secured total funding of over €10 million to date in the two completed calls. One of the projects is situated in County Carlow - the Insurtech Network Centre DAC - which aims to facilitate the development of a strong insurance and insurtech ecosystem in the south east and involves an investment of just over €1.4 million under the REDF. Guided by the forthcoming new regional enterprise plan to 2020 for the south east, the region and County Carlow are well positioned to build on this success and continue to see the benefits and results of collaborative and innovative initiatives that can make a significant impact on enterprise development in the region.

Deputy Pat Deering: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive reply. I am delighted to hear about the south east plan to be launched in March. From time to time Carlow feels that because it is the northerly part of the south east, it is left out of the south east equation. I have highlighted this before to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister of State, Deputy Breen. It is ideally located, a little over an hour from Dublin, and we feel disappointed that there is not more progress in respect of jobs. I acknowledge that a lot of progress has been made in recent years. Employment has increased by 50% since 2012, which is a phenomenal figure, but we do feel there is more progress to be made in that regard.

Will the Minister of State give me more information on an issue that arose before, the advance facility that was due to be constructed in the Carlow area in the past year but has dragged on? It has been eagerly awaited.

Deputy Pat Breen: I know Deputy Deering has a great interest in enterprise. Carlow is a great county. I have been there on several occasions with Deputy Deering.

We take a collaborative approach with the agencies and with local government, which is

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very important. Carlow is very lucky to have an information age technology college and the innovation centre attached to it, which plays a very important role in job creation. There have been some recent important job announcements in Carlow, from the IDA and indigenous enterprise. Recently, some rural enterprise development funding, €1.4 million, went to an Insurtech Network Centre in Carlow. We have also seen some other regional funding go to Borris railway viaduct and to Altamont House and Gardens. The local enterprise offices, LEOs, working hand in hand with local authorities and others, have had some success. Indigenous jobs are very important.

We receive many questions from Members asking why there are not more site visits or foreign direct investment in the county. SMEs account for almost 98% of the enterprises in the country and employ almost 70% of the workforce throughout regional Ireland. LEOs play a very important role, Enterprise Ireland plays an important role. This collaborative approach by all the agencies, including the third level institute in Carlow, will ensure that the regional plan that the Minister will launch will be successful and will build on the number of jobs we said we would create under the Action Plan for Jobs, that is, 145,000 jobs by 2020. We have already exceeded that and we will do a lot more. As one party on the other side of the House said once, “a lot done, more to do”.

Deputy Pat Deering: I concur with the Minister of State’s final statement, “a lot done, more to do”. Carlow is ideally located and has the facilities, the road infrastructure and an outstanding educational facility in the Institute of Technology Carlow. Yesterday, I had the honour of attending the local enterprise awards and the number of new businesses coming on stream is phenomenal. They all play a huge part in their areas. The final piece of the jigsaw would be for the advance facility that has been promised to be delivered in this coming year. It has dragged on for a while. I would always be a glass half full person. A lot of work has been done in the area. The figures have increased substantially in recent times. If this advance facility could be completed in this calendar year, it would be of great benefit.

Deputy Pat Breen: That advance unit is very important because there has to be a facility for a company that is ready to move in. Carlow is very well located geographically. It is near Dublin and it has been a recipient of inward investment. Only recently the IDA announced 170 jobs in MSD there, Enterprise Ireland announced a Crowley Carbon investment in Carlow-Kilkenny, and Netwatch, an indigenous company, has announced 220 jobs in Carlow. The Minister and I have been working hard to ensure the advance facility is progressed further and is in place if Enterprise Ireland or the IDA has an employer ready to move into that area. The IDA is very much focused on having those advance facilities to ensure we can create jobs and to ensure that the unemployment figures will reduce in Carlow, as they have gone from a high of 11.7% in 2015 to 7.7% now. A stream of funding will continue under the rural regeneration project and the town and village renewal scheme under the regional enterprise development fund.

Brexit Supports

11. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the discussions she has had with her EU counterparts regarding the possible 55,000 job losses Ireland will face if there is a hard Brexit; and the supports and advice that have been provided. [9386/19]

Deputy Michael Moynihan: What discussions has the Minister had with her EU counter-

parts in light of Brexit and the indication that 55,000 jobs could be in jeopardy? What support and advice have been coming from our EU counterparts in different countries on the job losses that could occur, particularly in the agrifood industry?

(Deputy Heather Humphreys): I understand that the ESRI and Department of Finance are completing a more comprehensive assessment of the impact of Brexit on Ireland and these results are expected to be published later in March. I suspect that the jobs figure to which the Deputy refers is based on preliminary analysis undertaken by the ESRI and the Department of Finance which takes account of recently published UK impact assessments. However, I should point out that the analysis does not suggest that 55,000 jobs will be lost, but rather that employment growth will be slower than otherwise would be the case in the absence of Brexit. Nevertheless, and reflecting our still growing economy, total employment is expected to increase by around 178,000 by 2023.

In February 2018, my Department published the Copenhagen Economics report which examined the strategic implications arising for Ireland from changing EU-UK trading relations. While all scenarios examined produce a result that is less favourable than a non-Brexit scenario, the Irish economy is still expected to record strong and positive growth out to 2030. This report also highlighted a range of employment challenges, with employment shifts occurring from vulnerable agricultural and traditional manufacturing sectors towards a range of services sectors likely to experience job growth. The analysis also highlighted the disproportionate impact of Brexit on the regions.

This analysis was conducted on the basis of no policy change, that is, if no mitigation measures were taken by Government or by firms. In reality, of course, extensive work to prepare for the UK's exit, including for a hard Brexit scenario, has been undertaken in my Department, across Government and throughout the enterprise sector. Over the course of the last three budgets I have introduced through the enterprise agencies an extensive suite of enterprise supports to assist firms to meet the challenges presented by Brexit. They range from liquidity support through short-term and long-term loans, to restructuring aid for businesses in severe operating difficulties. The majority of enterprise supports are open to all companies, including SMEs, and not just those that are clients of the enterprise agencies.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The ESRI and the Department of Finance are compiling a report which is going to be issued later in the month of March. Today is 7 March. We are within three weeks of Brexit. It is two and a half years since the vote was taken in the UK on Brexit. We are to accept that the Department of Finance and the ESRI are going to issue a report in March 2019. That frightens us because we have known the implications and challenges of Brexit. The Minister is quite right in what she has said about the regions because there are major challenges, not just in the agrifood industry but in the many companies that export to the UK. The management of many of the companies whom I talk to daily would say that the Government, the ESRI and the Department of Finance do not seem to be up to speed with it or treating it with any urgency. I have to challenge the Minister. Does she accept that March 2019 is not the appropriate time for the ESRI and Department of Finance report to be coming out and that it should have been done months, if not a year, ago?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Numerous reports have been compiled, but we have been acting on the information contained in the Copenhagen report which was compiled last year. The Deputy is right when he refers to exposed sectors that are vulnerable to Brexit. We have raised this issue with the Commissioner. We are working with businesses to overcome the dif-

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facilities of this possible shock. When I met Commissioner Vestager in January, the focus of our meeting centred on the severe challenges Irish businesses, especially SMEs, would face when the United Kingdom left the European Union. The Commissioner emphasised that the Commission stood ready to act urgently to mitigate the impact of Brexit on Irish firms. We recently received state aid approval for Carbery Food Ingredients Limited to help the company to finance a €65 million diversification project to mitigate the impact of Brexit. I know that the Deputy is very familiar with this good company which is going through a significant transformation as it moves away from the UK market. It is changing much of its produce from cheddar cheese to mozzarella as it targets the Asian market. The test case demonstrates what we want to do for the food sector. The dairy industry which has been working extremely closely with the Government has announced investment of between €700 million and €800 million.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Dara Calleary: One week from today, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, known as the PPS, will meet the families of victims of Bloody Sunday to brief them on the decisions it has made arising from its investigation into the events of Bloody Sunday. As the Tánaiste can imagine, this is an incredibly sensitive time for the families. Last weekend the PPS asked people to avoid speculation ahead of that meeting out of sensitivity for the concerns and interests of the families. That justifiable call has been ignored at the highest levels of the British Government and the British Tory Party. Boris Johnson added to it last weekend in his article in the *The Daily Telegraph* and with his callously inappropriate tweets. His statements trampled all over the feelings of the families. He ignored the fact that 13 people had been murdered on that day and that a 14th person had died from injuries he had suffered on that day. He also ignored the apology given by the former Prime Minister David Cameron specifically to the people of Derry and the families for the hurt and the wrongs done on that day.

Although it is easy to dismiss Boris Johnson because he is paid to be bizarre, as a former Foreign Secretary, he should not be allowed to get away with these remarks. We cannot dismiss the words of Karen Bradley because she is the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Her comments yesterday in the UK Parliament added to the enormous distress of the families. She completely ignored the views and requests of the PPS, as expressed last weekend. Her comments were completely inappropriate and, even worse, ignored due process and the impending decision of the PPS. She walked all over the rights, feelings and sensitivities of the families. She also ignored their grief and frustration. In the light of the history of the events of Bloody Sunday, the Oireachtas cannot let her remarks go unchecked.

Like every Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Tánaiste has had to deal with legacy issues on the nationalist and unionist sides. The grief and frustration of all families are still very raw, while we are trying to tackle those legacies. As a Parliament and as a political class, we have tried to approach these issues with sensitivity. Yesterday's remarks were absolutely callous, completely out of order and totally inappropriate. I gather that the Tánaiste met Karen Bradley last night in London and that they were due to discuss this matter. How did he express

people's anger at the remarks she made yesterday? Does she realise how offensive and careless they were? Does the Tánaiste accept that the comments she made yesterday show complete disrespect for the families? Ms Bradley said her comments had been misrepresented, but I do not accept that explanation. Does the Tánaiste accept it? Does he think Ms Bradley should withdraw her remarks immediately and issue a full apology to the families of those whom she offended?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which is one the House needs to address today. I met the Secretary of State, Karen Bradley, yesterday evening and assure the House that she is in no doubt as to where we stand on this issue. I made it very clear that the Irish Government's position was that there should be effective investigations into all deaths during the Troubles, regardless of who the perpetrators were. That is what was agreed to at Stormont House and that is what needs to be legislated for. No amnesties from prosecution are provided for in the Good Friday Agreement or any subsequent agreement, including the Stormont House Agreement. The Irish Government has been clear - we were clear again last night - that it will not support any proposal to introduce such a measure for state or non-state actors. I reiterated that point very directly last night.

While the Secretary of State's second statement yesterday afternoon, in which she clarified that "where there is evidence of wrongdoing it should always be investigated, whoever is responsible," was important, perhaps it was not enough. We need to stop and recognise that the comments she made yesterday morning caused intense concern, hurt and distress to families who had lost loved ones in dreadful circumstances. After all these years, their level of trust is understandably at a low level. Their confidence that a framework will be brought forward to address properly their deeply felt concerns is fragile, to say the least. That goes for all victims of violence perpetrated by anyone. I have met many such families and every one of them deserves respect, support and sensitivity. We have a responsibility to attempt to meet their concerns in a comprehensive way. That means fully implementing the Stormont House Agreement framework.

Most Members of the House will not have had access to the statement the Secretary of State issued in the past few minutes. It is much more detailed than the second statement she made yesterday. She apologises and says she is "profoundly sorry for the offence and hurt that [her] words have caused." She says "the language was wrong" and "deeply insensitive." She says very clearly that she wants "to see justice properly delivered" and that she and her Government "believe fundamentally in the rule of law." In the context of the tragedies we have seen in Northern Ireland, she says "where there is any evidence of wrongdoing this should be pursued without fear or favour whoever the perpetrators might be."

To answer Deputy Calleary's questions, we have raised these issues very directly and I think the Secretary of State now recognises the seriousness of the statement made yesterday. I think she is making a very significant effort today to try to correct it. She has made a very direct apology to the families. I understand she is likely to be in Belfast this evening and may comment further. I also understand she may make direct contact with the families.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The statement does not go far enough because it is digging again and ignores so many other things. The Tánaiste has said he has been clear with the British Government. I accept that he has been, but it has ignored the will of this House in relation to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. It has ignored the issues surrounding the Pat Finucane and Ballymurphy cases. It seems that there is a mindset to ignore these things in the hope they

will go away, but they cannot. This House owes it to the families to defend their rights and loved ones and stand up for their interests. How does the Tánaiste expect the families to work with Karen Bradley from here on in, given her remarks yesterday? She made the remarks in the House of Commons and was not under pressure. She was answering questions and, frankly, her comments were calculated. That she has made such remarks has added enormously to the distress of many. She has ignored the wish of the PPS for people not to become involved in this issue. The Tánaiste has to know and understand the anger of people on this and the other issues I have mentioned, including the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. The British Government's mindset is to keep ignoring these issues in the hope they will go away. That is what was behind yesterday's statement. That is actually the real feeling of the British Government about these issues.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy should read the statement in full before dismissing it entirely. I understand what he is saying in terms of the depth of feeling and distress that these comments have added to. The timing could not have been worse when one considers what is likely to happen next week with 14 families waiting for a briefing from the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland. It is a very stressful time for the families. One can also consider the timing of the judgment in the Pat Finucane case, which again has heightened focus on legacy issues. The police ombudsman's investigation and the information flow from the PSNI has also raised real concerns. There are ongoing requests for more information to be released on the Dublin-Monaghan bombings. This is a time of real sensitivity.

It also is a time of real sensitivity for many victims of violence and terrorism, from Kingsmill and many other areas, as well as for the Ballymurphy families. We are at a really sensitive point in Northern Ireland where legacy issues need to be dealt with in a sensitive way. The Secretary of State is very aware of that, and that is why she has issued a long statement today. I hope there will be direct contact with some of the families concerned to try to rebuild some trust and faith following the comments made yesterday.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ba mhaith liom an t-ábhar céanna a ardú leis an Tánaiste inniu, is é sin an méid a dúirt Karen Bradley i dTithe na Parlaiminte i Londain. Níl dabht ar bith gur chuir sé isteach go mór ar iad a fuair a ngaolta bás faoi lámh fhórsaí na Breataine. Yesterday the British Secretary of State, Karen Bradley, stated that the killings carried out by British security forces in the North were not crimes. It was an outrageous and ridiculous statement, which followed on from a statement from the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, who indicated that the British Government is planning to introduce legislation to protect serving and former British soldiers who may have committed crimes. This did not emerge from the blue, but rather was a part of a sequence of events happening within the Tory Party. The comments of both are an insult to families who have lost loved ones at the hands of the British army and their proxies in loyalist death squads who were directed by the British state. Such comments add insult to injury for the families who have suffered these awful tragedies and who have faced difficulties in trying to secure the truth for many decades. These families are faced with the British Government's continued attempts to block access to the truth and justice that they so desperately seek.

Nobody can be above the law. Bereaved families, some of whom have been campaigning for almost five decades, are entitled to the justice they seek. The Tánaiste mentioned that at Stormont House, the two Governments and the relevant parties agreed a process that was supposed to deal with issues of the past but which the British Government has thus far refused to honour. That goes to the core of what is happening within the Tory Government at this point in time. It is refusing to implement the Stormont House Agreement.

Can the Tánaiste outline to the House the conversation he had with the Secretary of State, Karen Bradley, during their engagement last night? Did he ask her to withdraw her remarks? I have read her statement and she has not withdrawn them. She has said that the language used was inappropriate. It should be clear that the problem is not just with the language she used. The content of her remarks in the House of Commons was deeply inappropriate and was insulting to the victims and to those who have lost loved ones directly at the hands of the British forces, and indirectly through loyalist actions supported through collusion and other assistance by the British state. Did the Tánaiste ask the Secretary of State the position of the British Government on the Stormont House Agreement? Will it now honour the commitments entered into many years ago when that agreement was struck? This goes right to the heart of British policy on dealing with legacy issues. The families and victims are being let down once again. The Tánaiste has acknowledged the hurt and pain that has been caused by the actions of the British Government, but many have said that they are not surprised that this is its position. They were surprised, however, that it was stated so bluntly and in such a matter-of-fact way in the House of Commons yesterday.

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy would expect, I had a very long meeting with Karen Bradley last night on this issue. At the end of the meeting, I asked her to state publically what she stated to me when I asked her for reassurance from her Government that it was still committed to the Stormont House framework on dealing with legacy issues in Northern Ireland and that it would move forward on that basis. I asked her to confirm that it could not and would not support any form of amnesty or Statute of Limitations that would mean that certain killings would not be fully investigated because of who the perpetrators may have been. I made very clear to the Secretary of State the impact that her statement earlier that day in Westminster would have on many families who were deeply hurt and very sceptical about whether they would be able to get truth and justice through the proposed legacy framework. I think she accepted all of those things and there is a strong attempt by her today to provide clarification. I understand that she may be in Belfast later this evening and may comment further but I think the apology and the confirmation that any evidence of wrongdoing should be pursued without fear or favour, whoever the perpetrators might be, is the kind of language consistent with what was agreed at Stormont House. That is what the two Governments need to recommit to: there is no other approach to legacy and dealing with it in a way that finds truth and justice for everybody and hopefully move society towards a process of reconciliation on the back of that truth. The Government will not support any other approach apart from what has been agreed between the two Governments and supported by the political parties, including Sinn Féin, in the Stormont House Agreement.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I note the Government's continued support for the Stormont House Agreement as the vehicle for dealing with legacy issues and to provide a pathway for those who have lost loved ones and for those who were injured to access justice and truth. It does not take away from the fact that the British Government is still not honouring that agreement. While the Tánaiste has outlined his comments to Karen Bradley and his hope that she would clarify a number of points, she did not provide that clarity in her statement today. She did not suggest that the British Government supported the Stormont House Agreement. Indeed, her statement is silent on that. It did not deal with the Statute of Limitations issue, in the context of the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, indicating this week that the British Government is planning to introduce legislation to protect serving and former British soldiers who may have committed crimes. The statement is silent on that issue.

Her statement conceded that the language used was wrong. It was not just an incorrect use

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of language, but the content of what she said was completely wrong and hurtful. I am mindful that the former deputy leader of Fine Gael, Senator Reilly, is calling for the resignation of Karen Bradley in the Upper House today. I am not sure whether the Government shares that view or if it was something the Tánaiste shared with her personally last night. Is the Tánaiste calling for Karen Bradley to retract her statement and not just apologise for the language used in her earlier statement?

The Tánaiste: I made it very clear to the Secretary of State last night that I believe her statement was wrong and ill-advised, and that it would cause deep offence to many people. I think she recognises that, but she can speak for herself. It is a very unusual situation where, in a different Parliament, a Minister of another Government is commenting on another Minister. I work with Karen Bradley on many issues. I believe she is a good person. I believe she has made a mistake here. She is apologising for it and is trying to correct it today. I hope she will be able to do that in a way that is convincing for the families impacted and affected by the statement made yesterday. I will continue to work with her to try to ensure that what was agreed between the two Governments and political parties as a way forward on legacy issues, which is hugely important on so many levels but in particular for victims and their families across Northern Ireland from both communities and none, is followed through on now. That is not to say it is straightforward because we know that with politics in London it is challenging to bring forward legislation linked to legacy.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: That is no secret. However, I made the Irish Government's position very clear. We will not support a legacy process that is not fair and balanced and that does not treat all-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

The Tánaiste: -----crimes and killings during the Troubles in Northern Ireland in a way that is consistent with what was agreed at Stormont House.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: At 2 p.m. on Saturday protesters will gather in Dublin city centre in the latest of a series of demonstrations organised by the National Housing and Homelessness Coalition to protest at the Government's failure to address the housing emergency. The protesters will gather at three different locations in the city centre and then converge on a building, which we will not disclose at the moment but which will symbolise what we believe is the real explanation for the country's housing crisis. It is part of a series of demonstrations that will happen in different cities to highlight the particular problems in different cities. There will be protests this weekend in Dublin, with further protests in Galway and Cork.

There are many reasons to protest in Dublin over the Government's failures in the housing crisis. The number of children and families in emergency accommodation in Dublin in the time that Fine Gael has been in government has increased by 270%. The Government has built a pitiful number of local authority houses that last year did not even meet its own pathetic targets. Property prices and rents have risen to absolutely shocking and unaffordable levels for ordinary workers. In Dublin, rents have increased by 82% since Fine Gael came into government. The average house price is now €446,000, an increase of €53,000 in the past two years. Despite repeated promises we still have no affordable housing scheme. This week we had the debacle of the Rebuilding Ireland affordable mortgage scheme. A whole generation of young working

people are forced to live with their parents and sometimes their grandparents.

How did Fine Gael let this happen? We got a glimpse of the answer this morning when we heard about the profits of Cairn Homes, the biggest owner of zoned building land in Dublin, which have increased by an incredible 267%. One can add to that Dwyer Nolan whose profits have increased by 233%. Seán Mulryan is getting paid €204 million by the Central Bank - I love the irony - for its new headquarters. The profits of I-RES REIT increased by 90% in 2018. The profits of Park Developments have increased by 100%. The profits of Kennedy Wilson in 2017 increased by €299 million. It boasts: "We are pleased to complete a record quarter that resulted in the highest level of profits in our company's history." In Dún Laoghaire the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-controlled council has just sold Johnny Ronan a public site on which 358 apartments could be built.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: My question is very simple. Is that not the real explanation for our housing crisis? While the Government has talked about providing affordable and public housing, it has not done it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It has actually facilitated obscene profiteering by vulture funds and developers - the very people who nearly brought the economy to its knees.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The boys are back in town and the Government brought them back to town. Ordinary people looking for an affordable roof over their heads are paying the price.

The Tánaiste: I do not accept that assessment, which will be no surprise to the Deputy. He approaches the housing crisis from an ideological perspective. He believes no one should make any profit from building a house anywhere as far as I can see. He believes that everybody should essentially be provided with a home by the State and that the taxpayer should pay for it all. Our position is that people who cannot afford to buy their own homes need to be supported by the State through affordable housing, affordable rental, supported rental or social housing.

Our economy is recovering from a deep recession that was caused by the collapse of a property market and a banking system. It has taken time to build capacity again in local authorities and in banking systems in terms of builders and developers being able to produce the number of homes that are needed across all sectors. We are now seeing dramatic year-on-year increases in the delivery of social housing. Working with some of the parties opposite, we will see a new affordable housing scheme delivering affordable houses in the next two to three years. We assigned money specifically for that in the previous budget. We are seeing private homes being built. We are seeing more first-time buyers purchasing houses than we have seen for a decade. The Rebuilding Ireland loan scheme the Deputy mentioned is a victim of its own success because we set €200 million aside for it. Clearly that money has now been fully used up and we need to find a way of financing that successful scheme into the future. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform are figuring out a way to do that.

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I am not suggesting that we do not have a major housing challenge to solve. Far too many people and far too many families are homeless. The number of families who are homeless has levelled off and we now need to ensure that number reduces dramatically over time. It is not correct to suggest that the delivery of homes is not moving in the correct direction. There were more than 18,000 new homes last year and 8,000 extra social houses. We need to get that figure over 10,000 and we need to increase total house building to more than 25,000, and we will. However, these things do not happen overnight and they certainly do not happen if the State takes on the burden of doing everything itself.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I presume the Tánaiste would not accuse the authorities in Berlin, for example, of being ideological. It is holding a referendum essentially to root out vulture funds and property speculators from Berlin because they are contributing to the housing crisis. That sentiment is expressed across the board in Berlin.

There is nothing comforting in what the Tánaiste has said. He has not responded to the charge that the Government's policy has essentially been about transferring large amounts of land from NAMA, based on the banks we bailed out, to the people who are now profiteering to obscene levels. The business section of today's edition of *The Irish Times* reports that even those who are profiteering are saying the Government's solution will not work. The CEO of Glenveagh Properties has said that there is not a chance of reaching the target of 35,000 units the Government hopes for and that the private market simply will not be able to do it. However, the Government's targets for building public and affordable housing go nowhere near meeting the shortfall because it has completely relied on the private sector-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----through the housing assistance payment, HAP, leasing arrangements and transfers of property assets to these people who are profiteering.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, the Deputy is way over time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is the fact. Glenveagh Properties plc seems to think it is. Where is the affordable scheme? The Government promised it in 2016, and now the Tánaiste is saying it is going to be another two or three years-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Can the Deputy conclude please, because he is over time?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----so there is no hope for a whole generation of young working people whose incomes could not possibly allow them to afford these property prices. Cairn plc properties have an average selling price of €428,000 this year. Has the Government not failed? Why does he not admit it?

The Tánaiste: When it suits the Deputy, he demonises developers, and then when it suits him to make a counterargument, he quotes them. This is a total inconsistency.

Deputy Bríd Smith: One can quote them.

The Tánaiste: We are not-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Sometimes the Devil can tell the truth.

The Tánaiste: -----developing our housing policy on the back of trying to make developers

happy. We have developed a housing policy that can deliver homes for people. We are going to add an extra 50,000 social housing units onto the existing stock over the lifetime of the Rebuilding Ireland plan and we are on schedule to do that. We are not relying on the private sector to deliver them. On a temporary basis, while we are adding the necessary numbers to our social housing, we have an over-reliance on the rental market and we are supporting people in the rental market through HAP and other mechanisms. We have always said that. That is because the problems of today cannot be solved immediately because it takes time to build homes. While we are building those homes, there is pressure and an over-reliance on a rental market which is why we have, on a temporary basis, introduced rent caps through rent pressures zones, to be able to limit the increases in rents that people have to cope with.

Anybody who suggests that one can solve this housing crisis overnight is either misleading people deliberately or is naive. It cannot be done overnight. This is a five-year housing plan and we are on target, despite the fact that there are still serious pressures that need to be resolved.

Deputy Joan Collins: I wish to raise some important questions on the issues of workers' rights.

I want to begin on a positive note with the coming into effect of the banded hours legislation this week. I have been informed by the Mandate union, which represents workers in the retail sector, that there has been a significant uptake in union membership on the basis of this legislation and a huge interest in applying for the extra hours.

However, the situation is complicated by what appears to be a joint approach by some of the major employers, such as Dunnes Stores, Lloyds and SuperValu, which have banded together to come to an arrangement where they insist that workers sign what they call a new banded hours contract. I understand this contains a threat of disciplinary action and even dismissal if workers fail to work the hours outlined in these new contracts.

I put it to the Tánaiste - I am glad the relevant Minister is present - that there should be a close monitoring of this legislation and its implementation over the next period because I believe there will be skulduggery in trying to scare workers again to not take up these banded hours.

I have also been approached recently by workers in the new, swanky and expensive restaurant, The Ivy, where the company is taking the major proportion of tips paid to staff to make up the difference in their wages. As an example, one worker signed a contract last October for €14.90 an hour. This person is now being paid €9.80 an hour, and the difference is being made up from the tips. This company is robbing the workers of their money and we do not know where the rest of the money is going. It seems it is being pocketed by the company. The staff working in the sector are reliant on tips to make up a reasonable wage to enable them to get by and to afford the outrageous rents being charged in this city for accommodation. This wage theft is an increasing practice in the sector. There also have been reports from the restaurant industry in Galway. A Bill has come through the Seanad on this issue, and I would expect widespread cross-party and indeed Government support for that legislation.

Finally, I want to raise the issue of the ongoing dispute for union recognition by ambulance paramedics who are members of the Psychiatric Nurses Association, PNA, in the health service. Is it not an incredibly bad signal for a major State employer such as the HSE to refuse to

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recognise the rights of ambulance paramedics to be represented by a union of their choice? The PNA is an officially registered trade union that already represents staff in the health service. It is even worse for the HSE to refuse an invitation to attend the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. The Government and the Minister should instruct the HSE to go to the WRC, which the PNA already has stated it is prepared to do.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. There are a lot of questions there.

Deputy Joan Collins: They are all related.

The Tánaiste: I will try to answer some of them.

This Government's record in trying to protect workers, particularly around minimum wage increases, is very strong and it will continue to be, by taking independent advice on an annual basis.

On the tips issue, to be clear, any employer that calculates salary and includes tips in that figure is acting illegally. This cannot be done.

Deputy Joan Collins: I have just said that.

The Tánaiste: Tips are separate to salary and if there are issues that the Government needs to act on there, then we will look at that closely. If there are loopholes in respect of the new legislation that are being abused, we will close them.

On the new legislation, which has been welcomed across the trade union movement generally and certainly by ICTU - I listened to Patricia King doing so during the week - this is a sensible and pragmatic way forward that involved some compromise but does provide significant increased protection for workers. That is what we are trying to do here in a way that is fair, and that has listened to the concerns of employers but has struck what we regard as a fair balance. This is a view that would be also be reflected across the trade union membership.

On trade union recognition by the HSE and the ambulance workers who want to be represented by the PNA rather than SIPTU, that is an industrial relations issue where the HSE must make a judgment call as to how to maintain a proper industrial relations infrastructure and relationship between unions and employers. The position of the HSE and the Government is fairly clear on this issue. There are different views and perspectives across trade unions on the approach here. Anyone has, of course, a right to join a trade union but that does not mean that the trade union necessarily has the right to be recognised, *per se*, by an individual employer, if another trade union is representing the concerns and rights of those workers. That is an ongoing dispute but I think that the Government's position has been made quite clear.

Deputy Joan Collins: The former Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, boasted that this was the best country to do business in. It is not the best country for a lot of workers facing exploitation by employers. It is extraordinary that the Government is saying that an employer decides who represents a worker in a workplace, and not the worker. It is a basic human right to be represented by a trade union of one's choice. It is not up to the HSE or SIPTU to make that decision. It should go to the WRC, where all issues will be discussed and decided upon and recommendations will be made. If the WRC says that those workers are entitled to be in a union of their choice, well then *c'est la vie*, that is the decision that is made. If not they can go to the European courts to challenge that decision. The Government is denying those workers that right by not

instructing the HSE to go to the WRC. That is the issue here. It is not up to the HSE to decide what union should represent those workers. It is a basic human right that is being denied them by the Government and I urge it to reconsider its position in this regard.

The Tánaiste: First, on the comments by the previous Taoiseach on trying to make Ireland the best small country in which to build a business and to work, I stand corrected if I am wrong, but my understanding is we have the second highest minimum wage in Europe now, and we are very proud to have that. At the same time, we are maintaining a competitive economy that is creating jobs every single day. That is not an easy thing to do and we will continue to try to manage an economy that protects workers' rights and pays them a decent wage for a week's work. We will continue to take independent advice on where the minimum wage should be and act on that as a Government. At the same time, we will continue to talk to employers about the supports they need to be able to build and grow competitive businesses out of Ireland. That approach has worked very well in the last seven years. We have seen unemployment fall from over 15% to just over 5%, and it is continuing to fall month on month. That is the approach we will continue to take.

In respect of the approach of the HSE in the other issue the Deputy mentioned, those matters are well understood and debated at this stage.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: I understand the Government Chief Whip has a business proposal to put to us.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne): It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that there shall be no oral questions to the Taoiseach taken next week and, accordingly, on Tuesday, questions to the Minister for Justice and Equality shall take place after the motion re deferred surrender order (referral to committee); and that, on Wednesday, the sos shall take place on the conclusion of Questions on Promised Legislation, in accordance with Standing Order 25(1).

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are only weeks away from the European elections. These are the first elections since 2016, when there was strong evidence of online interference in the electoral process. Deputy James Lawless has published the Advertising and Social Media Transparency Bill and it has gone through pre-legislative scrutiny. Will the Tánaiste commit that the Government will see it through Committee Stage ahead of the elections?

The Tánaiste: I will have to come back to the Deputy on the detail later today. There may be a money message issue; I am not sure.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Yesterday, a man was shot in broad daylight on Blakestown Road here in Dublin. Last week, we had another shooting in broad daylight at a retail park in Drogheda. These follow a spate of shootings and killings over the past number of weeks. Two men

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have died and others have been seriously injured as a result of criminal feuds. People in many communities are living in fear. They are great communities but they are being victimised by gangs. Those communities deserve a lot better. This is not just restricted to the urban areas. It also affects rural Ireland. The CSO statistics show that crime in nearly all categories has increased. Despite this, Garda youth diversion programmes are chronically underfunded as is the drugs task force. There are 1,000 fewer gardaí on the beat today than last year. What action is the Government taking to deal with this increased level of gangland crime? Is it not time for the Garda Commissioner's plan for redeploying gardaí to the front line to be fast tracked?

The Tánaiste: I am not going to comment on operational decisions that the Garda needs to make. Of course we are aware of the incident that took place in west Dublin yesterday and the need for an appropriate response to it from a policing perspective. There is ongoing contact between the Department of Justice and Equality and An Garda Síochána to ensure a proactive response. We have seen significant successes in respect of organised crime, in particular in respect of a response to gangland crime in the north inner city. However, there is a need for constant dialogue between the Department of Justice and Equality and An Garda Síochána to ensure it has the resources and policy platform it needs to be effective.

Deputy Willie Penrose: Reference has been made to supporting small employers across the country. I received a communication from a representative body for hairdressers stating that the Government is determined to increase dole queues, close down small to medium sized businesses and deny creative, artistic young people an opportunity to gain employment and learn skills for life. It is crushing small to medium sized businesses, which are the cornerstone of many communities, and the service industry, which generates over 200,000 jobs. That is from the hairdressing industry. It was hit with a 4.5% increase in rates. There was an increase in the national minimum wage, which I support. Now there has been an abolition of the training rates. This came in on 4 or 5 March and they were only notified on 1 March. There are two or three businesses in the constituency that are ready to go out of business already. They cannot sustain any more of this. The hairdressing industry took a fierce blow from the VAT increase. It might be all right in the big cities but in small towns and villages, this is the straw that breaks the camel's back. We are serving them well by wiping them out.

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): It was the Low Pay Commission that recommended to the Government last year that the training rates be abolished, on the basis that they were not being used. That report was published in the fourth quarter of last year and laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas at that time. There was no delay whatsoever in telling anybody in the industry. We all received the letter from the hairdressing industry this week but it is certainly not news.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Under the programme for Government, on Northern Ireland, the Government commits to maintaining the needs of victims and survivors at the core of its approach. I heard the Tánaiste say today that he accepts that Karen Bradley made a mistake and he accepts her apology. I would like to point out that there has been a systemic campaign by the Tory Party to clear the way for these soldiers not being charged. Her statement that they are innocent and that they never committed a crime because they were following orders has to be utterly rejected, not as a mistake but as part of a campaign to whitewash the activities of the paratroopers in Derry and Ballymurphy. Both of those historic incidents are coming up for scrutiny in the near future. It is not good enough to have gone to dinner with Karen Bradley and to accept that what she said was a mistake. It cannot be a mistake. She put those words together very deliberately. I am asking the Tánaiste to do what he says he will do in the programme for Government and

stick by the victims and survivors in Northern Ireland. I urge him to call in the British ambassador, as he did the Russian ambassador when there were suspicions over activities at that embassy, and insist that Karen Bradley resigns and that those remarks are not allowed to influence whether the soldiers who killed 13 people on Bloody Sunday and 11 people in Ballymurphy go to trial.

The Tánaiste: I dealt with this issue in some detail earlier. It is important to quote from the Secretary of State's statement today, in which she says that where there is any evidence of wrongdoing, this should be pursued without fear or favour, whoever the perpetrators may be. That principle underpins our approach to dealing with legacy issues and it is one from which we will not depart. I have made the Irish Government's position very clear.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The Tánaiste is not following the programme for Government. He is not sticking with survivors.

The Tánaiste: In response to Deputy Calleary's earlier question on the online advertising Bill, pre-legislative scrutiny took place and we are awaiting a scrutiny report. Once that is received, the Government will make a decision.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The programme for Government is strong in its commitment on rural regeneration. Thurles is famed for the founding fathers of the GAA, the trip to Semple and the matches. Now An Post, which has become a quango, has unilaterally decided to move the post office from the square in Thurles, an iconic location near Hayes hotel, out to a shopping centre. That is killing the centre of the town, as has happened in many towns where shopping centres have been developed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to address promised legislation.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There is promised legislation to rejuvenate towns. The Department of Deputy Michael Ring has given funding for Liberty Square of over €1.5 million. Last Monday evening I saw them painting a new sign on the post office. They are spending €6 million on new signage in post offices yet Angus Lavery said on radio last week that this one is being moved in six weeks' time. This is farcical. One hand does not know what the other is doing. I urge the Tánaiste to ask the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment to instruct An Post to treat communities with respect. It has been supported for decades and should not be hunting the post offices out of the town and affecting other businesses. There is a huge knock-on effect as regards where people spend their money if they get it in shopping centres. I am not anti-shopping centres but I am for the support of Thurles town centre and small businesses.

The Tánaiste: I am not sure it is appropriate for us to be deciding on the location of post offices on the floor of the Dáil.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Tánaiste should not wash his hands of it.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Has the Tánaiste made any further inquiries about the young woman who is being held prisoner in the United Arab Emirates? Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed al-Maktoum is the daughter of the King of Dubai and Prime Minister of the UAE. I have asked the Tánaiste about the matter previously. Clearly, Sheikha Latifa is being held prisoner in that country. The EU-Arab League meeting occurred recently. Has there been any outcome from it in terms of civil and political rights in the medieval Arab states, particularly as

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regards the oppression of women, the Christian faith and civil society groups? Are we making inquiries?

The Tánaiste: I do not have details on that specific case, which I do not believe is as straightforward as the Deputy is making it out to be.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Many people watched a programme in which the young woman spoke to us.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we let the Tánaiste respond, please?

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: We watched it before anyone, including the former President Mary Robinson, went out there.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, can we let the Tánaiste respond?

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: She seemed like a normal young woman.

The Tánaiste: I am not going to comment in detail on a specific case without having the full facts in front of me. I suggest that the Deputy submit a parliamentary question and I will try to give him as much detail as I can.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I have asked the Tánaiste twice.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: On a recent visit to Sligo, the Taoiseach met a delegation from a hard-working committee of people in Gurteen who were trying to save their post office.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: We cannot hear the Deputy.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: The Taoiseach stated that he would ask the management of An Post to meet a small delegation from that committee. I do not doubt that he has done so. To date, however, and despite many requests by letter and so on, no meeting has taken place. We all agree that post office closures have to happen. Some offices cannot be defended. However, we have seen six closures in a ten-mile radius of Gurteen village. Of the 950 post offices left in the country, the one in question is in the top 500 for business transactions. The Government has spoken about trying to stop rural decline. In 1963, Mr. John Healy from Charlestown wrote a book about rural decline, in which he pointed out that no one had shouted “Stop”. I call on the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, to shout “Stop” in this case once and for all and prevent a village from being wiped out because nothing is done.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I am shouting “Stop” now, as time is up.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

The Tánaiste: When I was in Sligo, I also met someone who made the case for that particular post office. I will ensure that the Minister is aware of the issue.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: My issue is literally on promised legislation. Indeed, were the Ceann Comhairle to give an award for the most promised legislation, it would have to go to the parent and student charter Bill. It was announced in December 2016 and underwent committee scrutiny in 2017. The then Minister, Deputy Bruton, at the 2018 teacher conferences, promised online safety protections in the context of that Bill. As far as I know, though, the Bill still has

not been written or presented to the Dáil. There has just been a draft. Last week, the same Minister made yet another promise regarding the online safety Bill. He said that he would write it, but it has not been written. When will we see these Bills and when will Fine Gael take the issue seriously?

Why was the announcement of the online safety Bill made this week? Was it connected to media queries from *The Guardian* and *The Observer* newspapers about Fine Gael lobbying on behalf of data and social media companies? Those queries would have been received last week. Is it the case that a decision was made to re-announce unwritten legislation relating to online safety in light of that publicity at the weekend?

The Tánaiste: My understanding is that a great deal of work has been done on the parent and student charter Bill and that it will be before the Cabinet in the next few weeks. It is no secret that the Government has had to prioritise in recent weeks the preparation and delivery of the omnibus Bill on Brexit. That has resulted in some delays in other areas, but I understand that the Bill the Deputy referred to is well advanced and will be before the Cabinet shortly.

Deputy Pat Buckley: A Programme for a Partnership Government reads: “For those vulnerable to suicidal behaviour, the HSE Mental Health Directorate should provide a co-ordinated, uniform, quality assured and safe 24/7 service and deliver pathways of care”. It goes on, but the line I wish to discuss reads: “This will be monitored and recommendations will be made by the appropriate Oireachtas Committee.” This is my fifth time raising in the Chamber the issue of the Joint Committee on Future of Mental Health Care. I learned from a Commencement matter last week in the Seanad in the name of Senator Devine that the Government had decided the committee would not sit any further. The first page of the committee’s interim report reads: “Based on these initial briefing sessions, the Joint Committee has already formed the view that it is necessary that a permanent Mental Health Oireachtas Committee be established in order to have ongoing accountability”. I am seeking clarity. We are in a crisis. Maybe Members of the Oireachtas are privileged in certain areas and can afford health insurance or private health care, but we are facing a major crisis in the mental health services. The joint committee was a very strong one that held people to account and got information. I call on the Government to re-establish it and ensure accountability in the mental health services.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): I advise the Deputy that the delivery of mental health services is not dependent on the existence of an Oireachtas joint committee on mental health.

Deputy Pat Buckley: With all due respect-----

Deputy Jim Daly: I just wanted to make that difference clear.

Deputy Pat Buckley: -----we have been listening to this waffle for the past-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy allow the Minister of State to answer, please?

Deputy Pat Buckley: No. It is not an appropriate answer. Committees allow for accountability.

Deputy Regina Doherty: Let him finish.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy, resume your seat.

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Deputy Pat Buckley: We will fob it off to some other organisation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputy Buckley let the Minister speak?

Deputy Pat Buckley: That organisation is the HSE, which is not accountable because it cannot be held accountable.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Pat Buckley: This is why we need the committee.

Deputy Jim Daly: The delivery of services is not dependent on an Oireachtas committee, but I have no objection to the establishment of one. As I understand it, though, the establishment of Oireachtas committees is a matter more appropriate to the Ceann Comhairle's good office and the Business Committee as opposed to the Government.

Deputy Pat Buckley: Who called the shots on it? We are still not getting an answer. This is ridiculous.

Deputy Robert Troy: A Programme for a Partnership Government gives a firm commitment to reviewing the TEN-T in Ireland. TEN-T designation opens up wide funding streams from the EU, and it is especially important in light of Brexit that we be able to review our network designation. According to a parliamentary reply from the Minister from Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, as recently as two weeks ago, though, he is yet to make an application to the European Commission on reviewing TEN-T designation. Is this a priority for the Government? It was included in the programme for Government more than three years ago. If it is a priority, when can we expect an application to be made?

The Tánaiste: Delivery of transport infrastructure is a significant priority for the Government, particularly outside of Dublin in the context of regional development and rebalancing under the 2040 plan. Regarding an application for change in TEN-T designation, I will have to ask the Minister to revert to the Deputy directly with the timing.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We have been informed locally in recent days that Carnonagh's courthouse will close temporarily for repair works on its roof due to health and safety issues, with sittings to move to Buncrana until the work is completed. Like other Oireachtas Members, will the Tánaiste use his good offices to intervene and make representations to the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works, OPW, to ensure that the work is completed properly and a location is found in the community for court sittings in the interim, in which respect there are a number of options?

The Tánaiste: I will do that.

Deputy John Brassil: Pages 35 to 37 of A Programme for a Partnership Government deal with the issue of tax compliance. Tax compliance works both ways, in that Revenue has an obligation to allow citizens to reclaim tax in a timely manner. Prior to 1 January, someone would have used a Med 1 form to reclaim medical expenses. It was a two-page, simple and straightforward form that came with an explanatory page. It has since been replaced by a form 12S, which is 14 pages long and is only available to someone who has Internet and email access. As the Tánaiste knows, many elderly people do not have access to email accounts, broadband or even the Internet. Will he ask the Minister for Finance to intervene and ensure the return of the simple Med 1 form? I do not know whether other constituency offices are like mine, but numer-

ous people have attended my office over being unable to manage this complex and difficult form and we have had to try to fill out the forms for them, open up emails for them, etc. Removing the Med 1 form has been unhelpful to citizens. Will the Government have it reinstated, please, to make the system easy for people to use?

The Tánaiste: Clearly, this is an issue for the Revenue Commissioners. I will certainly pass on the Deputy's message to the Minister for Finance. Generally, in my experience, Revenue's online service is really good, but if there is a problem, we will try to address it.

Deputy Mary Butler: Every day in Ireland 11 people are diagnosed with dementia. There are 55,000 people living with the condition. There are nine dementia advisers covering 13 counties, but the minimum required is 32. Unfortunately, the HSE's service plan for 2019 does not provide for the appointment of new dementia advisers, even though the Minister for Health and the Minister for State, Deputy Jim Daly, were extremely supportive of this request. Is this an indication that there is a heavy-handed approach on the part of the Department of Health in making the decision and overruling both the Minister and the Minister of State?

1 o'clock

Deputy Jim Daly: I thank the Deputy for her question. As she is aware, we conducted a review of the role of dementia advisers in order to inform future policy decisions. The review was very positive and while we are very supportive of expanding the network of dementia advisers throughout the country, unfortunately, we are not in a position to do so this year. We are not able to expand the network this year owing to other commitments, but it is our objective to do so as soon as possible.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: If it is all right with the Tánaiste, I will direct my question to the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, because he is familiar with the issue I wish to raise. I again refer to the Rosalie unit in Castlerea, County Roscommon. I acknowledge that the Minister of State has engaged on the issue over a long period of time. In recent days independent assessments of the remaining 11 patients in the unit were carried out. In some cases, patients' relatives received very short notice, about which they are not happy. In two or three cases advocates were called in when family members could not attend. Will the Minister of State ensure the patients in those two or three cases are reassessed in the presence of their relatives? In the context of the programme for Government, will the Minister of State ask the HSE to consider reopening the unit and operating it at its full capacity of 33 patients, bearing in mind that, per head of population, County Roscommon has the highest incidence of Alzheimer's disease in the country.

Deputy Jim Daly: As the Deputy said, an independent review is being conducted. Only one resident has no family member and an advocate has been assigned to ensure this patient's voice will be heard as part of the process. I am aware of the concern the Deputy has raised about the giving of notice and have spoken to local HSE management about the matter. I am satisfied that every step is being taken to address it.

Deputy Noel Grealish: The Tánaiste may be aware that designated salmonid waters by-law No. 964 of 2018 was signed into law by the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, on 25 October 2018. The by-law designates seven State-owned lakes as salmonid lakes, but it was challenged in the courts and the case was not defended by the Government. The by-law was signed into law in order to protect native species in seven salmonid lakes and control invasive species which had been illegally introduced. A further by-

law must be implemented as a matter of urgency to protect the native species in the seven lakes. Why was the case not defended by the State before the courts? No representative of the State appeared in court to defend by-law No. 964 of 2018 when it was challenged by pike fishing lobby groups. Will the Tánaiste to give a commitment to the House that emergency legislation will be introduced as a matter of urgency to protect the seven salmonid lakes and the native fishing industry? I assure him that if the Government does so, it will receive my full support. I understand the Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, is working hard on the matter.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue which has been examined by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and is not considered to be one that can be appropriately included in primary legislation. Primary legislation in the inland fisheries area generally sets out a framework for the *vires* of the relevant Minister to enact secondary legislation to encompass fisheries management matters. Primary legislation is generally not prescriptive in terms of detailed management interventions. The Minister of State at the Department, Deputy Canney, has asked it to reflect on the advice received and the outcome of recent court proceedings in the context of the intended by-laws. It must be emphasised that as a matter of policy the lakes in question have long been designated for management, primarily for the benefit of wild brown trout, and that policy designation remains. Inland Fisheries Ireland has advised that stock management plans for the lakes for 2019 have been approved by its board.

Deputy Tom Neville: In July 2018 it was announced that the Cabinet had approved a proposal to change the treatment of farms and businesses under the fair deal scheme. The proposal was to extend the three-year cap for farms and businesses where a family successor continued to operate the farm or business for six years. Will the Tánaiste provide an update on this proposal and indicate when it will be implemented?

Deputy Jim Daly: I thank the Deputy for the question. We are awaiting final legal advice on the matter. There has been a delay in receiving it, as experienced in most Departments, because Brexit has been given priority, but I hope the delays will ease soon. Some minor technicalities must be teased out, but I am hopeful that, once we receive a response on them, we can have the heads of the Bill published quickly and presented to the Government. I met representatives of the IFA yesterday to discuss the matter and thanked the association for its continued support in this endeavour.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: My question relates to the commitments given in the programme for Government in respect of new recruits in An Garda Síochána. In response to a parliamentary question tabled by Deputy Michael McGrath on 5 March the Minister for Justice and Equality said there had been 2,400 new recruits since 2015. Of that number, Galway only received 36, while Sligo-Leitrim received 24, Westmeath, 36; Longford-Roscommon and Mayo, 18 each; and Donegal, 54. Therefore, only 8.5% of new recruits have been deployed along the western seaboard. How does the Government intend to redress the regional imbalance in the deployment of new recruits in An Garda Síochána?

The Tánaiste: While I take it that the Deputy's figures are accurate, I point out that where new recruits are sent is determined by demand in policing in different areas, as decided by An Garda Síochána. Deployment is an operational matter for the Garda Commissioner, but I will certainly pass on the Deputy's question to the Minister for Justice and Equality.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Louth County Council has confirmed that it received instructions

to stop issuing home loan approvals under the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme. These are the very loans the Government stated would assist families on low to middle incomes and first-time buyers who had been turned down by the banks. Over half of the €200 million in the fund has been drawn down in what is the first year of a three-year scheme. The take-up is a clear indication of the need for this funding and, more importantly, additional funding. Why did the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government issue an instruction to Louth County Council to cease issuing Rebuilding Ireland home loans? Officials in Louth County Council are hardly making it up. Are they making it up, or did the Department instruct them to stop issuing loans?

The Tánaiste: The Housing Agency has recommended 1,772 applications for approval to the end of February this year. At the end of February the agency had assessed 4,153 applications since the scheme had opened. Clearly, there is a lot of demand for the scheme which is proving to be very successful, despite some initial criticism of it. There has been a big uptake of it and we need to make sure it is adequately funded. We cannot approve the allocation of money that is not available. Therefore, the Ministers for Housing, Planning and Local Government and Finance are looking at ways by which we can continue the scheme and make sure it is properly funded in order that the demand can be met.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Durkan is next.

Deputy Imelda Munster: On a point of clarification-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, the Deputy can only ask one question.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Has the funding been stopped? That is my question.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is only one question allowed.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Tánaiste did not answer it.

The Tánaiste: I will not have the House misled

An Ceann Comhairle: Who is misleading the House?

The Tánaiste: The funding has not been stopped. We are looking to continue the scheme, but we need to make sure it will be properly funded into the future.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The officials are making it up.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Central Bank (Amendment) Bill purports to deal with a number of issues in the public arena. When is the Bill likely to be brought before the House in order that we can debate it on Second Stage?

The Tánaiste: It expect it to be brought before the House later in the year, probably towards the end of the third or fourth quarter.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: We are coming up to the fifth anniversary of the announcement by the former Minister Pat Rabbitte on broadband. There have been many commitments made in that regard. There are several commitments given in the programme for Government. People who are not able to access high speed broadband, or broadband in any form, believe the Government has abandoned any realistic attempt to roll out broadband to communities that are demanding it. There have been several debates on the issue recently. Is there any serious

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commitment by the Government to actually put in place a plan to deliver broadband to the communities that do not currently have it and that are not covered by the commercial or Eir programmes?

Deputy Brian Stanley: I also have a question about the national broadband plan, against which it is fair to say a huge question mark has been put by the Taoiseach and the Minister in recent weeks in responses to questions about the cost which is running to multiples of the original estimated figure. Senior Ministers and the Taoiseach made the point that there was a question mark against the whole project, never mind the questions raised by Members in the House. It is clear that the plan is in trouble. It is also clear that there is concern on the Government benches about the issue. We are very concerned about it. I have been in and out of the Chamber in the past two and half years to raise it, as have other Deputies. Fianna Fáil has recently taken the same position as Sinn Féin on using the ESB to roll out broadband. We are aware that the ESB pulled out once 300,000 homes and businesses were taken by Eir. Is it not time to look at a plan B? There are questions about the cost and the viability of the plan, as well as about the logistics-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's point is clear. Can we get an answer to his question, please?

Deputy Brian Stanley: I ask that the spokespersons for the Opposition parties and the Taoiseach sit down to reach agreement on the issue.

The Tánaiste: I totally accept that this is a genuine question which arises from a genuine concern on the part of both Deputies. There is an absolute commitment on the part of the Government to deliver broadband to the households and businesses that do not have it. Some 74% of premises in the State now have access to high speed broadband, which represents a dramatic improvement in terms of where we were in recent years, but it is not enough. We cannot have a rural divide in broadband provision, which means investing public money to fix the problem. We are committed to doing so and have been through a long process. The Minister, Deputy Bruton, needs to bring recommendations to the Government on how we can move forward, having fully assessed the issue of value for money and all of the other matters raised by Deputies. I understand he will do so shortly.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Questions on Promised Legislation. All 21 Deputies were reached.

Sitting suspended at 1.15 p.m. and resumed at 1.55 p.m.

Estimates for Public Services 2019: Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2019: Vote 13 - Office of Public Works.

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) Deputy Bernard Durkan - to discuss the upgrading of the M4 and the respective interchanges at Maynooth and Celbridge; (2) Deputy Noel Rock - to discuss proposals for legislation in relation to regulations regarding electric scooters; (3) Deputy Catherine Martin - to discuss providing assistance to owners affected by building defects and their access to the Home Building Finance Ireland fund; (4) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss the home care package offered to a constituent who has been assessed by the HSE as requiring 56 home care hours per week; (5) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to discuss provision of a women's refuge facility in the constituency of Cavan-Monaghan; (6) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to discuss the urgent need for clarification on the legal standing of circulars distributed to staff in the education sector by the Department of Education and Skills and whether these circulars form part of the terms and conditions of staff; (7) Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - the need to adequately fund Donore community drug team's Targeting Resources at Youth programme; (8) Deputies Lisa Chambers, Dara Calleary, Bobby Aylward, John Curran and John McGuinness - to debate the need for Government to provide Spinraza for spinal muscular atrophy, SMA, sufferers in Ireland, the need to approve Spinraza for approval on the drugs reimbursement scheme, the failure to make the drug Spinraza available for children suffering from spinal muscular atrophy, and the need for the Minister for Health to outline what course of action he will take in relation to the provision of Spinraza for children with spinal muscular atrophy; (9) Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice - the delays experienced by older people throughout the country in getting their incontinence wear from the HSE; (10) Deputies Fiona O'Loughlin, Barry Cowen and Sean Fleming - the current status of the new school building for St Paul's secondary school, Monasterevin; (11) Deputy Frank O'Rourke - to discuss the need for public transport improvements in north Kildare, specifically BusConnects for the Celbridge area; (12) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - the need for a new school building to be provided urgently for Scoil Chaitríona senior and junior school in Renmore, Galway; (13) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the proposed transfer of Thurles post office; (14) Deputy Thomas Byrne - the need for increased primary school provision in Ashbourne; (15) Deputy Jim O'Callaghan - the need to provide support to all victims of terrorism and related violence based in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland; (16) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss with the Minister for Education and Skills what plans his Department has put in place for a new site and premises for Coláiste Dhún Másc, Phortlaoise; (17) Deputies Clare Daly and Mick Wallace - to discuss the ongoing situation in Venezuela and the need for the Irish Government and the EU to work for a peaceful solution to the crisis in Venezuela; and (18) Deputy Peadar Tóibín - to discuss the impact of the insurance industry on Irish business.

The matters raised by Deputies Bernard Durkan, Noel Rock, Catherine Martin and Thomas Byrne have been selected for discussion.

Local Drug and Alcohol Task Forces: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Joan Collins: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— global opium production jumped by 65 per cent from 2016 to 2017, the highest ever recorded by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and global cocaine manufacture rose by 56 per cent between 2013 and 2016, reaching its highest level ever in 2016;

— illicit drugs like opium and cocaine are booming and new drugs like fentanyl are emerging as a major drug problem;

— the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction's Early Warning System for new drugs monitored 670 new psychoactive substances by the end of 2017, up from 300 in 2013;

— cannabis remains the world's most commonly used drug, with 192 million people using it in 2018;

— in the European Union (EU), over 92 million people have used illicit drugs; and

— drug markets continue to be the most significant illegal market in the EU, with over 33 per cent of organised criminal groups involved in the production, trafficking and supply of illicit drugs;

further notes that:

— over 26 per cent (more than one in four) of the Irish population have used illicit drugs, with cannabis the most widely used;

— our communities are now coping with an increasingly complex and chaotic drug problem that includes prescription drugs, illegal drugs, new psychoactive substances, high-strength cannabis, crack cocaine, crystal meth and ketamine, and widespread availability and misuse of alcohol continues to be a core part of the polydrug problem;

— 695 people died from drug-related causes in 2015, and there has been a 61 per cent increase in drug-related deaths between 2004 and 2015 and drug-related deaths are 3.5 times higher than road deaths; and

— insidious, ongoing day-to-day related intimidation is being experienced in our communities, and in 2015 less than ten per cent of people experiencing intimidation reported it to An Garda Síochána for fear of reprisal;

calls on the Taoiseach's department to appoint a senior official to the National Drugs Strategy's (NDS) national structures to ensure direct accountability of all agencies at national, regional and local level for their active participation in implementing the new NDS; and

calls on the Government to:

— implement its own Programme for Government commitment through the immediate allocation of an emerging needs fund to the task forces to support community drug projects in the delivery of services that can respond to current and emerging service gaps in communities;

— commit to a clear timetable for prompt implementation of the Public Health (AI-

cohol) Act 2018 without further delay;

— accelerate the work of the Garda asset profilers targeting people making significant sums of money from the drug trade living in our communities;

— ensure that the new scheme proposed in the NDS for young people is developed through a partnership approach involving youth services, schools, and community drug projects;

— conclude the work of the working group on alternative approaches to criminalisation and end the criminalisation for personal use;

— strengthen the community voice across all levels of the NDS and make immediate investment in community leadership and participation programmes;

— acknowledge the relationship between addiction and mental health and commit to greater co-operation between the relevant agencies, as considered in ‘A Vision for Change’ and the NDS; and

— cease the Health Service Executive reviews of drug and alcohol task forces, with immediate effect, as these reviews are being carried out without any discussion or consultation with the national NDS committees that are responsible for supporting and monitoring the task forces, and it is incompatible with the interagency partnership approach that underlies the NDS for one agency to carry out a review and present it as a *fait accompli*.”

I wish to share time with Deputies Mick Wallace and Clare Daly.

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

Deputy Joan Collins: I present this motion to provide the House with the opportunity to engage in an urgent and focused debate on the implementation by drug and alcohol task forces of the national drugs strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, which was launched in July 2017. The national drugs strategy has enjoyed cross-party support over the years with Ministers in successive Governments committed to maintaining the interagency partnership approach to tackling the drugs crisis in Ireland, in particular in the cities. Is this Government going to be the first to buck that support? The strategy is two years into its three-year priority action plan and CityWide is more than concerned that the action plan will not be realised. CityWide emailed out a briefing document a couple of weeks ago, which this Private Members’ motion reflects. These are the very people who were ignored in the 1990s. Politicians recognised then that they had to be brought to the table in respect of task forces and the innovative model which was then established to reflect community views and link with agencies.

The points of concern and the proposals set out in the motion are about ensuring the national drugs strategy action plan is a success. The motion sets out first the international background. Opium production increased by 65% between 2016 and 2017, which is the highest level ever recorded. Cocaine manufacturing increased by 56% between 2013 and 2016 and was at its highest level ever in the latter year. Europe’s early warning system monitored 670 new psychoactive substances by the end of 2017, up from 300 in 2013. Cannabis, the most commonly used drug, was used by 192 million people globally last year. EU data show a significant increase in the potency of cannabis resin from 8.14% THC in 2006 to 17.2% in 2016. Drug markets con-

tinue to be the most important illegal markets in the EU with over 30% of organised criminal groups participating in the production, trafficking and supply of illicit drugs. There were 695 drug-related deaths in Ireland in 2015. Significantly, drug-related deaths occur at a rate three and a half times higher than the rate at which deaths occur on our roads.

There are 50 actions in the action plan for 2017 to 2020. These actions are designed to co-ordinate and implement the national drugs strategy at local and regional level. The key role of task forces is to provide a local response to local needs and the interagency partnership approach continues to be the cornerstone of the process. Community participation in decision-making to shape responses is also a key focus of task forces.

The link between national and local is the role of the national oversight committee and standing sub-committee.

There are serious challenges for the strategic role of the task forces. The most important is the funding for the task forces. There were no budget increases from 2015 to 2018 and in 2014 there was a reduction from 2013. There has been a cumulative cut of 37% to the budget. There has been no restoration even though funding to the HSE is increasing significantly each year. The projects are struggling to survive and maintain the existing level of service, to pay the salaries of the people employed and to meet the new and emerging needs. They are under huge pressure. The health budget has been increasing year on year so there is no reason for the base core funding for task forces remaining the same since 2014. The workers and communities feel they have been ignored and that the work they do is not recognised. They do not get the same recognition as other groups. The 2019 HSE plan shows a figure of an additional €1.9 million for overall social inclusion activities, with addiction services one of the five areas to be covered. There is no indication of any increase for the task forces. This is the problem of the core funding not being reversed. The only new moneys mentioned in the Minister of State's amendment is €1 million. One could say that is a coincidence and more cynical people might say it is a cynical move before today's debate.

CityWide has indicated that national drugs strategy actions are not being brought to the table by statutory agencies for consideration. There must be a mandate to the task forces to develop action plans based on the national drugs strategy actions. CityWide indicates that there are huge challenges to community participation. That must be actively supported and resourced and CityWide proposes an immediate investment in community leadership and participation programmes with a view to strengthening the community voice across all levels of the national drugs strategy. The Minister of State's amendment makes reference to that, but she does not say there will be immediate investment in it. She says it should be resourced, but there is a big difference between investment and resourcing.

The national drugs strategy commits to addressing the drugs issue with an integrated approach through inter-agency partnership. Strong co-ordination and co-operation are needed in delivering the actions involving 17 Departments, agencies and sections. Some agencies are not participating. They should be identified and forced to participate as it is in their remit to participate in the structures. The motion calls for the Department of the Taoiseach to appoint a senior official to the NDS national structures to ensure the direct accountability of all agencies at national, regional and local level for their active participation in implementing the new strategy. The Minister of State's amendment says there is robust accountability, but there is not. There are problems in that regard and we must try to tease them out.

Regarding the new scheme for young people, the increase in the strength of cannabis is leading to growing concern about the impact on young people's mental health, and community youth projects are reporting a significant increase in benzodiazepine use by young people. The Lifting the Lid on Greentown study shows how young people are being recruited into criminal gangs. CityWide has called for a new scheme for young people to be developed through a partnership approach, including youth services, those involved in the young people's facilities and services fund, YPFSF, schools and community drug projects.

Drug related intimidation is a serious threat to local communities. It was the local communities who detected that this type of intimidation was taking place. There is an urgent need to bring together a high-level group that includes senior justice and Garda personnel, community representatives and relevant stakeholders to establish an action plan to address this problem. I believe this action is worth examining and developing. Expansion and acceleration of the work of the Garda asset profilers are crucial. The work of the working group on alternative approaches to criminalisation must be brought to a conclusion without further delay to end criminalisation of possession for personal use and to address these harms in a better way by referring people to health led treatment rather than into the criminal justice system.

On the drug and alcohol action in the national drugs strategy, committing to an integrated public health approach to drugs and alcohol abuse is a key priority. Again, it is not adequately funded. CityWide is calling for an engagement with the task force on a timetable for implementation and monitoring of the 2018 alcohol Act, but funding is a prerequisite for doing that.

A key point I wish to make relates to the HSE reviews and the role of the HSE. CityWide welcomes the health-led response on drugs and alcohol, but in the broader, holistic sense of a public health response with mental health programmes and so forth. Currently, however, we are seeing a deterioration in how the national bodies are working. The subgroup is supposed to check the accountability of the task forces to the national forum, but instead the HSE is carrying out reviews in this regard. The subgroup should be doing those reviews and checking accountability, not the HSE. How much do these reviews cost? There have been three already. I have a copy of the remit of the review being carried out on the Canal Communities local drugs task force, with which I am involved. It is the work plan of what it is investigating. This is not the work of the HSE. It is the work of the communities and the task force. I have been at two reviews of the task force in recent years, as I am on the task force, and it does a very good job in terms of accountability for where money is going and what proposals have been put in place for the communities.

A total 21 of the 24 co-ordinators have been selected from a panel from just the HSE. Under the national drugs strategy the situation should be that a representative from both the task force and the HSE should be on those panels, but that has been refused. Heretofore the co-ordinators would link the drugs task forces to the HSE, but now it is the other way around. The HSE is doing the reverse.

The innovative model of the task forces is being threatened. People in CityWide who were part of the initial process in the 1990s are saying this. Those voices should be heard. The motion here from CityWide should be accepted by the House. I support the amendments put forward by the other parties. The Minister of State should listen to the words from the community.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I support the motion. We could implement all the actions in the motion and matters would certainly improve for people who are suffering under a crazy system,

but many of the situations that give rise to the drugs issue will persist. The criminalisation of drugs is a travesty. Above all, it is a gift to the gangs that have been handed by the State a tax-free business that is worth over €2 billion annually. The drugs they sell are not controlled by any quality checks and could have anything in them. When heroin is pushed onto the black market, it gets cut or contaminated with a long list of materials that were never meant to enter the human bloodstream, such as paracetamol, drain cleaner, sand, powdered milk, talcum powder, coffee, brick dust, cement dust and crushed bleach crystals. It could be virtually anything. When a person takes contaminated heroin, it clogs up the veins, damaging one after another around the person's body and destroying it as it travels. This is the reason heroin addicts on the streets look in ill health, more so than just the heroin itself.

One of the most important actions proposed in the motion in this respect is to end criminalisation of possession for personal use. Four years ago members of the joint committee on justice travelled to Portugal to see how its decriminalisation system is working and to talk to those involved. They were told by the Portuguese authorities that in the 15 years since decriminalisation, drug consumption had not increased, Portugal did not become a destiny for drug consumers, the number of crimes directly related to drug addiction decreased, and drug consumers were no longer looked upon or treated as criminals, not only by the authorities but also by society and their families. It put an end to thousands of criminal cases for drug consumption, which cost time and money with absolutely no gain.

It costs the State billions to police drugs. It is a colossal waste of lives, time, work, resources and talent. It does not even work. Almost one in five people in this country take illegal drugs regularly. They grow their own or buy them online, in the streets or in taxi cabs, or they get them delivered to their homes by An Post. Nobody has a clue if what they are consuming is safe. We must seriously consider decriminalisation and the possibility of directly regulating and taxing the sale of the products to the public.

We must also examine the problems behind the trends in drug consumption. Why are hundreds of thousands of people consuming so-called legal anti-depressants in Ireland? Many people are leading stressful lives. The cost of housing is soaring, wages have stagnated and insecure, low paid, low skill, less rewarding jobs have proliferated in the years since the crash. The truth be told many people have not recovered from the austerity implemented by the Labour-Fine Gael Government. Under the right wing policies of successive Governments we have seen more people working longer for less and becoming more insecure in their jobs and homes. People are increasingly working longer in jobs that they find meaningless. In Britain, in a 2015 YouGov poll people were asked, "Does your job make a meaningful contribution to the world?", to which 37% responded it did not. I am sure if people here were asked the same question, the percentage would not be much different. Addressing these structural issues is essential to people's sense of well-being. We cannot change the meaningfulness of jobs overnight but a massive State run enterprise to change Ireland into a dramatically greener country would provide the kind of employment people could take pride in. If people do not like their jobs, it is even worse that they spend longer at them and travelling to them and have less time for family and friends and the energy that one needs to feel good about life.

Drug consumption, whether legal or illegal substances, is massively connected to people looking out at the world and seeing a meaningful place for them in it, or not. The issue for us is whether we are shaping a society that breeds inclusion and security or inequality and insecurity. The least we should do is stop punishing those who have already been excluded and abused by the liberal economic and social policies of the last few decades.

Deputy Clare Daly: When the Taoiseach launched the national drugs strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, in 2017 he said: “The issues highlight the need to intervene effectively.” I could not have put it better myself, but that is exactly what has not happened. We have the policy, but no action and no resources to realise it. In that sense, Deputy Joan Collins’s motion before the House is a good one. There is a certain irony in it in that what it calls for the Government to do is intervene effectively, which is what the Taoiseach said previously, and to honour the commitment in the programme for Government in regard to the national drugs strategy which, sadly, has not been the case.

The policy intends to move towards an integrated approach to drug and alcohol abuse. While we would welcome that move, it does have consequences for local task forces working on the ground and we have to consider this. If the plan is to integrate drugs with alcohol and not to make use of all of the available resources, and provide additional resources, we may be setting this up to fail. We need to take account of the real experiences on the ground. An integrated approach should be integrating of the skills of those who have been on the front-line in our communities for decades, aligning them with available national resources.

A key part of this discussion is that we should be moving away from criminalisation towards a health approach, but we should not be going so far in that direction that we give full control over the health policies to the HSE and consequently freeze out the experience-led rich knowledge of community-led groups and local task forces. They have vast skills in this area which we need to harness. The health approach means more than medical intervention. It means medium and long term strategies to reinforce health and well-being within our communities and it means initiatives around education, training, retraining, jobs, life skills and all of the other initiatives mentioned earlier by Deputy Wallace.

There is no doubt that we need the authority and the resources of the health service to drive forward this strategy but that is not happening. We are in danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water and excluding local groups, which is one of the issues this motion attempts to address. The statistics speak for themselves. There were 16,119 drug offences in 2016 and an increase of 61% in drug related deaths over the last decade. The overwhelming majority of drug related offences relate to use and possession and not to supply. In other words, the wrong people are targeted and the process through the justice system commands huge resources but does not solve the problem.

Decriminalisation needs to be taken seriously. It is a shocking indictment of this House that a former colleague, Luke Ming Flanagan, moved a Bill to decriminalise cannabis in 2013 and we are again discussing the issue. As far as I am concerned, all drugs should be decriminalised and regulated. This is the safest way to deal with the misuse of drugs and divert resources into more positive and effective measures. The European Monitoring Centre drugs report for Ireland makes it clear that drug use remains prevalent and has become more common among the adult population in Ireland in recent years. There is no point in us being naive about this. Criminalisation has failed everywhere. In Ireland, over 13% of those aged between 15 and 34 regularly use cannabis and there are almost 19,000 high-risk opioid users here. As a society we have been reliant for a long time on the voluntary community sector to provide local supports and services. It should not be forgotten that it was people at the coal-face who were responsible for highlighting many of these problems in the 1980s in particular.

I will return to where I started. As the Taoiseach pointed out when he launched the drugs strategy, the whole of society is affected to some degree by drug use and abuse in terms of the

crime and health implications that result from it. Unless we resource our communities to deal with this issue, the inter-agency approach will not work. We have failed in this regard to date. The motion calls on the Government to implement its own policy by appointing somebody in a senior role to drive this forward and within that to recognise the unique role played by local task forces. It is vital they are an integral part of the drugs strategy. I again compliment Deputy Joan Collins on bringing forth this motion.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): I move amendment No. 4:

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

“notes that:

— the world drug problem remains a common and shared responsibility that should be addressed in a multilateral setting through effective and increased international cooperation and demands an integrated, multidisciplinary, mutually reinforcing, balanced, scientific evidence based and comprehensive approach (United Nations General Assembly);

— in the European Union (EU) over 92 million people have tried an illicit drug in their lifetime (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction);

— 14 per cent of young Europeans (15–34 years) used cannabis in the last year;

— the EU early warning system for new drugs monitored 670 new psychoactive substances by the end of 2017, up from 300 in 2013;

— in Ireland 26 per cent of the population aged 15 years or over reported using an illegal drug in their lifetime, with cannabis the most widely used (Drug Prevalence Survey);

— there was a 75 per cent reduction in the use of new psychoactive substances by young adults between 2010/2011 and 2014/2015;

— the annual number of poisoning deaths (overdose) by alcohol and/or other drugs was 348 in 2015, a four per cent decrease from 2014, and that alcohol was implicated in a third of those deaths;

— 30 new proceeds-of-crime proceedings were brought before the High Court in 2018, up from 13 in 2016, the majority of which arise from drug trafficking;

— 184 asset profiles were submitted to the Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB) in 2018, a 178 per cent increase from 2016;

— €5.67 million was returned to the State under CAB activities in 2018; and

— there were 16 formal reported incidents and 76 informal reported incidents of the use of violence or the threat of violence to enforce debts nationally in 2017;

acknowledges:

— the implementation of the whole-of-Government strategy to address drug and alcohol misuse, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, a health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025*, and the active engagement with all stakeholders, especially at the

community level;

— the robust monitoring and accountability structures for the National Drugs Strategy (NDS), which involve the Minister of State, relevant Government departments, State agencies, drug and alcohol task forces, voluntary organisations and community representatives at national, regional and local level;

— the further reporting of progress on the strategy to Cabinet Committee B (Social Policy and Public Services) chaired by the Taoiseach and the associated senior officials group;

— the funding of almost €100 million provided annually by the Department of Health to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for the provision of addiction services; and

— the funding of €28 million provided annually by the Department of Health to the drug and alcohol task forces; and

welcomes the Government's commitment to:

— implement and report on progress on the 50 strategic actions in the NDS on an annual basis through the national oversight structures and to develop an evaluation framework for a mid-term review of the strategy in 2020;

— provide new funding of over €1 million in 2019 (rising to over €2 million on an annual basis) for an integrated mental health and addiction programme in the HSE national service plan;

— better support people facing addiction and mental health issues in the refresh of *A Vision for Change*;

— prioritise the expansion of community-based healthcare services to minimise the harms from the misuse of substances and strengthen governance structures, in the HSE National Service Plan 2019;

— provide new funding of €1 million on an annual basis from 2019 for the implementation of the NDS, in conjunction with drug and alcohol task forces and the HSE;

— develop a new scheme with a fund of €250,000 on an annual basis from 2019, to provide targeted, appropriate and effective services for young people at risk of substance abuse, focused on disadvantaged communities;

— further implement the Mulvey Report on the north east inner city to address the drug related issues which are affecting the community, under the leadership of the programme implementation board;

— publish and oversee the implementation of a code of governance for task forces in line with best practice in the community, voluntary and charitable sectors;

— ensure that Ireland makes an active contribution to the forthcoming UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs, in cooperation with other EU member states;

— establish Ireland's first supervised injecting facility, in conjunction with Merchants Quay Ireland, to reduce the harms caused by injecting drugs and the prevalence of drug-related litter on our streets and communities;

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- support HSE monitoring and oversight responsibilities of drug and alcohol task forces under its section 39 governance framework to ensure that service provision is meeting identified needs and there is accountability and transparency for public monies provided by the Department of Health;

- treat substance abuse and drug addiction as a public health issue, informed by the forthcoming report of the working group on alternative approaches to the possession of drugs for personal use;

- strengthen the effectiveness and the public awareness of the drug-related intimidation reporting programme developed by An Garda Síochána and the National Family Support Network;

- enhance the profile of Garda asset seizure activity in local communities, through proactive profiling and investigation of local criminals;

- continue to support, promote and resource community participation in all local, regional and national structures; and

- implement the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018, by prohibiting, from November 2019, alcohol advertising in or on public service vehicles, at public transport stops or stations and within 200 metres of a school, early years centre or a local authority

playground, and by prohibiting alcohol advertising around films with an under-18 classification in a cinema and children’s clothing that promotes alcohol.”

I welcome everybody who has come to the Chamber for this important debate on the motion presented by Deputy Joan Collins. I also welcome this opportunity to update the Dáil on progress in implementing the national drugs strategy and on our plans to provide additional funding for new initiatives to tackle drug and alcohol misuse.

It is just over 18 months since the Government published the national drugs strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, a health-led response to addressing drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025. At its core, are the values of compassion, respect, equity, inclusion, partnership and an evidence-informed approach. The strategy represents an integrated public health response to substance misuse, with the dual aims of reducing harm and supporting recovery. The first phase of the strategy for the period up to the end of 2020 contains 50 actions across the following five goals: to promote and protect health and well-being; to minimise the harms caused by the use and misuse of substances and to promote rehabilitation and recovery; to address the harms of drug markets and reduce access to drugs for harmful use; to support participation of individuals, families and communities; and to develop sound and comprehensive evidence-informed policies and actions. As Minister of State with responsibility for the national drugs strategy, my focus and priority is the implementation of these actions. My officials recently presented the progress report on the strategy for 2018 and the planned activity for 2019 to the National Oversight Committee, NOC, which I chair. This committee comprises representatives from all relevant Departments, State agencies, drug and alcohol task forces, voluntary organisations and community representatives. Its remit is to give leadership, direction, prioritisation and mobilisation of resources to support the implementation of the strategy.

The progress report will be reviewed on an ongoing basis during 2019 by a standing sub-committee. Progress will be further reported through Cabinet committee B, chaired by An

Taoiseach and the associated senior officials group. I am happy to attend the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health to update it on the implementation of the strategy. Next year will see the launch of a mid-term evaluation of the strategy. This will allow all stakeholders the opportunity to reflect on progress on implementing the strategy and to identify what new actions may be required for period up to 2025.

The strategy commits to treating substance misuse and drug addiction as a public health issue. As a result, I established a working group to consider alternative approaches to the possession of drugs for personal use. To inform the group's deliberations, the Department of Health undertook a public consultation, which generated more than 20,000 responses to an online questionnaire. I understand from the chair of the group, Mr. Justice Sheehan, that the group is finalising its report and will submit it to the Minister for Health, the Minister for Justice and Equality and me by the end of March.

The Government is also tackling the alcohol problem as a public health matter. The Public Health (Alcohol) Act, which was enacted on 17 October 2018, is groundbreaking legislation that aims to reduce harmful drinking by people of all ages and create an environment where children will not be exposed to alcohol products or advertising. From November 2019, the Act will prohibit alcohol advertising at public transport stops or stations and within 200 m of schools, early years centres or local authority playgrounds. As Deputies will be aware, an important action in the national drugs strategy is to establish a supervised injecting facility, SIF, the purpose of which is to reduce the harm caused by injecting drugs and address the problem of drug-related litter on our streets and communities.

I am acutely aware of the harm caused by injecting drugs to people struggling with addiction, while those who inject openly on our streets are at even greater risk. Discarded drug paraphernalia in communities also poses a risk to members of the public and the supervised injecting facility is a major step towards reducing these risks, treating addiction as an illness and reducing deaths from overdose. The supervised injecting facility is a Government policy and it is crucial that it opens as soon as possible. In 2018, following a tender process, the contract to operate the new service on a pilot basis was awarded to Merchants Quay Ireland, which submitted an application for planning permission for the facility in October 2018. I understand that the application is still under consideration by Dublin City Council and that further information on local services and the policing plan have been requested. I am firmly committed to the SIF and officials in my Department are working with various stakeholders to advance the project.

In September 2018, I announced the establishment of a community fund to support improvements in the physical and social environment in the area around Merchants Quay in the south-west inner city. The HSE national service plan for 2019 sets out the priorities and actions for improving health outcomes for those with addiction issues. Specific actions are designed to expand community-based healthcare services to minimise the harms from the misuse of substances; strengthen governance structures in treatment services; develop an integrated mental health and addiction programme for co-occurring mental health and substance misuse concerns among at-risk groups, with new funding of more than €1 million in 2019, rising to €2 million on an annual basis; implement new models of care for homeless people with complex and multiple needs, including addiction, as part of an integrated housing and health policy response in line with the Housing First national implementation plan; and improve addiction treatment and rehabilitation services in Dublin's north-east inner city, in partnership with the north-east inner city programme implementation board.

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I acknowledge the important work being done in communities by the 24 drug and alcohol task forces throughout the country. They play an important role in assessing the extent and nature of the drug problem and taking the appropriate responses to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach involving all sectors in local communities. In 2018, the Department provided €28 million to drug and alcohol task forces through various channels of funding including the HSE. Last year, I established a working group to revise and update the handbook for task forces, which was published in 2011. This work is ongoing in my Department in association with the key stakeholders and is in line to be finalised in the second quarter of 2019. From this process we will have a new code of governance for task forces, in line with best practice in the community, voluntary and charitable sectors, and my Department will support its implementation in 2019. The revision of the task force handbook is an important step in the development of a performance measurement system, and an implementation plan to operationalise such a system will be developed by 2020. The HSE has monitoring and oversight responsibilities of drug and alcohol task forces under its section 39 governance framework to ensure that service provision meets identified needs and that there is accountability and transparency for public money provided by the Department of Health.

Yesterday I was delighted to announce an additional €1 million in funding for the implementation of the national drugs strategy this year. It is not fair to say the funding has only just been announced, given that I have mentioned a number of times in the Chamber and the Seanad that new funding would become available to us, although I did not have the figures at the time. The funding, which will be provided on a recurring, multi-annual basis, will address the priorities set down in the strategy, including early harm reduction responses, emerging trends in substance misuse such as polydrug use and crack cocaine and improving services for at-risk groups. It will also complement enhancement in drug and alcohol treatment services relating to mental health and homelessness under the 2019 HSE national service plan.

Working in partnership with statutory, community and voluntary sectors is central to the response. I will consult the drug and alcohol task forces and the HSE on how best to target this new funding and I have invited the task forces to a meeting in the Department of Health at the end of March to begin this process. This year I also intend to develop two new schemes to deliver an integrated public health approach to drugs and alcohol, as set out in the national drugs strategy. The first will provide targeted, appropriate and effective services for young people at risk of substance abuse, focused on disadvantaged areas, while the second will support evidence-based approaches to mobilising community action on alcohol. Both schemes will have funding of €250,000 on a multi-annual basis.

In conclusion, I reiterate my belief in a health-led, person-centred approach to addressing the issue of drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland. My priority is the continued implementation of our national drugs strategy with the support of the drug and alcohol task forces. I am confident that, working together, we can build in future on our many achievements.

Deputy John Curran: Every day we hear stories of individuals, families and communities throughout the country that have been devastated by drugs. Drug-related harm consistently clusters in communities marked by poverty and social inequality and it is in this context that Fianna Fáil will support the motion presented by Independents 4 Change and Deputy Joan Collins. We will also move a number of amendments but they are in no way meant to detract from the substance of the motion. Rather, they arise specifically from a briefing meeting held by Deputy Joan Collins with CityWide and will be tabled in that context. I hope the proposers of the motion will accept the amendments, as they address the need to restore an annual increase

in core funding to drug task forces and ensure that the debate in the Chamber is continued at the Committee on Health, which is important.

In all of my discussions, I stress that the national drugs strategy, which the Minister of State developed, leads and oversees, receives widespread public support from the community and voluntary sector and the statutory players. That is important because, as the Minister of State well knows, Governments and Ministers come and go but the strategy will span a number of Governments and it is important that there is widespread support, which there is. The purpose of the debate on the motion, however, is substantially to examine the implementation of the strategy.

The point was made earlier but I reiterate that the programme for Government, which is almost three years old, commits to expanding the projects supported by local drug task forces. There has been no increase in core funding in the past five years. While the funding partners, namely, the HSE and the Department of Health, have received significant increases to their budgets, the funding for each individual drug task force has remained static. Every other cost has risen and, therefore, in real terms and purchasing power, it has resulted in a stealth cut in funding which the task forces can feel. Some Deputies are members of task forces, as the Minister of State will be aware, and they can accurately relay to her the impact on them. We must not only address the issue of emerging needs but also annually increase core funding to support existing projects to ensure the long-term viability and sustainability of the programmes. I acknowledge that the Minister of State announced €1 million in additional funding yesterday. I questioned her in the House before and she indicated clearly that there would be additional funding. She did not say how much until now and I welcome the funding. She said there would be discussion with the task forces. A substantial amount of money must be found annually to maintain existing core services and funding to task forces before we move to additional funding. In her discussions, the Minister of State needs to set aside a proportion of that funding to support core funding to task forces. If the entire €1 million were just given to support additional funding to core task forces, there would be an increase per task force of 3.5%. It is nothing excessive and people should not get carried away. A sum of €1 million sounds like a lot but we have to look at the projects supported.

I acknowledge that there was funding for one-off projects last year. One-off projects are not the same as the long-term viability of the projects underpinned by the task forces. One element that CityWide has identified and expressed concern about is the input, commitment and support of some of the statutory players in the bodies. We often hear that they may or may not attend various task force meetings and such. I did a small exercise and asked a number of parliamentary questions about attendance. It would not be fair to pick one Department over another so I will not name the Department. One Department sat on one local and three regional task forces and attended only half the meetings. That supports the claim made by CityWide and the community sector that the statutory players often do not attend. It is important that we address this.

Some of the previous speakers raised the issue of decriminalisation. It is sad to say that, as we debate this, we know that there are approximately 700 drug related deaths per annum. More than four times as many people will die from a drug related death than will die on the roads this year. The numbers are staggering and we have the opportunity to make a difference and do things differently. Decriminalisation is not legalisation. It is not a get out of jail card. Decriminalisation will only work if the other supports are in place at that time. The focus is on diverting people from the criminal justice system to health, educational and other supports. The model we use is how they did it in Portugal, which has the population of more than double

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that of our country. More than 220 people died of a drug overdose in Ireland in the last year while in Portugal, with a population twice ours, the number is 27. There are significant inroads and gains to be made but decriminalisation on its own, without health and educational supports being in place, is not sufficient.

I know the Minister of State has tabled an amendment but I acknowledge that she has said she will attend the Oireachtas committee. We do not get adequate time in the House to delve into the details of the implementation of the strategy. I welcome the Minister of State's commitment to attend the committee because I believe we can tease out some of these points in further detail.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I welcome the motion. Our party spokesperson, Deputy Curran, has explained the rationale behind some of the amendments tabled. I speak not just as the Deputy for Dublin Fingal but as a chairperson for the north Dublin regional drugs and alcohol task force. For a bit of reality about the resources that we have, there are no local task forces in my area. There are many regional areas that do not have any other services. Our catchment area includes approximately 300,000 people. We have one counsellor for under-18s in the youngest area in the country, one family support worker, four case workers and a manager, and a HSE task force co-ordinator. We run the whole service, including education, family support, health promotion, youth services and the community care team, which we established ourselves, for €777,000 a year.

The Minister of State is right that the work has a real impact. I want to see the role of task forces strengthened. Part of strengthening that is resourcing them properly. My colleague, Deputy Curran, mentioned Portugal. It properly resourced the education, welfare and rehabilitation. That is not happening here. I welcome the Minister of State's announcement of the additional €1 million, but if that is broken down across the 24 task forces, it is approximately €41,000 each. It is not a whole hill of beans. Much of the funding up to now has been one-off funding, and while we appreciate it and use it well, it is much better to have multi-annual increases to core funding.

From my experience as chair of a very active task force, we have a good relationship with the Department and the HSE. There is good collaboration and much more can be done. I wanted to ask the Minister of State about her opening comment and her statement on community action on alcohol that came out of the last national drugs and alcohol strategy. The Minister of State has mentioned €250,000 for the implementation of that strategy, which we are doing in Dublin Fingal, as the Minister of State knows. Is that included in the €1 million? It is additional to it and that is welcome. From our calculation, we reckon that each regional task force would probably require approximately €40,000 to implement it properly. It does not go that far but it goes a certain distance.

I am short on time. All I want to put on record is, as everyone knows, that drugs and alcohol are the single biggest threat to young people in the country and State. If we are to do anything, we need to resource those on the ground who are equipped and qualified to do it. Many well-meaning people work in the area but I still think it is better to do it through a task force structure where people are qualified, trained and educated under the auspices of the HSE. I welcome that Independents 4 Change have tabled this motion, that the Minister of State will attend the committee, and the announcements of some additional funding. I am speaking as someone who looks after a catchment of 300,000 people for €777,000. We can do a hell of a lot more with more resources.

Deputy John Lahart: I welcome the motion-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Fianna Fáil will have an extra two minutes.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Leas-Cheann Comhairle tells us now. I could have used it.

Deputy John Lahart: Does Deputy O'Brien want to take it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I think Deputy O'Brien overshot the runway.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I hope I will come in to land on time. As my colleagues have said, we welcome this motion from Independents 4 Change. I welcome the funding. The Minister of State is clearly committed to this although this is three years into the term of a Government in which no major additional funding has been allocated. Since the Minister of State is familiar with this area, how would she expect a household to survive in 2018 on its 2013 budget? That is what we have asked the drugs task forces to do in recent years. The Minister of State is aware of the number of functions that a number of us serve. As Deputy O'Brien said, I am on the Tallaght drugs and alcohol task force. The range of measures or areas that they take control of or attempt to address with a minuscule budget includes crack cocaine issues, family support service, homeless services, prevention and education, and crimestopper schemes. They never received any additional funding for alcohol services. In the Tallaght area, an increase in the use of crack cocaine and cannabis has been observed, especially among young people. That alcohol issue is significant and growing. We also try to look after the needs of families as well as possible in that task force and to provide the support that they need, especially where families have a member who is in trouble with the drugs issue.

I want to reinforce the point made by my colleague, Deputy Curran. It is ironic that the Minister of State will invite submissions from the drugs task forces and invite them in to chat along with the HSE. There is an issue with statutory agencies turning up to the drugs task force in my area. I think the Minister of State needs to address that. She has the power to do it. I compliment Superintendent Ian Lackey in Tallaght Garda station, who attends most of our drugs task force meetings. Representatives of the HSE and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection are not great attendees. There is no representative either from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs or the Department of Education and Skills. They are critical players, but they do not seem to think they have a role to play in the month to month running of these organisations, although they have a say in their oversight and where the money is to be spent.

Yesterday the Minister of State announced funding of €1 million. She will invite the groups in by the end of March, but it will be the end of April or into May before she decides on what to spend the money. That leaves five or six months left this year. Will every cent of the €1 million be drawn down in 2019? We want a commitment in that regard.

The Minister of State also intends to develop two new schemes. She says there is funding of €250,000 available for one of them. That works out at approximately €10,000 for each of the drugs task forces. It is not much, but it is welcome. She has given no figure for the "targeted, appropriate and effective services for young people at risk of substance abuse, focused on disadvantaged areas" about which she talks.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: The figure is the same - €250,000.

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Deputy John Lahart: That is also welcome, but they are small crumbs from a Government that three years in has demonstrated no commitment to communities that are under savage attack from drugs. We welcome this small contribution to help the task forces which are under enormous pressure and that are the glue that hold communities together to do their work.

Deputy James Lawless: I welcome the motion and concur with my colleagues who have spoken. I will focus on the issue of criminalisation.

Previous contributors have spoken about the numbers and the funds needed to reduce the damage drugs and alcohol can do to individuals, communities and the State in terms of the resources spent in combating their influence. There is no doubt about the damage that can be and is being caused. When we consider alcohol and tobacco and the range of other substances used and abused, there is comparatively very little difference between them. Alcohol can be easily purchased and imbibed; people can fall over, become addicted and their difficulties spill over into their families and employment and in extreme cases lead to serious illness and death. The same is true of tobacco, as has been well documented. Although public health policy is catching up, tobacco is still legal, albeit expensive. I am no Puritan. I am not condemning anyone for using these drugs or substances, as I also use them, but they are legal. However, if we put their use in context and put them with many other substances, the argument for decriminalisation is well worth reviewing. I wonder if we were to describe alcohol and tobacco and their effects and they were to be introduced to the market in the morning under another name, would they be approved? I very much doubt that they would.

Previous contributors touched on the variety of strengths, strains and ingredients of illegal drugs and their consumption. There is no regulation, quality control or testing. There is no safety. It is often said what is measured is managed. However, there is no measurement of illegal substances. By definition, there cannot be. That, in itself, is a contributory factor. There was a report in *The Irish Times* a few weeks ago that indicated that the potency of cannabis, which at one stage might have been thought to be a soft drug had massively increased in the past 20 years. That is an example of something that has happened in the background in the illegal, dark spaces of the black market that is not being measured or managed. We have to wonder what else is in the unknown?

Legal drugs, prescription drugs, are also an issue. I recently read a book entitled, *The Spirit Level*, about equality in society. It considers the epidemic in the USA which will spill over to Ireland before too long. We all know about the rust belt and the “flyover” states where economic decline has led to lack of employment, etc. Reported less often is the epidemic of prescription drug abuse which contributes further to the decline of communities. With obesity, this and similar issues amount to a huge public health crisis which is beginning to unfold.

If one walks in on any given day to the Criminal Courts of Justice or any criminal court one will see an all too familiar spectacle, predictable and depressing, because almost every defendant will to some degree suffer from substance abuse or addiction. They may not be there on drugs offences but on petty crime or theft offences, perhaps to support their habit. That is a huge drain on the resources of the State, including the courts, the HSE and the supporting apparatus.

Minor miracles are performed by many agencies, some of which have been mentioned. In my constituency I am familiar with Tiglin where Aubrey and Fergal McCarthy do a fantastic job in running a support centre. Individuals and groups achieve minor miracles in managing against the odds. With honourable exceptions, the approach to date is not working. It is time

to think differently.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Fianna Fáil has one minute left if anybody else wishes to speak.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I would like to come in.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot do so because he has already spoken.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is a shame because I had a lot more to say.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I know and I am sure the House would want to hear what the Deputy has to say.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Eugene Murphy was probably going to mention the section 39 body staff who have received no increments in the past seven years.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Sinn Féin will be tabling an amendment to the motion. I commend Independents 4 Change on tabling this Private Members' motion. For many local communities, the drugs crisis has got progressively worse. Tragically, it does not seem to have the same priority on the political agenda as it once did. From the early 1980s until 1996, the State had effectively abdicated its responsibility towards communities in tackling it. Only in 1996 did it for the first time, under pressure from local communities, recognise that the drugs crisis was not just a criminal issue and that it had to put in place measures to tackle it. The foundations were laid for the establishment of the local drug task forces and national structures and the provision of core funding to tackle the drugs crisis. Significantly, it also led to the appointment of a dedicated Minister of State with responsibility for the national drug strategy.

I pay tribute to someone who was to the fore in working-class communities in tackling the drugs crisis and recently passed away. John 'Whacker' Humphrey was a tireless and courageous worker and an inspiration for many. People like him gave communities a sense of hope at a time of hopelessness and despair. Our thoughts are with his family and friends at this sad time.

Tackling the drugs crisis is not a priority for the Government, nor was it for previous Governments, and communities are paying a heavy price as a result. Drugs task forces had their funding cut every year between 2008 and 2014 since when funding has been frozen without even consideration of the rate of inflation. Additionally, drug projects have had to tackle the alcohol crisis which was added to their remit without the provision of extra funding or resources. Funding needs to be reinstated to 2008 levels, with a comparative increase in funding to reflect the addition of the alcohol crisis. A sum of €250,000 goes nowhere near what is required. Community based drugs and alcohol projects need to be given the resources and proper funding they need to meet the complex challenges they face. Those who work in the projects should also expect to receive decent pay and conditions, but staff are expected to do more work and be more accountable for less money, which leads, in turn, to the loss of experienced personnel and projects, as well as a recruitment problem. Staff should have their pay restored. Those who are entitled to increments should also have them restored.

The drugs crisis continues, mainly in working-class communities, with 695 drug-related deaths in 2015. There was a 61% increase in the number of drug related deaths between 2004 and 2015, over three times higher than the numbers who died on the roads. Parents, children

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and entire communities are being terrorised and intimidated by those involved in the drug trade. Drug related intimidation is a daily challenge for many and their families. According to a recent report from the CityWide Drugs Crisis Campaign, 74% of those who suffer from intimidation do not report incidents to the Garda, but 90% report such incidents to community groups or family members. In addition, 37% have experienced physical injuries, while 67% have reported mental health problems as a result of intimidation. Another worrying trend is that children are being groomed to be used as drug couriers. No one sector or agency can deal with the drugs issue. It requires an inter-agency approach.

Sinn Féin is calling for a dedicated Minister to be given responsibility for the national drugs strategy. He or she should have a dedicated ring-fenced budget equal to the budget which was available in 2008. Additional funding should be provided for this Minister for the alcohol part of his or her remit. The emerging needs fund and the young person's facilities and services fund should both be re-established because they would allow local drugs task forces to respond quickly and effectively to new challenges. The task forces must once again be responsible for drafting and implementing local strategies to combat the drugs crisis. They must be allowed to operate independently of the HSE and its bureaucracy. They must be supported by the State and Government agencies, including the HSE, the Garda and local authorities. Representatives of the community and voluntary sectors are crucial to the development of a drugs strategy. Their voices and opinions are vital in the fight against drugs. We need to reprioritise tackling the causes and consequences of the crisis. Funding must be reinstated. The local and national structures must be strengthened and made accountable. All of this must be supported by a dedicated Minister with responsibility for the drugs strategy.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I am a member of the Mid West Regional Drug and Alcohol Forum which is based in Limerick. I would like to mention a number of groups that are funded by the forum. The community substance misuse team deals with young people with addiction problems. The Northstar Family Support Project deals with families who are affected by a family member's substance misuse. I am proud to be involved with the Limerick City Community Network, which is a voluntary group comprising people across all communities in Limerick city who come together. They receive no funding, but they are supported by the local task force. I also mention the probation and linkage in Limerick scheme, the Ana Liffey Drug Project, the Saoirse addiction treatment centre and Novas Initiatives, all of which are doing great work in Limerick. Unfortunately, I do not believe the national drugs strategy will work because the necessary funding is not being provided to tackle the problem which is conspicuous across the State, particularly in parts of my constituency of Limerick City.

The misuse of drugs in Limerick is increasing almost on a daily basis. The continued failure to resource properly those who are working on the front line against the scourge of drug addiction is simply not acceptable. It is unsustainable and for that reason the problem is getting worse. It depresses me to say the national drugs strategy will fail. If the funding for it is not increased, there is no hope it will achieve its aims. The groups in Limerick that I have mentioned are having a really positive effect on people's lives every single day, but they are starved of funding because the regional forum is not properly resourced. Limerick does not have a detox centre. Most services have lengthy waiting lists and their staff are under great pressure to deliver basic services. It is estimated that upwards of 1,000 people in Limerick are addicted to heroin alone. The Mid West Regional Drug and Alcohol Forum has taken cuts of more than 50% since 2008. During the years such cuts have had a massive impact and prevented the delivery of drug and alcohol services that are urgently needed in Limerick and across the entire

mid-west. It is clear that the drugs problem in the city of Limerick is getting worse. The use of heroin, the excessive use of alcohol, problem gambling and the misuse of prescription drugs are causing significant problems across the city and wider region. The Government's failure to fund these groups properly is a clear demonstration of its indifference to the damage and devastation drugs cause to people, families and communities.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I commend Deputy Joan Collins and her Independents 4 Change colleagues on the introduction of the motion which we are discussing at an opportune time. The cynic in me cannot help noticing the close proximity to this debate of yesterday's €1 million announcement, but I hope I am wrong.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: The Deputy is wrong.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The announcement seemed to be made at a very opportune time. I would like the Minister of State to explain what the €1 million means. Does it mean that each task force will receive €41,000? What will I say to Councillor Malachy Quinn who is our representative on the north Fingal task force? I commend the work done by the task force which serves a population of 300,000. I believe it has the youngest population in the State. We see the damage the misuse of drugs causes in communities. We also see the possibilities young people have to transform themselves if they are given a hand-up or offered an alternative. Unfortunately, if we do not have the resources or the personnel required, young people will end up going down the road of drug misuse. We need to look at the facts. The level of drug related harm and the number of drug related deaths are increasing. The number of convictions for personal drug use is also increasing. What about the drug dealers? The number of convictions for drug dealing is not keeping pace with it. This shows that the focus is not where it should be placed. If we want to talk about decriminalisation, we should do so. We are talking about decriminalisation, rather than legalisation. Decriminalisation would take away the stigma and focus on the people who need attention. The facts speak for themselves. I have seen in my community the devastating impact of drugs. I wonder how serious the Government is about tackling the scourge of drug misuse. I know that Councillor Quinn and other members of the task force, including the chairperson, are deadly serious about tackling it. They are fighting might and main and working night and day to tackle it, but they need real and meaningful support from the Government. They need multi-annual funding. They need to know how much they will receive next year as they need to be able to put plans in place. If we do not do this, we will simply keep going back to the same place and see young people's lives ruined and communities destroyed.

Deputy Willie Penrose: It will come as no surprise to anyone that the Labour Party welcomes and supports the motion on the issue of drug addiction. I congratulate Deputy Joan Collins and her Independents 4 Change colleagues on the tabling of this worthy motion which at this juncture is timely. When the former leader of the Labour Party, Pat Rabbitte, was a Minister of State in the late 1990s, he commissioned the ministerial task force on measures to reduce the demand for drugs. He chaired the task force which published a report that became known locally as the Rabbitte report. It led to the establishment of the local task forces. The Government of the day provided funding to build a network of drug related support services for individuals and communities that now exist within the drugs task force structure.

I want to note a few aspects of the current situation. We all know that drugs represent a significant threat to people, especially young people, and society at large. The new national policy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, has made a few valuable changes. It has identified that compassion and care are central aspects of a health-led approach to the issue of addiction. It

is appropriate that such an approach, rather than a heavy-handed criminal justice approach, be taken to people who are addicted to drugs. I welcome the call made in the motion for decriminalisation. Approximately 20 years ago, former Deputy Emmet Stagg was the first to make such a call, in which I joined him at the time.

Deputy Gino Kenny: It has still not been done.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I remember very well that everything came down on his head at the time. Last year the Labour Party called for the decriminalisation of users of illegal drugs in the case of people who were addicted. As Deputy O'Reilly said, many people are confused because they do not understand it is proposed to decriminalise the user only. It is important to get the message out that we are not saying we should legislate to decriminalise drugs. The problem is people are confused. I know from being in the courts that a great deal of Garda time is spent in dealing with minor cases of possession of drugs. As the motion suggests, the focus should rightly be on issues such as the violent intimidation of people by drug gangs and the extreme violence we have seen in recent years perpetrated by those running such gangs. That is where the Garda should be directing its efforts and resources. and it will do so if it is permitted and directed in that way. We congratulate gardaí at all levels on their significant successes in recent years. The force needs additional resources in its fight against the drug gangs.

The new national policy includes alcohol for the first time in the same strategy. This is a recognition that addiction is primarily a psychological and medical issue. We should remember that drug addiction is also a problem for some people who are abusing prescription drugs, rather than illegal substances. Last night's "RTÉ Investigates" programme showed how the use of benzodiazepines could have an impact. Prescription drugs are very good when used properly, but they can have unfortunate side effects and people can come to depend on them. The long-term use of such drugs carries with it a risk of addiction. We have to focus on a wide area. Addictive behaviour among those who participate in gambling is one of the wider issues. Many are hooked on making bets on their mobile phones. Some people are losing a fortune because they are making impulsive bets. In some cases, such bets are made late at night when people are not fully focused, perhaps because they have been drinking.

Addiction is a serious issue that affects the person who is addicted, his or her family and the wider community. We know that addiction to drugs occurs all over the country and involves a wide range of substances. This reflects two major changes dating from the 1980s.

In the 1980s, during what became known as the heroin epidemic, the problem was concentrated in urban areas with high rates of unemployment and other areas suffering from deprivation and disadvantage. At the time the focus was on heroin. The first change is that
3 o'clock drugs are now available and abused all over the country. There is hardly a village or community in rural Ireland that has been left untouched by the scourge of drugs. The Internet has facilitated access to drugs in new ways. Drug gangs are active in more areas than before, including rural areas and small villages. It is absolutely frightening.

The second change, on which the motion rightly focuses, is what is called poly-drug use, the use of a mixture of illegal drugs, prescription drugs and alcohol. When it comes to prescription drug use, there is also the question of whether the person was personally prescribed the drugs. The Government's new plan recognises poly-drug use, but the major increases in funding have been focused on medically supervised injection rooms - only for heroin - and the provision of the anti-overdose medicine naloxone and similar medicines. There has not been

enough of a focus on how the substances involved in addiction have changed greatly and the need for policy to keep pace with these changes. There is a generation of people who are active drug users who are using anything and everything, except heroin. An important aspect of the motion draws attention to the need for the Government and agencies involved to consider poly-drug use and whether enough emphasis is being placed on the new challenges associated with it. The current structure of local and regional drugs and alcohol task forces covers the entire country, which is appropriate, given that drugs are a problem everywhere.

To explain the Labour Party's amendment to the motion, our concern is that even though addiction is a national problem, it is the case that the original logic behind the establishment of the local task forces in areas suffering from social and economic disadvantage remains valid. We are concerned that resources may now be spread too thinly. In the effort to illustrate some response to addiction, there is a risk that the Government's plan will fail to dedicate enough resources to those areas with the greatest levels of material deprivation and income inequality. The Labour Party proposes to add two sections to the motion. We propose to add that the Dáil note, "While addiction to drugs is a problem across all of the country, neighbourhoods with a concentration of social and economic disadvantage are more seriously affected by drugs than other areas and merit a more substantive response from the State to address the underlying causes of drug addiction". We further call on the Government to "Increase the level of funding available in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas for youth work, family supports and community development services, and for training, education and employment supports, to help address the underlying causes of drug addiction".

To be clear, drug addiction is more prevalent in areas with high rates of unemployment. It is more prevalent in areas where people do not have a comfortable upbringing and where there are fewer opportunities. Local drugs task forces have played an extremely important role in funding what are called tier one services in the HSE's four-tier model of care for those affected by addiction. Most of the tier one service interventions are about social care, housing support, education, probation, vocational training, employment support, job seeking skills and family support. The tier two, three and four services are largely medical, up to hospital services in tier four. The tier one services deal predominantly with social and community issues, rather than medical services. The Labour Party is concerned that these valuable services have been given less priority by the HSE, in favour of a purely individual, medical approach to addiction. We must be clear that tackling addiction is a community issue and that it is absolutely necessary to retain a social and economic focus on how we deal with the underlying causes of drug addiction.

Addiction is not just a personal problem. Any person can become addicted to drugs, but a person needs a range of family supports and community based services to help him or her to get his or her life back on track as he or she moves away from drugs. The community based service end of the equation is absolutely essential, not just in dealing with a medical addiction but also to help people to get their lives back on track. We must allocate additional resources for education services, sport and other diversionary projects. A significant increase in resources for the local community task forces would be a good start. I concur with the view that they will only work well if the statutory authorities and agencies comply in full in meeting their obligations to attend and fully participate in them. It is sad to note that their attendance is patchy, to say the least. The Minister of State should call on them to honour and meet in full their obligations and duties.

The Labour Party will be supporting the motion, but it will also be supporting the amend-

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ments tabled by Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil. I have provided the rationale for the Labour Party amendments to the motion and hope Members across the House will support them. It is incumbent on us all to put our thinking caps on to find a solution to the problem.

Deputy Gino Kenny: It is clear from the motion and the statistics that the consumption of drugs is increasing, both nationally and globally. The demand for and use of drugs are greater than ever before, particularly for certain drugs. It runs in parallels with the upsurge in the economy. On a personal level, I have seen what drugs can do and the devastation they can cause to individuals, families and communities. We will have to have a grown up argument about why prohibition has failed. Drugs are destroying communities, but the market for drugs has been surrendered to individuals who only care about profits and making as much money possible. This raises the question of whether we should do something completely different from what we are doing. The consumption of drugs is increasing and prohibition is simply not working.

The debate about decriminalisation in the context of the national drug strategy will continue. Decriminalisation should have happened 20 years ago and should happen today. It should be done and implemented properly because putting people through the criminal justice system just does not work. In fact, over 40% of the people incarcerated are in prison for cannabis use. Anybody listening to this debate should know that nobody should be in jail for cannabis use. That drug should be legalised immediately.

The pharmaceutical industry presents another issue. I read an incredible statistic which I had to check and re-check. Last year 32,000 people in the United States died from a Fentanyl overdose. That is one person every 20 minutes which is absolutely incredible. Some 70,000 people in the United States died of a drug overdose last year, which is astonishing. These drugs are legal. They are in a package which can be bought in a pharmacy. Pharmaceutical companies that make billions and billions in profits are allowed to continue to operate unchecked and cause the social damage we have seen.

We need to look in new ways at the catastrophe drugs cause. Decriminalisation is very important. Drugs will be with us forever. No matter what we say, people will use them and it does not matter what laws are in place. A new approach is required. We need the regulation, decriminalisation and legalisation of certain drugs. That debate has to happen and it will be a difficult one for some, but if it is about saving lives, we should look at the Portuguese model. In 15 years thousands of people have been saved from death and the criminal justice system. I note that the new strategy looks at holistic ways of dealing with drug addiction and drug use. That is good and what we should be doing. However, decriminalisation should happen today.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The motion is timely and the amendments tabled by Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin have some merit. The numbers of deaths occurring as a result of poisoning and non-poisoning in the use of drugs - the figures have been provided by the CityWide Drugs Crisis Campaign - are startling. In discussing the issue we have to consider the legacy of the cuts made in funding drug initiatives in the days of austerity. Between 2008 and 2013, there was a 37% cut in funding for drug initiatives. Some might say we are past those days and that some of the funding has been restored. However, if the issue was researched properly, it would be found that during those years, because the cuts in funding for drug initiatives were made at community level, more and more people became addicted to legal and illegal drugs and alcohol.

This is an important discussion for us all. Deputy Joan Collins, the mover of the motion, the Minister of State and I share the same constituency, which has major problems with drug and

alcohol addiction. I echo what Deputy Gino Kenny said about the need for a serious discussion on the question of decriminalisation of drugs. Until we do that, we will not really get to the heart of holistically treating the question of addiction as a health issue rather than as a criminal issue. Some people get caught and get into big trouble for small amounts of drugs for personal use. This is not to argue that we should not treat people who push, sell or make personal gain from selling drugs differently. However, we need to treat addiction to drugs as a health issue and find legal ways, as well as health ways, of doing it.

I wish to make a point about prescription drugs. It is very worrying that a large number of drug deaths come from the overuse of prescription drugs. It goes to the heart of the control big pharma has over our attitude to health. When Deputy Gino Kenny introduced his Cannabis for Medicinal Use Regulation Bill, it was not to legalise cannabis but to have cannabis available for medicinal purposes. He was able to prove how it can deal with issues such as anxiety and pain. There was great resistance from the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, to that Bill. The HPRA does not seem to display the same resistance to the big pharma companies which, for example, do not over-produce Spinraza because it costs millions of euro for children who need to get their hands on it. They do not over-produce pembrolizumab because it costs millions of euro for those suffering from cancer to get their hands on it.

A lot of control is needed over big pharma. In an ideal world, as well as dealing holistically with the question of addiction and asking why people want to get off their face on drugs or alcohol in the first place from a young age up to an older age - that question will tell a lot about the society we live in - we also have to ask about the role of big pharma in pushing drugs in this country and the role of the drinks industry in pushing alcohol. To that end, the discussion needs to go beyond the scope of the motion. However, I fully endorse the motion and the amendments to it.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I welcome Deputy Joan Collins's motion on the national drugs strategy. It has taken a back seat under Fine Gael and certainly has not recovered since recessionary cuts were made. There have been no increases in funding since 2015 despite global opium trade increasing by 65% from 2016 to 2017, the highest estimate ever recorded. Cocaine manufacturing went up 56% during 2013 to 2016, to its highest level ever in 2016 and Europe's early warning system monitored 670 new psychoactive substances on the market by the end of 2017, up from 300 in 2013.

It is evident that the illegal drugs industry is creatively expanding its products to expand its reach. It is exploiting the funding gap created by governments across Europe which slashed funding during the recession creating a vacuum allowing the drug trade to slip in. It can now smuggle in an entire range of synthetic drugs to add to that.

While drugs are a huge problem globally, I want to focus on something which is more of an issue than drugs in my constituency of Donegal and that is alcohol abuse. According to the north west drug and alcohol task force, alcohol remains the primary drug of choice while the secondary drug of choice is cannabis. In its 2017 annual report, some startling figures revealed the reality of alcohol addiction in Donegal. Out of 1,202 people referred for treatment, 860 were for alcohol and 258 were for drugs. A total of 749 were male and 439 were female. The numbers are steadily increasing. In 2016 a total of 593 men and 319 women were admitted, of whom 691 were admitted due to alcohol. In 2015, a total of 767 were admitted for alcohol addiction in the north west.

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I am aware of the great work the north west drug and alcohol task force has been doing in Donegal in particular. It does so much and yet it has the second smallest budget in the country. Only the west has a smaller budget and the north west drug and alcohol task force has an enormous geographical area to cover. With the funding it gets, it funds an aftercare worker and aftercare groups across Donegal. Its funding is also used to strengthen a family programme for young people, children and families, and this is done through the alcohol forum. The north west drug and alcohol task force also funds a youth drug and alcohol worker through Foróige and a training and development officer through the Donegal ETB delivering drug and alcohol training and education.

The new national strategy has a strong element of family involvement and family support in the treatment of alcohol addiction. As a result the task force, working with a number of stakeholders and the Minister of State, will be hosting the launch of the community alcohol action plan for Letterkenny at the end of this month. This multidisciplinary initiative is the first of its kind in Donegal. It is a collaboration between Donegal County Council, the alcohol forum, youth groups and Letterkenny Institute of Technology. I hope that it goes far in the area of education and offering family supports. As well as needing more Government funding, the national drugs strategy needs to look more at collaborative efforts taking place across the country and should reflect the need for more of these types of initiatives. The community alcohol action plan for Letterkenny is an example. I understand a family support worker has been funded for south Donegal and north Leitrim to help bolster family supports in the area.

The north west drug and alcohol task force has done a considerable amount despite little being offered by the Government. However, more could be done, for example, if funding was provided to support the Bill W Club in Donegal town, which supports adults in recovery from alcohol addiction. I have met those running the club a number of times and have tried to help them get funding but it is hard for them to get the support because of the limited funding provided to the alcohol forum in the north west. That is the only forum and the only way that funding can be accessed by any group.

Another aspect that needs more focus is the rise of hidden harm. The experience of children living with, and affected by, parental substance misuse has become known as hidden harm because these children are often unknown to services. While task forces do their best to offer treatment to those who present themselves for help, we do not know about those who are not presenting themselves for treatment. It is very hard to monitor and will have major repercussions in the future for children's mental and physical health.

The motion will do much to address the situation facing Dublin and urban areas but less to address the situation in rural constituencies like Donegal. However, that is not to say that same thing might not happen and funding will need to increase to maintain a focus on early warning and emerging trend and monitoring mechanisms.

I commend the hard work carried out by the north west drug and alcohol task force and local community groups like the Bill W Club which do so much with so little. Their incredible work should not be taken for granted by this or any Government.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the motion and thank Deputy Joan Collins for introducing it. I welcome the positive and helpful amendments from Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin. The national drugs strategy is a very good strategy; I could not find fault with it. However, like A Vision for Change, it remains simply a strategy and the problem lies with its implementation.

One could not improve on what is in it. It builds on two previous strategies, the second of which finished in 2016. This one is more health-focused and more person-centred which is welcome. With A Vision for Change, because nobody trusted any government, a separate independent monitoring mechanism was set up. It was set up for two three-year periods. It was wonderful. It gave the positive and the negative. It showed what improved and what did not. However, a previous government - I cannot remember which one - abolished it.

Similarly here, we have a wonderful strategy. That strategy is born out of pain and death, and it has come from the response of the communities that have fought on the ground and been ignored by a succession of Governments. That is where this strategy came from. The shorter-term plan had 50 actions which were to be completed by 2020. Is the Minister of State in a position to tell us how many of those 50 actions have actually been implemented? At the least I would have expected her to have outlined that in her speech today. We are responding to frustration from groups on the ground at the lack of implementation. I mentioned A Vision for Change because it is *déjà vu*. Of course the vision and the strategy are *fite fuite le chéile*. They are totally tied up with each other. We do not need any more strategies or plans; we need action and commitment. We need the Minister of State to outline how many of the 50 actions are implemented and when the remaining items will be done. That is the sort of straight talking we need in relation to this. I agree with Deputy Gino Kenny when he says that we need an honest conversation about the decriminalisation of certain drugs.

We need a very honest conversation about alcohol. It is a major problem in Galway city. As for the level of suicide in Galway, I find it too upsetting to go into the number of deaths per week in Galway of people going into the water. It is tied up with many things. It is tied up with mental health, with the abuse of alcohol and the abuse of drugs. It is also tied up with our hypocrisy. To cite a very practical example, again in Galway, the Garda informed us that it could not prevent drinking on the street. Consequently we brought in by-laws but as there was a fault in these by-laws, a second set of by-laws was brought in. The Garda said it could not act until the councillors brought these in so we did. It is now an offence under the by-laws to drink on the street. Different interests, however, decided that people should be allowed to drink on a certain street and not on other streets. That was the first problem. The second problem is that the Garda states it does not have the staff to implement the by-laws. That level of hypocrisy is very apparent to the people who drink to excess. They see our hypocrisy. They see it in relation to our advertising and on how we promote sport through alcohol. That is something that we really need to face up to on a serious level. The Government and its Ministers will have my full support if it starts doing that on this issue.

It must start with the 50 actions and how many of them have been implemented. If they have not been, why not? There are problems, I understand, with governance on the ground. We face this every single Thursday in the Committee of Public Accounts, where governance issues repeatedly arise. We see a chairperson saying openly in the newspaper that he stayed on for a longer period of time, even though the recommended time was three years, because nobody else was there to take his job. I do not believe that is acceptable. There should be a feedback mechanism when there is a shortage in respect of chairpersons or co-ordinators, because they simply cannot function on the ground without that sort of backup. Tá mo dhóthain ráite agam.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I am very pleased to have an opportunity to speak on this Private Members' motion. At the outset, I commend my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, on her work and her leadership. I heard Deputy Connolly mention straight talking and the need for it, and I do not know many people who are more

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straight-talking than Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, or more passionate when it comes to this area, as are many in other parties as well.

My second point is that until we as a country adopt a health-led approach to drug addiction, we will continue to fail those who suffer from drug addiction. That is why I am very proud that we launched the national drugs and alcohol strategy under the leadership of Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, with the Taoiseach last year. At its very core, that strategy talks about addressing the issues of addiction in a health-led way. Until we get real in relation to that issue, we will continue to fail people who have a drug addiction, their families, and the communities in which they live. The sort of tough talking that we often hear from conservative commentators and politicians in the United States about the “war on drugs” forgets that behind drug addiction are individual people. They are people with health needs, whose needs we need to meet. I am very pleased, hope and expect that we will be able to build cross-party support on this, just like there was previously at the Committee on Justice and Equality, on how we deal with drug use. We also have the interdepartmental group, which is due to report shortly, looking at the issue of decriminalisation.

The drugs phenomenon is an international issue that needs to be tackled in a co-ordinated way and addressed in a global context. I share the view of the United Nations General Assembly special session on drugs in 2016 that, “the world drug problem remains a common and shared responsibility that should be addressed in a multilateral setting through effective and increased international cooperation and demands an ... integrated, multidisciplinary, mutually reinforcing, balanced [scientific, evidence-based] and comprehensive approach.”

Ireland’s drug problem is going through a particularly dynamic phase, as is indeed happening in other European countries. Analysis by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction shows that people are using a wider range of substances than in the past, and many are polydrug users which increases the risks to their health. Although the use of heroin and other opioids in Europe remains relatively rare, these are the drugs that cause the highest rates of fatal overdose in Europe. Europe has also experienced an increase in deaths and other harms from newer types of drugs. I therefore welcome the 75% reduction in the use of new psychoactive substances by young adults in Ireland between 2010 and 2015, but we need to remain vigilant.

The 62nd session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, CND, will take place in Vienna next week. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, will represent our country at the high-level ministerial segment. The Minister of State will discuss the future direction of world drug policy and participate in setting priority goals going forward, leading to the adoption of a declaration by Ministers. This debate is especially timely. I assure the House that Ireland, along with other EU colleagues, will be a strong voice for a public health approach to drugs at this event. That is really the point where we have to take a health-led approach to drug addiction. There are other issues that we need to address, but we need to get that and cop on as a country as to how we respond to this issue. I am very pleased that the strategy has this at its very core.

Building the resilience of families and communities to respond to the drug problem is a key feature of our national drugs strategy. Community participation and consultation in shaping policy responses to drugs is therefore very important. This is a key role of the drug and alcohol task forces. Equally, measures which address underlying socio-economic disadvantage and the criminality associated with illegal drugs are critical to the development of that integrated

response.

I acknowledge that many people in local communities live in fear due to drug related intimidation. It is a Government priority to help communities and protect them from intimidation because of such drug use. The use of violence or the threat of violence to enforce debts related to drug use further impacts on these communities by creating an atmosphere of fear and undermining the health and well-being of families affected and the wider community. I welcome the close collaboration between An Garda Síochána and the National Family Support Network to develop a programme to strengthen the effectiveness and public awareness of the drug related intimidation reporting programme. This is a key commitment under the strategy.

There are a number of initiatives targeted at addressing drug related crime. The Criminal Assets Bureau achieves nationwide coverage in the targeting of the proceeds of crime through the operation of the divisional assets profiler programme. These asset profilers work together with local Garda management and communities toward the objective of denying and depriving criminals of assets. There is now a national network of 378 trained asset profilers compared with 279 at the end of 2017. I want to acknowledge this afternoon the important role played by An Garda Síochána in tackling the supply of drugs by supporting local communities through various preventative and detection initiatives. The Government has allocated very significant resources to policing in recent years and the budget for An Garda Síochána has been increased to €1.76 billion for this year.

I refer specifically to north east inner city initiative, NEIC, as it is an example of the Government's multifaceted response to drugs and drug related crime. The NEIC community is one that has borne the brunt of drug related crime. It is also a socio-economically disadvantaged community. On foot of the Mulvey report on the challenges of the area, the Government established a programme implementation board to oversee the implementation of its 24 actions to reduce criminality and improve living conditions in the area. I thank Deputy Enda Kenny who, during his time as Taoiseach, took a very personal interest in this as well.

From the outset of this initiative, there has been targeted community engagement and a focus on improving supports and facilities for a wide range of projects and services. One of the major aims of the initiative is to ensure the area is safe for families, residents and the people who work there. Since the start of this year, 51 new gardaí have been assigned to the area to provide reassurance to residents. Increased patrols targeting drug dealing and antisocial behaviour blackspots have also started to make a real and noticeable difference. Ensuring employment opportunities are maximised for local people is also a priority. Another key objective is to improve the physical environment and build that sense of pride in the area.

The Department of Health, in association with the HSE, has developed an integrated package of services to address addiction and related issues in the community. It is estimated that there are 1,000 people in receipt of drug treatment services in the north east inner city. There are an estimated 1,800 homeless people with significant health needs in the inner city, a large proportion of whom are in the in the north-east inner city. The total cost of the new services is €1.8 million, with €500,000 from HSE resources and €1.3 million from the programme implementation board. This is very much welcomed.

I know that the motion also refers to our Public Health (Alcohol) Act. The passage of that Act had significant learnings for us as an Oireachtas. It shows what we can do when we work together in a bipartisan fashion and when we stand up to vested interests who endeavoured to

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stymie this landmark legislation. It also shows what we can do when those of us in this House work with communities, civic society and medical experts outside of this House. That partnership model delivered the Public Health (Alcohol) Act, just as predecessors in my role managed to deliver similar initiatives on smoking. The challenge for us now on drugs is building cross-party and societal consensus as to how we deal absolutely with the criminality aspects of drugs and that we crack down on the supply of drugs.

We also remember, however, that behind addiction is a human being and his or her family. We have to support that individual. As Minister for Health, I cannot stand over anything that does not take a health-led approach to drug addiction. We have a strategy in place - Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery - and I re-emphasise the Government's commitment to it. I look forward to the report of the interdepartmental group on the issue of decriminalisation, which is due very shortly. I hope it provides us with a way forward in this area and I know the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, is deeply committed to that. Our public health-led approach requires services to work together, not in a siloed manner, in order that people do not fall through the cracks as they try to navigate the different services required to meet their specific needs. At the same time, the strategy recognises the need to address the harms of illegal drug markets on local communities and wider society.

I look forward to continuing to working with the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, with colleagues from across the House and with wider society as we address the many important issues highlighted in the motion put forward by Independents 4 Change and in the Government's amendment.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I commend my colleague, Deputy Joan Collins, on her tremendous work in bringing forward this motion on the local drug and alcohol task forces. The motion strongly supports the work of the task forces, which are central to the implementation of the Government strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, of 2017. The motion calls on the Government to implement the commitment in the programme for Government to allocate an emerging needs fund; to commit to urgent implementation of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018; to accelerate the work of the Garda asset profilers; to ensure a partnership approach to the new youth scheme; and to conclude the HSE review, among other measures. The Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin amendments are also very welcome.

There are 14 local drug and alcohol task forces, 12 in the Dublin area, one in Bray and one in Cork city. There are also ten regional drug and alcohol task forces. I am informed that current funding has been reduced by around 37%, which is an astonishing cut, since 2008. There were a number of years with no funding restorations and in budget 2018, while the HSE received an additional €6.5 million for addiction services, none of this was distributed amongst the task forces.

Tragically, there were almost 700 drug related deaths in 2015. Drugs continue to be a scourge on our communities and families. I welcome some of the measures the Minister for Health and the Minister of State have indicated they are interested in bringing forward. Some of the strategic actions of the task forces include responding to the needs of women and older people with substance misuse issues; supporting and promoting community participation in all local, regional and national structures; and promoting the participation of service users and their families. How can the task forces be expected to deliver on such actions with inadequate funding and an erosion of morale? These issues are partly due to a HSE review, which I understand is being completed with little or no consultation with the task forces on its terms of reference.

How can the HSE expect to review the remit and running of task forces when so much of the work and interaction of those bodies falls outside of the health sphere?

Constituents who work and volunteer in the sector inform me that they strongly agree with having transparent systems in place for reporting on the spending and allocation of task forces' funding. They make a convincing case that core funding to community and voluntary groups should be increased significantly. I am informed that some of the organisations cannot pay yearly increments to their experienced, professional core staff. The Minister is aware, as we all are, of the importance of community employment schemes for assisting people in addiction to come back into the workforce. However, the term limits on those schemes can make recovery very difficult. Organisations and volunteers working with people with drug or alcohol addiction issues or both mention deficiencies with the health service, the psychiatric services, dual diagnosis services and so on. One of the key organisations in my own constituency of Dublin Bay North, the Kilbarrack coast community programme, states that the increasing number of drug deaths each year is a result of front-line services not being put in place or being totally overwhelmed. I am sure the Minister of State is aware of the excellent work of that organisation. The Dales Centre in Darndale is another outstanding local service, as are the rehabilitation and support programme, RASP (Laneview Learning Centre) CLG, in Coolock; the Edenmore drug intervention team, EDIT; and indeed several other anti-drug and alcohol organisations in various parishes in the north east.

One aspect to which the Minister referred and which I would also like to address is that of drug related intimidation. The Ceann Comhairle may have noted that our parliamentary colleagues in Westminster are very agitated at the moment by the high level of homicides from knife crime. We have an outrageous level of homicides from gun crime here, and some of these issues are created out of what has been happening in the drug abuse area. This growing and worrying part of the drugs trade and addiction is terrorising communities around the country. In 2016, CityWide undertook a survey which showed that under 10% of people reported their experiences of intimidation to the Garda, and the Garda figures backed that up with just one case under investigation in 2017. Reference has been made to the Garda asset profilers. There is a real issue here about communities living in terror. I hope that is being taken on board by the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, the Minister for Justice and Equality and the Minister for Health.

I warmly commend the work of the drug and alcohol task forces, as well as the organisations and projects funded by them. I congratulate my colleague, Deputy Joan Collins, on bringing forward the motion.

Deputy Joan Collins: I accept the amendment from Fianna Fáil, whose Deputies were at the briefing by CityWide the other day. It is very practical and I welcome the fact that the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, has said she would attend the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health. CityWide should also come in along with the task forces and the HSE to drill down to what is happening with the implementation of the national drugs strategy. I also agree with the Sinn Féin amendment calling for funding for the task forces to be brought back to 2008 levels and for wage increases to be taken on board. We cannot have people working in austerity conditions when the Government is telling us we are into a recovery and are going to have more money in our pockets. There is a group of people who are putting in an awful lot of time and effort. It is their job to get their hands dirty in the community, work with their communities and bring in those instances to try to deal with them through the task forces.

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The task forces were set up in 1996 to respond to the growing drugs crisis, particularly in our working-class communities. Families were nearly wiped out and we still have masses every year where those who died during those years are remembered. A criminal element was developing in our communities at the time and the murder took place of Veronica Guerin. Mr. Pat Rabbitte, who was then a Minister of State, said the Government had not listened to the communities and that their voices were missing on what was happening and what people were experiencing. The model of the task force was based on the principle that the growing crisis could not be tackled without the voices, knowledge and expertise of the communities identifying and responding to needs, and shaping and funding those responses to link in to State agencies, local authorities, the Garda, the health services and so on. There was a bottom-up and top-down integrated response to the issues. Although it was innovative, that model is now under threat. I do not know if the HSE is wiping someone's eye on this but there are serious problems.

The Minister of State, the task forces and CityWide all agree that the national drugs strategy is good. It is what should be done. However, CityWide is saying that because of the way it is being implemented, we are in great danger of moving away from the model of the task force. We all agree the strategy should be health-led but this should be done in a holistic way. We are talking about decriminalising the use of drugs and making the approach more health-centred. The original model is being stretched and torn apart.

The national oversight body, under its terms of reference, looks at the prioritisation and allocation of funding, whereby all agencies are supposed to participate and agree where moneys are to be distributed. The national oversight body was told recently that an allowance of a couple of million euro should be discussed and priorities agreed, and that it would distribute the money. However, in a reply to a parliamentary question, it was revealed that the HSE had already allocated the funding, ignoring the terms of reference of the national oversight body. These agencies are not attending meetings of the strategic bodies, which poses a considerable danger.

The standing sub-committee met yesterday to agree actions by Customs and Excise and the Garda on the supply of drugs, and while there was an introduction, there was no discussion, engagement or outcome even though that is what the sub-committee is supposed to do. This flies in the face of its terms of reference, which are to oversee and monitor the responsibilities and accountability of the task forces, yet the HSE is initiating reviews and essentially ignoring the committee. These two national bodies cannot do their job under their terms of reference because the necessary information is not being provided to them and decisions are being made elsewhere, primarily by the HSE.

Like CityWide, I disagree that there is robust monitoring. Issues are being missed. It is important to point out that unless the Minister of State addresses this matter, problems will seep down into the task forces. Community representatives and various representative bodies fear that they are not being listened to, that the task forces will just become a talking shop and that, through these reviews, the HSE will control their funding and the direction they take. The Minister of State will have to deal with this issue.

The amendment does not address core funding, wages or the issues raised by CityWide. The voices of the 1990s are coming back and saying to us as politicians that something is wrong and it needs to be addressed.

I thank the parties that are supporting the motion. I hope that we can progress it and make it effective.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 28 March 2019.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Road Projects Status

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Ceann Comhairle and his office for affording me this opportunity and the Minister for attending to reply to this important issue. It is 20 years since the M4 opened. It was a major boost to traffic at the time and has served its purpose well. With the passage of time, however, we have come to understand that its capacity is no longer capable of dealing with the volume of traffic on it. Three or four times per week, and sometimes every second morning, we hear without fail of an incident on the M4 between junctions 7 and 5. In some cases, this involves a minor accident. In others, it is a serious accident. In every case, it leads to considerable delays for morning commuter traffic. It happened as recently as yesterday morning, when a heavy vehicle had a *contretemps* with a van. The van lost out and ended high up on the embankment among the trees. Traffic was held up by at least an hour at a crucial time in the morning. Drivers cannot turn around on a motorway. It is not like a minor road.

I have referred to this situation before and the Minister is aware of it, but it is now vital that, at the earliest possible date, provision be made to upgrade the section of the motorway where it merges with the regional road, which was backed up yesterday almost all the way to Kilcock on one side and Lucan on the other. It is imperative that steps be taken to upgrade the road in accordance with what would normally be expected in such a situation. Doing so is not only important to morning commuters, but also to those in the transport sector, for example, Bus Éireann and Bus Átha Cliath, who travel on that road at every time. They are all waiting anxiously for an intervention to be made, and I am looking forward to the earliest possible intervention.

I will make another suggestion that would probably do no harm. That section of road could do with a police motorcyclist on a regular basis to monitor traffic. Something that we have all seen, including the Ceann Comhairle, is traffic moving from one lane to another and creating a serious opportunity for an accident to happen. Sometimes, vehicles move without signalling. Ramps at both ends of the interchanges are overloaded with traffic and need to be extended to ensure that vehicles merging with fast-moving traffic have an opportunity to pick up sufficient speed without causing an accident and vehicles heading onto the ramp can do so by moving from the motorway's high-speed lane into the slow lane earlier.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I thank Deputy Durkan for raising this important matter. As Minister, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in respect of the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015, the planning, design and improvement of individual roads is a matter for the relevant road authority in respect of local and regional roads and for Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned, in respect of national roads.

Within the overall context of Project Ireland 2040, the national development plan has been

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developed by the Government to underpin the successful implementation of the new national planning framework. This provides the strategic and financial framework for the TII's national roads programme for the period 2018 to 2027. In the ten years covered by the plan, more than €11 billion will be invested in the road network.

The national development plan identifies two categories of national road improvement project. The first covers projects to advance to construction, subject to the satisfactory outcome of the project appraisal and development consent approval processes. The second relates to projects at pre-appraisal and early planning stage that are being assessed with a view to developing a pipeline of suitable projects for development.

Overall, the TII considers that, taking steady-state and public private partnership, PPP, commitments into account, the indicative national development plan budget would allow for the projects in the first category to be progressed and a pipeline of projects to be taken through early planning, but it would not be possible to take all of the pipeline projects through the development consent process or to construction stage within the timeframe of the plan. Advancing projects in the second pipeline category will, therefore, be subject to prioritisation within the overall national road programme and funding.

The proposed M4 Maynooth to Leixlip project is included among a number of major national road schemes that were identified for appraisal and falls into the pipeline category. The overall aim of the scheme is to aid in the delivery of Project Ireland 2040 by enhancing connectivity between Dublin Port and the west, in particular Sligo and Athlone. The extent of the section of the M4 corridor under consideration includes the mainline carriageway between junction 7, Maynooth, and junction 5, Leixlip, and the associated mainline junctions. The proposed alignment is 10 km in length, with the majority of the route in Kildare County Council's area and approximately 1.5 km traversing South Dublin County Council's area.

The benefits of the proposed project would include improved journey time reliability; improved connectivity between the west and north west to Dublin Port; enhanced linkages between Dublin and the west, in particular Sligo and Athlone; catering for future travel demands; and improved safety.

As regards the current status, this project was subject to pre-appraisal to establish its compliance with the requirements of the public spending code and my Department's common appraisal framework and to identify whether it should be included in a portfolio of projects to be progressed to stages 1 to 4 of planning and design in accordance with the project management guidelines. The pre-appraisal plan submitted by Kildare national roads office to my Department was approved in January 2019. I understand that Kildare national roads office is now compiling the project management deliverables to submit to TII for approval in order to proceed with the appointment of consultants who will progress the planning and design phases one to four. It is expected that consultants will be appointed in May 2019.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Durkan might invite them in for a visit.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I would be delighted to do so. The Ceann Comhairle might rise to the occasion himself, as he has more than a passing interest - no pun intended. I thank the Minister for his reply. I am pleased that work is in progress but it must be accelerated to the greatest extent possible. We have spent the past number of years regretting the accidents that have occurred on the N7 and N9 and on the Sallins bypass although work on the latter is

progressing well. We need to see the same kind of progress with this particular project. The sooner consultants are appointed and the work starts, the better. If it was yesterday, it would not be too soon.

Concern has been expressed by commercial and passenger transport operators about the costs to them of delays on the road network because of accidents that should not really happen, particularly when all of the traffic is moving in the same direction. There is a lack of capacity on the motorways and regional roads which are incapable of dealing with the volumes of traffic coming on stream. I am glad that there is every intention to proceed as quickly as possible. Many of us have been in touch with TII on the matter. I must emphasise that this project is urgent and the sooner it is fully operational, the better for all concerned. Lives will be saved if the project is completed in the shortest possible timeframe.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank Deputy Durkan and accept his point about the speed with which this project should be completed. I know that capacity at junction 7, Maynooth is proving to be a challenge but we must await the outcome of the various stages of the project's planning and design before pre-empting the extent of any capacity constraints that may exist. The feasibility working cost is estimated to be in the order of €100 million. That relates to phases 1 and 2. I understand from TII that this cost is a very early indicative estimate and would not, as yet, include project specific aspects. It is expected that the proposed scheme will address capacity demands but the solutions to the issues and alternatives are still to be examined.

In line with the requirements of the public spending code and my Department's capital appraisal framework, two sets of approvals are required for projects, namely, approval of the business case and the cost-benefit analysis of the project and, separately, approval by An Bord Pleanála of an application for development. As the Deputy knows, the project is at an early stage and I would like to take this opportunity to stress that any timeframe for the successful and timely delivery of any project depends on obtaining the necessary consents at various critical stages, including at the route selection, detailed design and tender stages. The necessity to meet the requirements of the public spending code and planning consent from An Bord Pleanála along with an adequate capital budget are also critical to delivering the project.

I wish Deputy Durkan and the Ceann Comhairle well in their endeavours.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister. He can consider the invitation already issued.

Electric Vehicles

An Ceann Comhairle: We will move on to a somewhat different item. Deputy Rock wishes to discuss proposals for legislation or regulations in respect of electric scooters. Does the Deputy have an electric scooter?

Deputy Noel Rock: Yes, I do.

I have been raising this issue by way of parliamentary questions for a year now. The Minister, as well as every other Member who represents an urban constituency, will be well aware of the explosion in popularity of this form of transport in Ireland and across Europe. There is no question that this is the way of the future for environmentally sustainable transport and for

integration with public transport. I tabled a parliamentary question in July 2018 in respect of electric scooters and the Minister replied to the effect that governing legislation is currently in place for scooters that are powered by mechanical or electrical means. However, when other Deputies posed similar questions subsequently, the Minister's answer changed. It is quite clear that these vehicles exist in a legislative grey area. When it comes to taxation, they are, in effect, impossible to tax. Members of An Garda Síochána are unclear as to what to do with these vehicles. Due to the absence of legislation on these vehicles in the context of the Road Traffic Acts, local authorities have had to form their own views on them. Since I tabled this matter last week, Dublin City Council has made its views known. It believes that until legislation is enacted, these vehicles should be rendered illegal via a bye-law.

What is the plan here? It has been obvious for some time that something would have to be done about electric scooters but nothing has been done to date. It is clear that new legislation would have to be introduced or the Road Traffic Acts amended in order to bring these vehicles into line, legally. We need to set down clear regulations on speed, pedestrian safety and their use on footpaths and roads and in cycle lanes but none of this has been done. It is regrettable that we are being reactionary in this matter rather than being proactive. There are over 3,000 of these vehicles in use in Dublin right now and that number is growing by the week. A number of high street retailers are now selling electric scooters and they are no longer a niche, minority vehicle. They are growing in popularity and will continue to do so.

What is the Minister's plan? What are the timelines here? What kind of assurances can we give to people using these vehicles and how can we integrate them into a fully functioning transport network? Increasing numbers of people are using bicycles, buses and trains but how do we integrate scooters into the mix? We have ambitious plans for BusConnects, a metro system and so on. Scooters are particularly useful in the context of the final mile of any journey.

4 o'clock People can use our high-speed and high-frequency public transport network and then use their scooters to get to a particular place such as, for example, Leinster House.

They can get off the metro or the Luas and use their electric scooters for the final mile. In my view, electric scooters should be treated in the same way as electric bicycles, which is how it works in other European countries. That is the direction in which we should go but I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on the matter.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank Deputy Rock for raising the issue of electric scooters, which provides us with the opportunity to discuss these and similar vehicles. I am aware of the increasing number of electric scooters, electrically-powered skateboards and similar small vehicles on our footpaths and roads. I will start by advising the House of the current legal situation with regard to such vehicles.

The Road Traffic Act 1961 defines a mechanically-propelled vehicle as a vehicle intended or adapted for propulsion by mechanical means, including a bicycle or tricycle with an attachment for propelling it by mechanical power, regardless of whether the attachment is being used. It also includes a vehicle the means of propulsion of which is electrical, or partly electrical and partly mechanical. Electric scooters and powered skateboards fall into this category and are therefore considered to be mechanically-propelled vehicles.

Any users of such vehicles in a public place, as defined in the Road Traffic Act 1961, must have insurance, road tax and a driving licence. The penalties under road traffic laws for not being in compliance with these requirements include fixed charge notices, penalty points, fines and possible seizure of the vehicle. As it is currently not possible to tax or insure e-scooters or

electric skateboards, they are not considered suitable for use in a public place.

Electric bicycles are in a different category to e-scooters. Where a bicycle has an electric motor attached that may be used as an alternate means of propulsion, the vehicle is defined as a mechanically propelled vehicle under the Road Traffic Acts whether or not the motor is being used. Under article 1(h) of EU Directive 2002/24/EC, e-bikes are defined as “cycles with pedal assistance which are equipped with an auxiliary electric motor having a maximum continuous rated power of 0,25 kW, of which the output is progressively reduced and finally cut off as the vehicle reaches a speed of 25 km/h, or sooner, if the cyclist stops pedalling,”.

Legal advice obtained by the Department confirms that as bikes of this type require continuous effort on the part of the cyclist, they are considered to be pedal cycles. In other words, the engine is not the means of propulsion but an aid to the user. Pedal assisted cycles with a maximum continuous rated power of more than 0.25 kW and e-bikes that can be exclusively propelled by the motor are classified in the directive as low-performance mopeds, i.e. vehicles with pedals with an auxiliary engine of power not exceeding 1 kW and a maximum design speed not exceeding 25 km/h. Such vehicles are subject to road traffic legislation as I have just outlined, with the user obliged to have tax, insurance and an appropriate driving licence where the vehicle is to be used in a public place.

I have requested the Road Safety Authority to research how e-scooters and other such vehicles are regulated in other countries, particularly other member states. I am keen to understand the road safety implications of the use of such vehicles on public roads, especially when interacting with other vehicles. I will make a decision on whether or not to amend existing legislation when I have received the outcome of the RSA's research, and not before then. I will need to be satisfied that permitting such vehicles on our roads will not give rise to safety concerns for the users themselves and for all other road users including cyclists, pedestrians and motorists.

Deputy Noel Rock: I thank the Minister and the Ceann Comhairle. I suppose it is better late than never in many respects. The Road Safety Authority's review could have been commissioned when the first parliamentary questions on this matter were being set down. Clearly it was going to be an area that deserved further scrutiny. Based on comparable European countries the matter was clearly going to be an area that needed legislative scrutiny or potential legislative change. I welcome the Minister's response, belated as it is. These electrically assisted scooters require a manual start. They have to be kick started by the user and must reach a minimum of 7 km per hour under the rider's own propulsion, before the electric assist kicks in. Accordingly, this is where the ambiguity exists. In discussions with the motor taxation offices it appears that these vehicles cannot be taxed. Even if one wanted to tax them one could not. This is where the ambiguity exists. Ultimately, multiple agencies of the State have differing views on how these vehicles should be treated. I believe, and officials of various agencies believe, that it is necessary to bring about some legal clarity on the matter either to legalise them or explicitly make them unusable. It is necessary to introduce legislation.

I welcome the Minister's closing point in his statement that the RSA will be commissioned to put together a report. I urge the Minister to ensure that the RSA does this in short order and quickly. Many thousands of people use these vehicles and many hundreds more are buying them every week. There is an onus on us to bring clarity to the area and, as legislators, to make sure that we legislate accordingly.

Deputy Shane Ross: As there are so many people using these vehicles I acknowledge there

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is a need for speed in clarifying the situation. I hope to do this today. The emergence of these vehicles, and other such vehicles, is an example of a case where the legislation, while unambiguous as it stands, needs to be reconsidered in the light of new developments, such as those we currently speak of. Any possibility of change in the legislation would first and foremost have to consider the safety of the people using these vehicles and the wider public. It is clear that there are implications for public safety in the use of these vehicles. Where they are driven on a public road they are extremely vulnerable. When driven on a pedestrian or cycle path they can pose dangers to legitimate users on those paths. As Deputy Rock said, I acknowledge that consideration by the Road Safety Authority is the right place for this to see what should be done and what legislative changes are required. When the authority has concluded its examination and reported on it I will consider that report. If any legislation is required I will introduce it as quickly as possible.

Deputy Noel Rock: I would like to issue the Minister, Deputy Ross, with an invitation to use one of these vehicles on some of the private space around Leinster House, if he would be so willing.

An Ceann Comhairle: You might give him a loan of your own.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I believe that the Minister has had enough dodgy photo opportunities.

An Ceann Comhairle: Let us move on. We are getting a little carried away.

Home Building Finance Ireland

Deputy Catherine Martin: This week many homeowners and management companies of defective buildings, who were led down a path by the Government in relation to securing loan funding for the remediation of latent defects caused by rogue developers during the boom years, found that the path set out by the Government led straight into a brick wall. The Minister for Finance indicated in an answer to a parliamentary question in December that the Home Building Finance Ireland, HBFI, scheme would be in a position to consider applications from this month by apartment owners and management companies to undertake remedial works on latent defects, but it turns out that it is closed to assisting homeowners who face the appalling prospect of having to undertake work on their own coin just to make their homes safe.

Department of Finance correspondence to a Government Minister from November of last year states that “there is nothing contained in the HBFI legislation that would prevent such a funding application being considered.” Now, however, it seems there is. The HBFI is not able to imagine a situation where a remediation application would be funded, due to the possibility of further estimated costs once remediation is commenced if further issues present, and the inability of most management companies to provide security beyond personal guarantees from apartment owners. I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy English, that apartment owners have been led up a blind alley by the Government. Will the Minister of State please tell the House what happened here? Did the Government really not understand its own legislation well enough honestly to tell people affected by latent defects that there was not a snowball’s chance in hell that the HBFI fund would be of any use to them? Why would the Government direct them with this false hope?

While the affected apartment owners and management companies deserve an answer as to why the one direction pointed out to them turned out to be a dead end, they also deserve a comprehensive and accurate answer as to what the Government intends to do to assist them.

I first raised this issue in the Dáil with the former Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, more than two years ago. A Green Party motion has since been backed by the Dáil to “prepare and publish options for the financing and carrying out of remedial works to defective housing units, that will form the basis for a nationwide scheme, enshrined in legislation, for the orderly remediation of legacy defects in housing.” There has also been the cross-party Safe As Houses? report that called for a redress scheme to assist homeowners with latent defects and for an information and advice service for those affected by non-compliance and regulatory failure.

The most straightforward part of the Safe As Houses? recommendation was the call to set up an advice service. After the fiasco of the Government’s misinformation on the HBFI scheme it is clear that this type of service is needed more than ever. Has the Government even looked at doing it? Does the Government intend to conduct a review, as called for by the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland, to ascertain how widespread and serious the problem of defective builds across the country is and, if it has not, why not? One cannot accurately assess potential reliefs without a comprehensive picture of the problem. Does the Government intend to investigate, or has it already investigated, the possibility of the provision of any sort of assistance for affected homeowners in the form of an advice service or the provision by some other means of accurate information for people dealing with defects; some form of tax relief, in particular given the reliefs given currently to builders and developers and those engaged in a wide range of other activities, in the form of VAT relief on remediation works, income tax relief or property tax relief; a low-interest State loan fund to assist those who cannot pay for remedial works, or a redress scheme for the orderly remediation of latent defects?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I thank Deputy Catherine Martin for raising this issue and acknowledge the distressing situation in which some owners and residents have found themselves, through no fault or their own, due to defects in buildings. It is an ongoing issue which we have debated here, as the Deputy said, over a long number of years. In general, building defects are matters for resolution between the contracting parties involved, namely, the homeowner, the builder and the developer and their respective insurers or structural guarantee and warranty schemes. While my Department has overall responsibility for establishing and maintaining an effective regulatory framework for building standards and building control, it has no general statutory role in resolving defects in privately-owned buildings, including dwellings, nor does it have a budget for such matters. While I acknowledge that calls for such a fund have been made, it is not possible for the State to take on responsibility or liability for all legacy issues nor would it send the right message to the industry regarding responsibility for compliance. In this regard, it is incumbent on the parties responsible for poor workmanship and the supply of defective materials to face up to their responsibilities and take appropriate action to provide remedies for affected homeowners.

The legislative position is very clear in terms of where responsibilities rest. Under the Building Control Acts 1990 to 2014, primary responsibility for compliance of works with the requirements of the building regulations rests with the owners, designers and builders of buildings. Enforcement of the building regulations is a matter for the 31 local building control authorities, which have extensive powers of inspection and enforcement under the Acts and which are independent in the use of their statutory powers. When a building is constructed and

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occupied, statutory responsibility for fire safety is assigned by section 18(2) of the Fire Services Act 1981 to the person having control of the building. In multi-unit developments, the person having control is generally the owner management company. Under the Multi-Unit Developments Act 2011, the owner management company must establish a scheme for annual service charges and a sinking fund for spending on refurbishment, improvement or maintenance of a non-recurring nature of the multi-unit development.

In response to the building failures that have emerged over the last decade, my Department has advanced a robust and focused building control reform agenda and will continue to ensure that these reforms have an impact. While that does not solve matters for the existing people, we are confident the proper regulatory framework is in place to prevent this happening with developments commenced after 2014. The difficulty the Deputy raises relates to who can deal with the problems arising in buildings constructed in previous years. The Deputy asked a number of questions, but her principal one was on the Home Building Finance Ireland, or HBF, scheme. The scheme was established under the Home Building Finance Ireland Act 2018 as a supply-based measure to help address the shortage of new housing and falls within the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Finance. The Minister has been very clear that the HBF was established on a commercial basis and that its activities must comply with state-aid rules. Any funding provided by the HBF will be backed by appropriate security and normal banking terms. As such, conditions will apply and HBF will not be in a position to offer cheap or subsidised credit. It is not about subsidised credit but a cost-neutral approach.

It is important to recognise the complexity of the funding of remediation works. These are high-risk projects which pose significant issues for lenders having regard to access to appropriate security. While the HBF will be open to considering all residential development construction-related activity, it is the responsibility of applicants to ensure their applications for funding are commercially viable to allow the agency to comply with state aid rules. I am advised by the HBF that only a small number of calls and emails have been received on this type of funding to date and that no inquiry has progressed to a full application to date. People are welcome to progress to a full application but it must be on a commercial basis and security must be provided. Lending of that nature will probably not suit circumstances such as those outlined by the Deputy in respect of developments in need of remediation. It is not that they are prohibited from applying. No one has misled anyone in that respect. However, such an application might not be approved due to the requirements around commercial viability and securing the loan.

Deputy Catherine Martin: With respect, these homeowners need more than an acknowledgment of their stress. With regard to the Home Building Finance Ireland scheme, the Minister of State said the Minister for Finance had been very clear, which he was. I have his remarks. He said nothing contained in the HBF legislation prevented a funding application like this being considered. In reply to my parliamentary question, the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, stated that the HBF would be in a position to consider applications from apartment owners and management companies for such funding. The mixed messages here are cruel. Instead of giving people hope, the Government has given them a sense of hopelessness. They were given that hope and then the Government took it all away.

I referred to four possible ways in which the Government could assist homeowners but it has done nothing. At this stage, every time I stand up to speak in the House, the Minister present presumes I am going to ask about helping these homeowners. That is how often I have raised the issue. However, the Government has done nothing. It has not even put in place a phone helpline for people who are in need. They do not know to whom to turn. It is abundantly

clear that two years down the road, the Government is intent on abandoning these homeowners. I received a letter today from a person whose family member has been hit with an unexpected bill of more than €16,000 to fix fire safety issues at an apartment building. The bill was accompanied by a stern notice that the matter should not be discussed even with friends because if the media got to know about the problem, the property would be rendered unsaleable. People are terrified and, to its shame, the Government is thriving on that terror. The Government depends on the fear those people have about speaking out publicly because doing so might mean they will not only have to pay for the defects but their properties will be rendered unsaleable. That means no political pressure on the Government and, therefore, no problem.

With respect, every time this matter raised, I hear about the Building Control (Amendment) Regulations 2014. Let us not talk about those any more because they are of no help to these people.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy-----

Deputy Catherine Martin: This is a pre-2014 issue. I ask the Minister of State to accept as a fundamental principle that this is not simply a matter of private contract. For many of these homeowners, there is no recourse to builders and developers who have long since gone bust. Does the Minister of State accept that this is a public safety issue? The Government cannot simply sit idly by.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, now, Deputy.

Deputy Catherine Martin: Is it waiting for a tragedy to occur? Will it take a death? Fire alarms are going off in these buildings and people think their apartment complexes are going to burn down. They are living in fear and the Government must act.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. The point is well made.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The Government must indicate that it intends to do something.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Minister of State to conclude on the matter.

Deputy Damien English: With respect to Deputy Catherine Martin, I had to focus my reply on the main question she submitted for debate. I understand she has other questions to which she wants answers. That is fine. However, the Deputy asked perhaps ten questions and I do not have time to respond to all of that. I had to focus on the charge the Deputy made that the Government had misled people in relation to the funding model provided under the HBFi scheme, which is not the case. We were very clear that the HBFi was to be established as a commercial entity in full compliance with state aid rules, with full lending terms and conditions to be approved by its board in due course. No other impression was ever given. That is the charge the Deputy makes today and that is what I will deal with. It is unfair to say we misled people when we did not. We understand the difficulties people are experiencing. We have all had situations in our constituencies where we have had to work with groups of people who found themselves in very difficult circumstances due to rogue workmanship at an earlier stage under previous Governments. We have tried to help where we possibly could. The Deputy should not accuse us of misleading anyone in relation to this fund. It was set up as a supply issue to help builders today to meet demand by building houses. To be clear, people can apply to the HBFi and each application will be examined on its merits and in the context of its particular circumstances. It is a matter for the HBFi to assess applications and, if appropriate, issue a term sheet having

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regard to state-aid rules and its commercial obligations. I ask the Deputy to bear in mind that, as with all lending, some security is required. That is a difficulty here.

I refer to the general approach to the issue. I referred to the changes we have made because the Deputy has asked repeatedly what we are doing as a Government. The first thing the Government had to do was put in place changes to ensure this could not happen again.

Deputy Catherine Martin: It means self-certification.

Deputy Damien English: No.

Deputy Catherine Martin: It does. The Minister says it does not, but it does. It is not robust.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please let the Minister of State respond.

Deputy Damien English: We put in place a system and, as the Minister of State in the Department, I have full confidence that this system can prevent a recurrence of what happened in the past. The situation the Deputy is raising will not happen again. That is the difference we have made. Experts in this area all over the world will tell the Deputy that the Irish system is one of the best. Self-certification works and even countries that do not have self-certification are considering going back to it because it has been proven over the last number of years that it is working. It is making a difference in the quality of the buildings. We are also working with the sector on changing the culture as well in respect of the workers.

The Deputy referred to calls for a fund to be established. The Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, addressed this last Tuesday in the Dáil. If there was a magic way to intervene and help in this area without exposing the State to an unquantifiable amount of money, because there are over 200,000 apartments-----

Deputy Catherine Martin: Does the Minister of State know how many apartments there are?

Deputy Damien English: The Minister has been clear that if somebody can come forward with a roadmap whereby we can intervene and help people, we will look at it. However, we must be very careful about the exposure of the taxpayer.

School Accommodation Provision

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Gabhaim buíochas as an deis chun an t-ábhar seo a ardú inniu. Is ábhar an-tábhachtach é do go leor tuismitheoirí i gCill Dhéagláin i gContae na Mí, mo Dháil-cheantar féin. Tá a lán daoine buartha faoi seo. Tá páistí ag dul ar scoil lasmuigh de Chill Dhéagláin agus lasmuigh de Chontae na Mí, uaireanta i mBaile Átha Cliath. Táim ag impí ar an Rialtas agus ar an Roinn le blianta bunscoil nua a chur ar fáil i gCill Dhéagláin toisc go bhfuil an t-éileamh ann.

Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for giving me the opportunity to raise primary school provision in Ashbourne again. I have raised it previously in parliamentary questions and in the education committee. The population of Ashbourne continues to grow. At the end of the recession, house building was starting in Ashbourne when it was not happening in other places.

We are beginning to pay the educational price now. There is simply not enough room for all the children who require primary school places in Ashbourne. Over the last number of years, as people moved to Ashbourne, inquired about schools and found there were no places, some of their children continued to go to the school they attended previously, perhaps in Dublin. In one case the school is in Bray and in another it is Drogheda. In other cases they attend schools in the countryside outside Ashbourne. The Department of Education and Skills helpfully provides a list of alternative schools, but one of them is 22 km from Ashbourne. That is unacceptable and should not be suggested to parents.

Children are entitled to exercise their constitutional right to primary education. It is an important constitutional right. They are entitled to have that education in their local area among their friends in the excellent community in Ashbourne and in association with the sports clubs, drama groups, scouts, guides and other groups for young people in the area. Children should go to school with their peers in their local area, and that entitlement is not being satisfied in Ashbourne at present.

Last year, there was an attempt to bang heads together to find out whether extra places could be extracted from local primary schools. Not much emerged from that. However, the queries still come to my office and I am sure to the offices of other Members about where there might be school places. The Minister has organised a meeting with the school principals at the end of this month in Ashbourne. I welcome that insofar as it goes and I am happy to attend it on foot of the Minister's invitation, but it is not the job of the local principals to provide places if there are no places. That is the job of the Department of Education and Skills. The Minister's colleague, the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, announced yesterday that the Department is open to providing a new school. I would prefer if the Department was actually opening a new school. It is always open to opening a school, but the question is whether it will open one in Ashbourne next September. I do not know what the purpose of the Minister, Deputy Regina Doherty's, statement was because it was not an announcement but simply restated the obvious.

We seek something concrete. We want places for children. I invite the Minister to visit Ashbourne - his party colleagues have probably already invited him - to see the housing development, visit the excellent schools and meet some of the parents involved in this campaign. They have set up an online petition. They have visited my office and I am sure they have visited the offices of other politicians. They are worried and desperate. I could raise all sorts of school issues in my constituency, such as Lismullen, O'Carolan College in Nobber, Dunboyne and a list of schools that need building work, but this case involves children who may not have a place in their home town.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta fá choinne an tseans labhairt ar an ábhar iontach tábhachtach seo. Tuigim na deacrachtaí in achan cheantar a éiríonn as an bhrú, in Átha Cliath agus na contaetha atá cóngarach dó ach go háirithe. Dá n-ardódh an daonra, bheadh an brú ann. Sa cheantar seo bhí suas le 150 dalta scoile i gceist anuraidh. Bhí inní ar na tuismitheoirí nach mbeadh spás ar fáil i mbunscoileanna an cheantair, ach socraíodh an cheist. Táim cinnte go mbeidh réiteach ar an fhadhb seo i mbliana.

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it gives me the opportunity to set out the situation with the lack of places at primary schools in the Ashbourne town area. In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the coun-

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try into 314 school planning areas. The Department uses a geographical information system, GIS, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise. The GIS uses data from a range of sources, including the Central Statistics Office, Ordnance Survey Ireland, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and the Department's databases. With this information the Department carries out nationwide demographic exercises at primary and post-primary level to determine where additional school accommodation is needed.

Major new residential developments in an area also have the potential to alter demand in that area. In that regard, as part of the demographic exercises, the Department engages with each of the local authorities to obtain the up-to-date data on significant new residential developments in each area. This is necessary to ensure that schools infrastructure planning is keeping pace with demographic changes as there is a constantly evolving picture with planned new residential development, including additional residential developments arising from the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF.

Where demographic data indicate that additional provision is required, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following: utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools, extending the capacity of a school or schools or provision of a new school or schools. Approximately 40% of extra school places are delivered by extending existing schools. In April 2018, the Government announced plans for the establishment of 42 new schools over the next four years, 2019 to 2022. In addition to the new schools announced, there will be a need for further school accommodation in other areas in the future.

With regard to Ashbourne, in 2018 concerns were raised locally about waiting lists for primary schools of up to 120 pupils. The Department worked closely with the principals and patron bodies of the schools in the area to put contingency measures in place. Notwithstanding that those numbers of pupils did not ultimately materialise in September 2018, the Department considers that there is a need for increased capacity in the area in the short term and over the medium to long term taking account of residential development in the area. I am aware there are a number of schools in the Ashbourne school planning area with waiting lists for enrolment for September 2019.

The Department is engaging with the principals of the five schools in the Ashbourne town area, and I thank the principals for their engagement. The school principals met recently to carry out a joint exercise to establish the net demand for 2019. This information has been received within the past week by my Department and it is currently under consideration. I acknowledge and welcome the engagement and co-operation of all of the political parties in that regard. In parallel, my Department is actively engaging with the patron of one of the schools in the area in regard to expansion of that school for 2019 to deal with immediate needs. Interim accommodation solutions for September 2019 and September 2020 will be developed with the aim of utilising, in the first instance, any available existing capacity. As pointed out by Deputy Thomas Byrne a meeting has been arranged between myself, principals of the local schools and Oireachtas Members to discuss the issues. I have no doubt Deputy Byrne will participate in that meeting.

My Department is conscious that Ashbourne is an area of growing demographic demand and additional residential development and it is open to establishing a new school to respond to the medium to long-term demand arising in the area, if necessary. Factors such as the scale and timing of developments in the Ashbourne area will determine the medium to long-term

requirement for additional school places, including the potential need and timeline for a new school. These medium to long-term requirements are currently being examined by the Department. The process will include an opportunity for patrons to assist the Department in identifying requirements for new schools in rapidly developing areas beyond the 42 schools announced in April 2018.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Go raibh maith agat. I acknowledge and do not disagree with anything the Minister said. He is correct that these concerns were raised last year by principals. They were also raised with me and I raised them privately with the then Minister, Deputy Bruton, but nothing materialised. It is also the case that the Minister and the Department do not know how many children from Ashbourne are being educated outside the town. I know for a fact that the Minister's officials handed out a list of alternative schools to a number of parents last year, including one school that is 22 km away. I am aware that children from Ashbourne are attending school in Drogheda, Bray, Malahide and other parts of Dublin. There are people whose children are on the list for Malahide as well because that is where the parents came from. I do not think the Department is able to track this activity, which is failing in the assessments that are taking place.

There are two major difficulties, one of which is ready-made families, which was first mentioned some years ago by a former and esteemed colleague of mine. These are families who have older children when they move into particular areas. These children are not expected and that is a particular problem as well. They should be expected. This issue should have been dealt with at least 12 years ago when the Department first started to deal with these issues. The other issue in Ashbourne is the people for whom English is not their first language, many of whom are Irish citizens and all of whose children are Irish citizens. These people are as local as anyone else in the area. There is definitely a language barrier with a proportion of these parents and that is a problem. In an effort to get some movement on this issue I previously used the word "discrimination". There is no question that there is a language element to this. People either do not understand the system or they are not confident to communicate. That is my experience. Without question, the number of parents who have been in touch with me and other politicians has increased this year. We need action quickly and we need certainty for parents and schools. The Minister spoke about September 2019. Parents watching and listening to this debate are worried about the future of their children and their schooling and they need certainty fairly quickly.

Deputy Joe McHugh: That certainty will be forthcoming. The information from the principals was received last week. We will meet at a political level at the end of the month when we will have an opportunity to be updated by the officials. If I have information before that, I will share it with colleagues.

On the language barrier and parents struggling to communicate through the medium of English, it is an issue. During one of my visits to St. Luke's national school in Tyrrelstown in regard to infrastructural issues I visited another building in the complex where parents are taught English. There is provision within the higher education institutes and education and training boards for people who are not proficient in the English language. The model operated in Tyrrelstown is interesting. It might be of interest to the Deputy in the context of the deficiencies in his own area. When I was there I met parents from Georgia, France, Syria and as far afield as Pakistan, which is indicative of the range of people who are being taught English while their children are at school. It is a very interesting model.

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Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Minister is aware of the urgency around the issue.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I am.

The Dáil adjourned at 4.35 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 12 March 2019.