



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 9 Bealtaine 2019

Thursday, 9 May 2019

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Eugene Murphy) i gceannas ar 9.30 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

CervicalCheck: Statements

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Good morning to the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, Deputies and the staff of the House. I wish all of them a good and productive day on behalf of the people of the nation as we start our business with statements on CervicalCheck. I call on the Minister to make his statement.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank the House for giving me the opportunity to provide an update on matters related to CervicalCheck. It is over a year since issues related to the CervicalCheck audit emerged. I welcome the opportunity to address a range of issues that have arisen in the past year and outline the work that is well under way in my Department, the HSE and the National Cancer Registry of Ireland to address them and, moreover, drive continued improvement in the screening service.

It is worth reflecting on what the CervicalCheck programme has achieved since it was set up in 2008. Since its inception, the programme has carried out more than 3 million screening tests. It has detected over 100,000 cases of abnormal cervical cells, many of which could have developed into cancer if not detected through screening and treated, where necessary. Cervical cancer rates have reduced, from around 14 cases per 100,000 women in the years 2009 to 2011, inclusive, to 10 cases per 100,000 women in the years 2013 to 2015, inclusive. The lifetime risk of a woman getting cervical cancer fell from one in 96 women in 2007 to one in 135 women in 2015 which, as Dr. Gabriel Scally noted in his report, represents a substantial improvement.

Dr. Scally also included in his report something to which I want to draw attention again - the substantial contribution CervicalCheck staff have made to women's health since the programme was established. I know how difficult a year it has been for them also.

Dr. Scally's report was produced following the in-depth scoping inquiry carried out by him and his team following a Government decision. This House's contribution in drafting the comprehensive terms of reference for the scoping inquiry helped to ensure his report identified the core issues and provided the framework to fix the flaws he identified in the screening service.

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He provided a progress report and a first report in June 2018 and his final report in September. All told, he made 56 recommendations which addressed a range of issues, including governance, audit, procurement and women's health.

An implementation plan for all recommendations has been developed and was published on the website of my Department on 12 December 2018, following a Government meeting. There are more than 120 actions in the implementation plan which, together, address all of Dr. Scally's recommendations. Some of the actions relate to work that had already been under way such as the establishment of a new board for the HSE and the proposed patient safety Bill. Others have been put in place in response to Dr. Scally's report. Work has been ongoing since December across the range of actions. My Department, the HSE and the National Cancer Registry of Ireland all have important and ongoing work to do.

It is important to say Dr. Scally has, at my request, reviewed the implementation plan for his recommendations. He said publicly that never before had he drawn up a report and then been asked to oversee its implementation. That is how seriously we are taking this issue. He provided a very positive preliminary assessment last November and a more detailed report in February which was published on the website of my Department. He was clear in that report that significant effort and resources were being committed to addressing the problems that had been identified and that the appropriate resourcing and project management structures were in place.

As Deputies will be well aware, Dr. Scally has committed to providing a supplementary report on certain further aspects of the laboratories, including procurement, quality and accreditation arrangements and governance structures. I look forward to receiving and acting on this report in the coming weeks. The report will, of course, be published once it has been shared first with representatives of the 221+ patient support group. The full implementation of Dr. Scally's recommendations will ensure women can have absolute confidence in the cervical screening service. Screening saves lives. It is essential that women continue to use the programme and all of the indications are that they are continuing to use it.

It is important to acknowledge that there continue to be challenges, one of which is laboratory capacity. As Deputies are aware, following the issues which had emerged with the CervicalCheck screening programme, I made the decision to offer free out-of-cycle smears to any woman who was concerned about her health, where her general practitioner, GP, felt she should have a further test as part of providing reassurance. The reality at the time was that general practitioners, in difficult and pressurised circumstances, were dealing with large numbers of worried patients. GPs needed to be supported while they awaited supporting information to be developed and disseminated by CervicalCheck. Approximately 112,000 consultations were provided by GPs, highlighting the sense of worry in the country, while 57,810 early repeat smear tests were provided between 1 May and 31 December. In other words, about half of the consultations resulted in a smear test, which is very different from how it is portrayed. Some 112,000 women saw their doctor, about 50% of whom decided, in consultation with their GP, that a repeat smear would be beneficial as part of providing reassurance. I trust women and doctors in making those decisions.

Laboratory turnaround times have increased as a result. A backlog of over 80,000 smears had built up to the end of February 2019, a figure that has been well documented. This reflects the 57,000 or so additional smears but also the fact that, thankfully, more women were using the screening programme, including some who had never before engaged with it. The HSE has advised that it has sourced additional capacity internationally and that it is working to agree

commercial arrangements and complete quality assurance processes in order to enable it to incorporate this capacity into the CervicalCheck programme. I know that this will be welcome news. It has been welcomed by the patient advocates, many cancer organisations and many Deputies in government and opposition.

The HSE is advising women that the natural history of cervical cancer indicates that the disease normally develops over a period of ten to 15 years. It has stated that, in this context, a delay in the return of cervical screening results is undesirable but not necessarily dangerous and that it poses a very low clinical risk. That is not an excuse for the backlog but an important message for the women of Ireland.

The House will be aware that I have asked the HSE to introduce as soon as possible human papilloma virus, HPV, testing as the primary screening method for the prevention of cervical cancer. This is in line with developments in cervical screening internationally. Ireland will be among the first countries in the world to make this transition. The HSE is engaging with other countries which have already made the switch in order to identify lessons for the project across a range of work streams, including reconfiguration of laboratories, procurement, information and communications technology, ICT, and colposcopy services.

The report on the scoping inquiry led by Dr. Scally outlines the difference between the current testing approach, using the traditional cytology test as the primary test, and the newer HPV test. It states that for every 1,000 women screened, around 20 will have pre-cancerous changes. The traditional test will identify 15 of the women, while the HPV test will correctly identify 18. In other words, it is a more sensitive and accurate test. Funding to implement the switch to HPV screening and, importantly, extend the HPV vaccination to boys, an issue on which I know Deputy Kelly has advocated, has been allocated in budget 2019. Vaccination for boys will be introduced in September. The independent expert panel review, which is being conducted by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, RCOG, will provide further clarity and assurance to the women who have consented to take part. I am the first to admit that this has taken longer than expected, particularly due to the necessity of seeking consent from women or their next of kin. However, I am pleased the review is now progressing well, with the transfer of all slides due to complete shortly. Of crucial importance is that the results of the review are disclosed to women in a sensitive and quality assured manner, and work is ongoing to ensure the right process is in place for this to happen.

On 16 April 2019, the Government approved my proposal for the drafting of a Bill to establish a tribunal to hear and determine claims arising from the retrospective CervicalCheck cytology clinical audit and from the expert panel review of cervical screening, in particular in respect of the reading of smears. This arises from recommendations made by Mr. Justice Charles Meenan in his report on an alternative system for dealing with claims arising from CervicalCheck. The proposed tribunal will be chaired by Ms Justice Mary Irvine, a serving judge of the superior courts, and will be open to individuals who are part of the 221 group, along with individuals who are identified during the RCOG review, where this review presents findings discordant with those of the original cytology examination.

I am pleased that we have this opportunity to put in place a new process to hear and determine claims for these cases. Mr. Justice Meenan's report provides a roadmap through a complex legal environment and the tribunal that he proposes is substantially different from anything that has been done before. It has never been done before in our country. Getting this right involves striking a careful balance between several important priorities, including the

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well-being of women and their families, the continued viability of life-saving cancer screening programmes, and the need to properly hold the State and private operators to account. Following consultation with the office of the Attorney General, the general scheme of the legislation is now available on my Department's website. The Bill has gone for drafting to the Office of Parliamentary Counsel. I have issued a letter to the Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health, Deputy Harty, who is present, to offer a briefing by my officials to committee members. This is complex legislation but it is a priority for the Government. Let me be clear that it is my intention to pass the legislation through both Houses before they rise for the summer recess.

On 11 March 2019, the Government agreed to my proposal to establish an *ex gratia* scheme for women affected by the non-disclosure of the CervicalCheck audit. The scheme is designed to provide an alternative, non-adversarial and person-centred option for women affected by the CervicalCheck non-disclosure issue. The Government also approved the appointment of an independent assessment panel. I have appointed the other two members of the panel, namely, Ms Brigid Doherty and Dr. Kevin Connolly, along with the judge. The panel has begun its work and held its first meeting on 1 May 2019. The role of the panel is to make a determination as to the appropriate amount of the *ex gratia* payment. Under the terms of scheme, the same amount will be paid to each woman, or her estate, who is assessed by the panel not to have had appropriate and timely disclosure. All women, or their next of kin, in the 221 cohort identified from the clinical audit as having discordance in their smear test results will be eligible to participate in the scheme and I am pleased that letters of invitation were issued yesterday. The terms of the scheme will shortly be available on my Department's website.

Members can see the considerable focus on the various issues raised over the past year, and the progress that has been made in responding to them. My overriding priority remains public health. The country has the opportunity to drive the virtual eradication of cervical cancer through a combination of screening and vaccination against HPV. Since the inception of the cervical screening programme, the incidence of cervical cancer in Ireland has been falling and we must build on this. This is very much the focus of the work of my Department, the HSE, and the many brilliant patient advocates in implementing the recommendations of Dr. Gabriel Scally, as well as in the important development of extending the HPV vaccine to boys this year. My priorities now are the *ex gratia* scheme, the Meenan tribunal legislation and ensuring the capacity is in place to reduce the backlog turnaround times.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Each Opposition spokesperson will have six minutes. The first Opposition spokesperson is Deputy Donnelly of Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will share my time with Deputy Murphy O'Mahony. I thank the Minister for his statement. At this stage, we are all acutely aware of the damage that the offer of the free retest caused in terms of the-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I want to clarify for all Members that I am told this is questions and answers with the Minister.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Can we start again, then?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Yes, that is fine.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We are all very aware of the implications and damage that the offer of the free smear test caused-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: I am sorry for interrupting. Six minutes for questions and answers is not practical. I was not told this. Was Deputy Donnelly aware of this?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Yes.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Was Deputy Funchion aware of the six minutes?

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I was not and I am-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I want to point out this is not a direction from the Chair. It was agreed by the Business Committee-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Fine but it seems tokenistic-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I can sympathise with Deputy Kelly's point-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: -----to have six minutes for questions and answers on a subject such as this.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I sympathise with Deputy Kelly's point but that is what has been agreed by the Business Committee.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Okay.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy Donnelly will have to start for the third time.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I apologise.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Not at all.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: That is okay. We might start the time again, if that is possible.

The offer of the free smear test contributed greatly to the HPV vaccine roll-out being delayed and to the backlog for women waiting for their smear test results. Back in February, the health committee was told the backlog had increased. We were all expecting it to have reduced considerably. From memory, it increased from approximately 78,000 to approximately 81,000. The Minister referenced February's figure. Given that it is May, what is the figure now? Does he at least have a date for when the HPV test should go live?

Deputy Simon Harris: Obviously, I do not agree with the Deputy on the free repeat smear test but in the interests of time, I will not rehearse the argument we have had many times. In my opening statement, I outlined why I believed it was the appropriate action to take. I do not have any more up-to-date figures available to me now but I am checking whether we can get them. If we can do so during the debate, I will make them available to the Deputy and the House. If not, I will make them available to the Deputy in writing, ideally today. I will certainly seek them for him.

What I can say, and the Deputy knows it - and it has been welcomed by the Marie Keating Foundation, the 221+ group and many others - is that the agreement we now have in place with MedLab, which is the laboratory that has the largest backlog, means it is expected the backlog will be significantly reduced over the summer months. Many women receive their results

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within three weeks or within nine weeks. The specific challenge has been with MedLab, where the time is approximately 33 weeks. The fact that MedLab is now focusing on its backlog will see it reduced significantly.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: What about the HPV test?

Deputy Simon Harris: It is still my intention for the HPV test to be introduced by the end of the year. We have reached an agreement with MedLab whereby it already uses the HPV test with regard to its backlog, which is an important point.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Minister. I accept his bona fides in stating he will get us the information but, with respect, these are Dáil statements on CervicalCheck. The backlog is one of the most pressing issues. The latest data we received was in February. The Minister should have the figures at his disposal for the Dáil this morning on what the backlog is because we need to know whether it is increasing, decreasing or stationary.

In the interests of time I will put my other questions together. I welcome the movement on the *ex gratia* payment but by the time it is implemented it will probably have been a year since Dr. Scally recommended it. Why has it taken so long to do something that seems to be fairly straightforward?

My next question is related to CervicalCheck. It is very important and probably deserves more time in the Chamber. It relates to the court ruling in the recent case on screening, which has sent a shockwave through all screening programmes. Senior doctors are speaking to me about the possible implications of having to shut down entire screening services in the country. Is the Minister able to give a brief response on what actions the Government is taking on this front relating to CervicalCheck?

Deputy Simon Harris: I ask, with the agreement of the House, that we show each other a bit of flexibility because when a major question such as this is asked I will not rush my words because it is important. I am happy to be flexible.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Yes.

Deputy Simon Harris: On the *ex gratia* payment I take the Deputy's point. My position is that the scheme is very much under way and the letters of invitation issued to women yesterday. With regard to the recent court judgment I am limited in what I can say because the House should not discuss cases that are still technically before the courts. What I will say in light of the public and medical concern that has been expressed and articulated by the Deputy is that this is a judgment that needs to be considered carefully. The Taoiseach and I have asked the Attorney General to consider the implications of the judgment. I do not mean the implications regarding Ms Morrissey. Everybody is pleased she has received justice and that she has received an award in this regard and I wish her and her family well. I am speaking about the broader implications regarding the phrase "absolute confidence" and the broader implications regarding the primary liability lying with the State and what that liability is for. We have often been criticised for knee-jerk reactions on this issue. The State does not intend to have a knee-jerk reaction but to allow the Attorney General consider the implications of it for the wider health service. After I have been legally advised on it, I will be happy to brief Opposition spokespersons or come back before the House.

Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: In the interests of time, I will group my few ques-

tions together. I am the first female Deputy ever elected in Cork South-West. I am the only female Oireachtas Member from County Cork. I stand before the Minister this morning to say how sad and let down I feel on behalf of the women of Ireland at the way the CervicalCheck saga has played out. I am tight for time but I must say how awful it is. I acknowledge that the Minister knows of the pain and worry of women who continue to wait for results but I want to get it across to him how awful it is.

What is the Minister going to do to restore confidence? It is essential that the women of Ireland go ahead with this and any other screening process that is available. What will the Minister do to restore confidence in health checks in general and CervicalCheck in particular? Was the Minister advised not to go ahead with the free or out-of-schedule smear tests? How can the Minister stand over the fact that if one pays for a result, one can get it faster than if one does not? That is still the case. Can poor people not be sick? Why do poor people have to wait for a result? There are so many calls on people's money now. Why must they wait for a result and worry for the duration of the wait while people with a few bob for results can get them faster? How can the Minister stand over that?

Deputy Simon Harris: It was exactly because of the Deputy's last point that I decided to bring in a free repeat smear test. People on a Deputy's income and the like could have afforded to go to the doctor and pay for a repeat smear test. Some of the Deputy's constituents would not have been able to do that, however, and I was not going to allow an apartheid to exist in relation to reassurance. The circumstances of the free repeat smear test have been well documented but the Deputy and I have a different view despite the fact that many Members across the House called for its introduction at the time. Such is political life.

The Deputy asked what I am doing to restore confidence in the screening programme. The clinical audit did not happen during my tenure as Minister for Health, nor did many of the challenges arise. However, the issue blew up during my time but it is my job to fix it and to work with the Deputy in that regard. We are going to eradicate cervical cancer in our country within a generation. That is not pie in the sky, it is something that has been done effectively in other jurisdictions. It will be done in Ireland through screening, HPV testing, the introduction of the HPV vaccination for boys, the promotion of vaccination by all Members of the House and, hopefully, the end of the silly nonsense and scaremongering of some Members against the life-saving vaccine and CervicalCheck. We are implementing the recommendations of the Dr. Scally report, namely, the 120 actions that - I accept Deputy Murphy O'Mahony's bona fides and passion on the issue - will genuinely give us a world-class screening programme which will continue to build on the progress CervicalCheck has made since its introduction in 2008 on foot of a brave decision by Fianna Fáil in government which has helped to save lives.

Deputy Alan Kelly: My first question is on Dr. Scally. His first report was in September. Where is his second report? I am becoming very concerned about this. Something does not add up, as I have been saying now for months. Let us go back to the meeting of the health committee of 13 February 2019. At that meeting, I asked where the second report was. We know there are issues around outsourcing and I am very confident that there are further issues in that regard which were not found in the first report. We know also that there are huge issues in relation to quality assurance. The second phase of reporting on the part of Dr. Scally relates to contracts and quality assurance and all related issues. At the meeting of 13 February, I pressed the Secretary General of the Department of Health on when the second report would be forthcoming. I spoke to him about the issues I have just set out. He told me he believed the report was due imminently. I asked how soon and whether it would be that week and he replied that

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it potentially would be that week. That was 13 February. What is after happening? Is there a misunderstanding between the Department of Health and Dr. Scally regarding the terms of reference for phase 2? In fairness to the Minister, he published the terms of reference. I am not trying to catch him out. I just want to know what has happened. From September last year or the exact point at which the terms of reference were agreed and sent to him, Dr. Scally has been working on the terms of reference as written by the Department. I want an assurance this minute that this is the case and that his work did not change as a consequence of what happened at the health committee meeting of 13 February 2019. I cannot understand how the Secretary General could say the report was imminent and potentially due that week when it is still not done in the second week of May. What is going on? That is the first question.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Kelly for the questions. I have no knowledge that-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Something does not add up.

Deputy Simon Harris: -----Dr. Scally is working to anything other than the terms of reference. I cannot remember the date but I told Deputy Kelly in the House on a previous occasion, when he put the proposition to me, that additional laboratories had been identified which had previously been used in our screening programme but which were not, to the best of my knowledge, still in use. Dr. Scally provided me with an assurance that nothing he had found should concern me in relation to the safety of the laboratories being used today but he said he would require more time to look into some of the issues he had found regarding some of those laboratories. Deputy Kelly has always been responsible on this and it is important to say Dr. Scally provided me with an assurance on the safety of the laboratories we are using today, albeit he said it would take him longer to do his work. I believe it is nearly complete and I expect to receive it in the coming weeks. I cannot be more specific as Dr. Scally is independent in his work.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I have no issue with waiting. I want him to be thorough. I just want to know why, all of a sudden and in the middle of all this, Dr. Scally had a conversation. I would have presumed the Department and Dr. Scally were hand in glove. I cannot understand how a Secretary General would say it was imminent and potentially due that week when we are still waiting for it. That does not suggest a hand-in-glove relationship. Rather, it suggests a hands-off relationship and a not-in-control relationship. I want dissection of what went on historically. I appreciate what was in the first report and that we have to go through quality assurance and so on in the laboratories and in the contracts. Something here does not add up because it has changed since 13 February.

My second question relates to the decision of the judge in Ruth Morrissey's case. I heard what the Minister said earlier about that and I wish her all the best. She is an amazing woman. There is an opportunity here. We all know, albeit the Minister will not admit it for reasons I respect, that what the Taoiseach promised on "Six One" was unachievable. It was scandalous to do so. He overpromised something the Government could never do which was to say it would chase the laboratories and that the women would not have to go through the courts. Ruth Morrissey spent over 35 days in court and it is a national scandal that she had to do so. The judge has made his decision. While I respect the fact that the Minister needs to get an opinion on it, the Government now has an opportunity to settle with these women and for the laboratories to be pursued separately. The Taoiseach is so out of touch that last week he did not know what he was talking about a second time. He said women would not now have to go through the process of giving evidence. The only difference, which I acknowledge is unique, is the proposal

following Mr. Justice Meehan's report that the press will not be involved. The press has been very important in revealing every issue in relation to this scandal. Women will still have to give evidence. The Minister has an opportunity based on last week's decision to create a process to settle with these women. All of these women and their families have the process of going through the High Court and they will have the process of going through the tribunal following this legislation. However, there is a third way. Many of the patient advocates believe there is a third way. Will the Minister look at this third way to settle with the women and their families? In his deliberations with the Attorney General, I ask the Minister on behalf of many people, to whom the Minister knows I speak, to seek advice on whether there is a third option, namely, to mediate and settle with them to shorten the process for these women, many of whom do not have time on their side.

10 o'clock

Deputy Simon Harris: As the Deputy has acknowledged in his comments, I am not going to pre-empt the Attorney General's consideration of what the legal landscape looks like-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: I just want the Minister to add to it.

Deputy Simon Harris: -----but I hear the point made by the Deputy. As Minister for Health, I have a number of priorities here and I need to make sure they are complementary and not competing. The first is to make sure we are looking after women who were wronged and the second is to make sure we protect our screening programmes. I am aware that the Deputy is also passionate about that.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Yes, 100%.

Deputy Simon Harris: The impact of the judgment on our health service will need to be considered very carefully. It has been acknowledged by many patient advocates and some of their legal teams that not all of the cases will be negligent. How one proves negligence is an issue with which many of us have been grappling.

There is an important point to be made with regard to the Meenan tribunal legislation. It does not say that the cases must be held in private. The Meenan tribunal legislation has indicated that it is the woman's choice. If a woman wants to have the hearing held in public then that can happen, absolutely. If a woman wants to have it heard in private then she also has that right, which she does not currently seem to have in the courts.

Deputy Alan Kelly: This is once it passes in legislation.

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes, once we pass the legislation. We have seen the waiver of pre-legislative scrutiny and I believe we can pass that legislation before the summer recess.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I am very conscious of the seriousness of the matter and as the Minister has said I do not want to prevent people from making their points. We are running slightly over but as there is just a certain period of time allowed, I would appreciate Members keeping their contributions reasonably within the timeframe.

I apologise to Deputy Funchion because I had not realised she was standing in for Deputy O'Reilly. I should have come to Deputy Funchion second. It is now her turn.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: That is fine. We had not realised that the format of this debate was questions and answers but this is okay. Some of the points already have been raised and I echo the comments of Deputy Murphy O'Mahony who made an excellent contribution on be-

half of all the women of Ireland and in particular those who have been affected by this matter. Deputy Donnelly raised the issue of the backlog, which is one of our questions. Exactly how long have people been waiting? We are aware that at one point it was 27 weeks.

I will group my questions together but there are two main questions as well as the issues already raised. We welcome the fact that people can have their hearing in public or private. It is very important for women that their wishes are respected in that manner. Women who may already have received a court settlement, however, are not to be allowed to give evidence to the tribunal. While it is totally understandable that a person cannot have a second claim in this regard, it is important that all those who have been affected are allowed the opportunity to give evidence to the tribunal to help it in its deliberations. Will the Minister confirm that women who have already received an award are barred from giving evidence? I would welcome if that is not the case but I would appreciate clarity on it. If it is the case, why would women be stopped from giving evidence? They would not be seeking a second award.

Reference was made to the recent judgment on absolute confidence in screening programmes. What are the views of the Minister and what are the assessments of the chief medical officer and the Attorney General on this ruling? Where lies the future of screening programmes as a result of this judgment?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Funchion for grouping the questions. The Deputy has made a fair point about the Meenan legislation. The Deputy has quite rightly indicated that people cannot, nor would they wish to, have two claims or go through two processes. I believe Deputy Funchion is asking me whether it is possible for a woman who had gone through the courts to have her experience documented by the tribunal, if she so wished. The Bill is at the general scheme point of preparation at present but I understand the legislation is currently silent on that matter. It is a provision we probably could accommodate. I am happy to work with the Deputy and her party spokesperson as we progress the legislation on how we could advance that.

On the recent legal case, I do not have anything further to add to what I have already said other than the ruling is going to require very careful consideration by the Attorney General. We need to look at the impact not merely in relation to the individual case. We have been very clear and are unified as a House in wanting Ms Morrissey to be supported, for her to receive the compensation the court has awarded to her and for her to be able to enjoy time with her own family, as she outlined after the court case last week. There may be broader issues for the health service on which we will need clarity. Today we are at the stage where the Attorney General is considering these matters and he will then revert to the Taoiseach and to me. In due course we will consider how best to get that clarity. As Deputy Donnelly rightly said, many medics are now asking about the implications for screening and for other elements of the health service. We are duty bound to answer this question. In the coming period we will consider how we will answer this in a way that does not adversely affect Ms Morrissey but provides legal clarity.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: Will the Minister also provide information on the current backlog and the waiting times? A 27-week wait is the equivalent of maternity leave. It is a huge length of time for a person to wait while wondering every day if a letter or a phone call is going to come. It would help if we had the information on the backlog.

Deputy Simon Harris: I have no difficulty whatsoever in making that information available. The work we have been undertaking, which has been welcomed by patient advocates,

doctors, cancer groups and others, is to now try to have a really intensive focus on the backlog. The Deputy has not said it, but it is not true to suggest that everybody has been waiting a very long time. Far too many, however, are waiting a long period of time. When one considers the three laboratories involved, the Coombe laboratory has a turnaround time of approximately three weeks, Quest Diagnostics has a turnaround time - from my memory - of approximately seven to nine weeks and MedLab Pathology had a much longer turnaround time. MedLab is now focusing on its backlog, is now using HPV testing and is prioritising tests, which is a good development. I expect that the backlog will substantially reduce over the summer months.

Deputy Michael Harty: I thank the Minister for giving us the opportunity to discuss the subject this morning. Cervical screening is not a diagnostic test and this is where a lot of the issues have arisen. No screening programme can identify 100% of the abnormality that it is looking for. In this case the screening programme looks for pre-cancerous changes, which have a huge spectrum of change from zero to invasive cancer. The programme attempts to deliver population health versus individual health. Up to 2008 it was random screening of cervical smears and then the population health directorate introduced the national screening programme, which has delivered a huge amount of success in identifying women who had pre-cancerous changes. Unfortunately, because the programme has inherent difficulties - all screening programmes have inherent difficulties - the judgment that was delivered last week on absolute confidence really misunderstands what screening programmes are all about. It is not attainable or available to any screening programme to achieve 100% success. Right across the world this is not possible. Medicine is an uncertain business and one tries to confirm in an area of uncertainty. Screening tries to improve population health. Will the Minister tell the House if the judgment will put other screening programmes in doubt, has it put other diagnostic tests in doubt and has it put the future of cervical screening in doubt? I understand there was a high-level meeting between CervicalCheck and departmental officials some days ago to discuss this very issue. Has the judgment really damaged the future of all screening? I believe there will be an appeal of the judgment. Will the Minister comment on that?

HPV testing has been promised for a year. It was to come in last October and it is now promised for before the end of this year. What are the barriers to introducing HPV testing before the end of this year? Is it dependent on clearing the backlog or is it dependent on finding a laboratory that will provide the new level of testing?

My third question relates to MedLab's coverage. The smears that are sent to MedLab are usually from the regions outside the Dublin area. I believe that MedLab is no longer accepting new smears since 1 July. Those smears are now being stored pending access to new laboratory capacity, which has not been attained yet. Will the Minister confirm if this is true?

Earlier I made a suggestion for dealing with the substantial backlog, for which the last figure we had was 80,000 smears. Is there some merit in suspending the screening element of CervicalCheck until that backlog is cleared? Women are now being asked to attend for smears but they might not get a result for up to 33 weeks, which negates the benefit of getting an early result from screening and undermines confidence in the screening programme. Has the Minister or CervicalCheck considered a temporary suspension of the screening arm of CervicalCheck to allow for the backlog to be cleared?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for his questions. I very much appreciate the points he made, as a medic and a public representative, in regard to reminding this House that screening is not a diagnostic test and that there will, therefore, always be false positives and

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false negatives in any screening service in any country. While the HPV test, when introduced, will lower the numbers of false positives and negatives, some will remain, as I outlined in my opening statement.

I said - I do not wish to go any further - that I am aware of the concern over the judgment among the medical community. I have heard many of them articulate it publicly in recent days. My suggestion, which is prudent and sensible, is to consider the implications in a calm and rational manner and then decide what action, if any, is required, either by these Houses or the Government in regard to seeking legal clarity on the impact of the judgment beyond any individual case.

I am not a legal expert by any stretch but I would make the point that the judge states in his judgment that the United Kingdom has some of these tests in place. The UK has a very robust screening process and, therefore, I call for calm and for us to allow the Attorney General to advise the Government. On the basis of that advice, I ask that we stand in support of screening and take whatever action is necessary and appropriate, should any be required, in regard to screening or wider implications for the health service.

With regard to the introduction of HPV as the primary method of testing - it is already in place in some cases, particularly regarding MedLab and the backlog - it is a good development. The HSE has been engaging with other countries that have made the switch, including the Netherlands and Australia, and countries that are preparing to do so. We are learning from their experiences. We have provided funding to make the switch. A clinical advisory group has been set up in the HSE and it is currently reviewing quality assurance guidelines. Colposcopy capacity planning is under way through the national women and infants health programme. This is required to support the introduction of HPV testing. This includes reviewing current operational pressures for all colposcopy units, in addition to the impact of the introduction of primary HPV testing and the review of the RCOG. That is also nearing completion. The HSE has advised that the majority of planned site visits have now taken place, and the plan is to have the remaining visits in the coming weeks. We will manage to introduce the system by the end of this year.

The Deputy asked about current capacity within the screening programme and whether I considered a suspension. I will group the questions in the interest of time. Had additional capacity not been sourced, the proposition the Deputy highlighted might well have become a reality but the HSE has been undertaking a global search for laboratory capacity. As he will be aware, it has not been easy to do so. The HSE has advised that it has sourced additional capacity internationally. It is working to agree commercial arrangements and to complete the quality assurance process while remaining conscious of Dr. Scally's findings. The process is at a very sensitive stage. I expect it to be concluded very shortly. I expect this will provide us with enough capacity to continue to run the screening programme, to continue to invite women to attend for screening after appropriate regular intervals, and to address the backlog.

I assure women today that the HSE is fully focused on ensuring the necessary screening capacity remains in place and that there will be capacity to process all the slides that have been taken so far.

Deputy Michael Harty: I seek clarification. The Minister said the HSE has sourced additional capacity internationally. Is it the case that it is not in place yet?

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes. The commercial negotiations are very much nearing conclusion.

Deputy Michael Harty: Is it the case that smears that normally would have gone to Med-Lab from 1 July do not have a laboratory to go to at the moment?

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes, it is the case but they are being stored safely and will be processed. I cannot go further than that. I know the Deputy would not want me to jeopardise what is going on at the moment but I assure the House that additional capacity is coming on stream, which will ensure the slides are processed safely. I can give women that reassurance.

Deputy Michael Harty: I seek a little more clarity on that. There are cervical smear takers around the country who are taking smears at present but there is nowhere for those smears to go. They are being stored pending the HSE's sourcing of additional capacity. Is that the case?

Deputy Simon Harris: It is the case that the finalisation of the commercial arrangements in regard to the additional capacity is ongoing. The process is very much nearing completion. This will provide the additional capacity to ensure our screening programme operates at 100% capacity and can address the backlog. There will also be other significant benefits to the screening programme, which I would be more than happy to discuss in great detail at a meeting of the health committee once the commercial negotiations are concluded. I believe I am due to appear before it on 22 May for our quarterly meeting. I can reassure women that the smears being taken today will absolutely be processed. I expect the commercial negotiations to conclude very shortly.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Is Deputy Harty happy?

Deputy Michael Harty: Yes.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Since some Members were tied up at committee meetings this morning and could not get here, there is a little time remaining. If Deputies Funchion, Donnelly and Harty wish to ask any other brief questions of the Minister, I will allow them before he responds. I am sure that is acceptable to the Minister.

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We are good at this stage.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): In that case, I ask the Minister to conclude.

Deputy Simon Harris: I do not wish to take up the time of the House unnecessarily other than to emphasise again that a significant body of work is ongoing in regard to CervicalCheck. I sincerely acknowledge the positive and constructive role the health committee is playing in overseeing this and in continuing to monitor the implementation of the recommendations. I assure Deputy Harty of the ongoing co-operation of my officials and those of the HSE in appearing before and updating the committee he chairs. There will be a number of appropriate and important occasions when this can be done, particularly in regard to HPV testing and processing the legislation on the new tribunal.

I am pleased we now have a very robust implementation plan in place. I am pleased Dr. Scally is pleased because he is the independent arbitrator who rightly has the confidence of citizens at large and certainly of patient advocates. I am satisfied now that some of the supports

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regarding the *ex gratia* scheme are being processed and that the invitations to women to participate have been issued. The HPV vaccine will be introduced for boys this year, in September. As I outlined in answering the final round of questions from Deputy Harty, substantial progress has been made as we prepare for HPV testing.

I thank HSE staff, particularly Mr. Damien McCallion, who has done Trojan work on behalf of our country in trying to ensure the continuance of screening and the sourcing of additional capacity. I am pleased that while we have experienced genuine challenges in this area, Deputies and patient advocates continue to support screening and call on others to support it. As challenges emerge and as we deal with ongoing challenges and consider the legal implications of court judgments, I am pleased that there seems to be a bipartisan and constructive approach to this issue. I look forward to making progress on that basis.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): That concludes the debate. I thank the Minister and his officials. I thank all the Deputies, whom I believe contributed in a very sincere way to the debate, which touches every one of us. I thank the officials of the House for their help.

Sitting suspended at 10.20 a.m. and resumed at 10.30 a.m.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Brexit Supports

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I welcome back the Deputies and wish the Minister a good morning.

1. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a compensation package will be introduced for beef farmers in view of the significant decrease in prices and incomes since autumn 2018 from the impact of Brexit; and if a formal application has been submitted to the EU Commission for exceptional or market disturbance aid. [20275/19]

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. This is to ask the Minister when a compensation package will be introduced for beef farmers, considering the significant decrease in prices and incomes since last autumn from the impact of Brexit. I also ask the Minister to clarify whether a formal application has been submitted to the European Commission for exceptional or market disturbance aid. There appear to be conflicting stories as to exactly what the Minister has applied for and when he applied for it. More importantly, when will aid come to the beef sector, which is crying out for it and in desperate need of it? I hope the Minister will be able to take this opportunity to give an assurance that aid will be forthcoming

promptly and to give clarity as to what is being applied for.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I thank the Deputy. The agrifood sector is of critical importance to the Irish economy and its regional spread means it underpins the socioeconomic development of rural areas in particular. Brexit has the potential to have a very significant impact on the sector, given its unique exposure to the UK market, which accounted for 38%, or €5.2 billion, of agrifood exports last year. There are ongoing discussions with the Commission regarding the difficulties which would face Ireland in the event of a no-deal Brexit and the assistance that might be required for its agriculture, food and fishery sectors. Avoiding a no-deal Brexit continues to be the Government's overriding policy priority. I have held a number of discussions with Commissioner Hogan regarding the potential impact of a disorderly Brexit on the sector. I have stressed the need for the Commission to be ready to deploy a range of measures to mitigate the potential impacts on agrifood and fisheries, including through traditional market supports and exceptional aid under the CAP's single Common Market organisation, CMO, regulation, as well as increased flexibility under state aid regulations.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that the past few months have been very difficult for beef farmers in particular, following a difficult year in 2018 due to weather conditions. There has been a prolonged and exceptional period of depressed prices since last autumn, with the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the outcome of Brexit, among other factors, contributing to this market disturbance. In light of the ongoing depressed market prices, in discussions with Commissioner Hogan and my EU counterparts I have stated I believe the deployment of exceptional measures under the CMO regulation to provide targeted aid to farm families who have suffered a sustained reduction in returns from the market is now required. I made an intervention to this effect at the April meeting of the Council of agriculture ministers, and my officials have followed this up with a detailed submission, which is under consideration by Commission officials.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There is very little detail from the Minister as to when exactly farmers can expect to receive the support they need. As the Minister should know, farmers needed this support months ago, not in the next number of weeks or months, because Brexit has been happening and impacting on the beef sector over the last period. Unfortunately, the Minister and the Government have not been recognising or acting on this. Despite the grave threat posed by Brexit, the Minister has not used that opportunity and that difficulty to ensure we are drawing down funds from the EU Commission to support our beef farmers. The performance of both the Minister and the Government has simply been unacceptable and has been neglectful of the farming community and the massive pressure it is under. A report from Professor Michael Wallace of UCD in today's edition of the *Irish Farmers' Journal* outlines that if action is not taken, the suckler herd will be reduced by approximately 140,000 cows over the next ten years. We also will see 14,000 suckler farmers leaving the sector and an impact on the approximately 52,000 jobs in rural Ireland that are underpinned by it. It is essential that this funding comes immediately. Can the Minister give an assurance to the many farmers who are desperately in need of it today, as to when it will come and the extent of the funding that will be available?

Deputy Michael Creed: A Chathaoirligh, I do not accept the Deputy's charge that we have not been doing anything. There is a two-stranded approach to this. One is at EU level, and one is what the Government itself can do. In terms of the latter, there has been a significant level of Government commitment in the areas of market access, live exports, supporting producer or-

ganisations, the beef environmental efficiency programme and restoring payments in the areas of natural constraints, ANC, scheme.

At the level at which the Deputy's question is pitched, the Government also works at Commission level to try to ensure we get the best possible deal for Irish agriculture. Our overwhelming focus, understandably in the context of Brexit, has been to ensure that farmers would be supported in the event of a crash-out. I understand the view that we are dealing with Brexit already. There is market sentiment, as well as the sterling issue, and compounding those is the issue of bad weather. We have been making the case in recent times that, apart from the supports that would have been necessary in the context of Brexit, there is a case for the Commission to respond now to the difficulties the industry is facing.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Minister states it is not correct that the Government has not done anything. He states there are two strands to his response, namely, the European Commission's response and the Government's response. I put to the Minister that neither strand has delivered a response in support of the agrifood sector and of the beef sector in particular. The Minister mentioned the ANC scheme but all that has happened in that regard is that the payments have been restored to the previous levels of a number of years ago. While I acknowledge we have the beef scheme, between that and the beef data and genomics programme, BDGP, neither adds up to what would have been available under the previous suckler cow welfare programme.

We have heard the Minister talking for two years about introducing a Brexit loan scheme and how that was going to be the big ticket response to assist the farming community. It was only last month that he finally introduced it, after two years of talking. As far as the European Commission goes, we have seen no funding come from it yet, despite two years of Brexit negotiations. No funding is coming to support the Irish agrifood sector, which has been in massive distress. It is past time that the Minister got his act together and recognised the massive pressure the farming community is under. It should not take protests outside the Cabinet meeting in Cork last week to draw some type of response from the Government in this regard. I am asking the Minister this morning to give a guarantee that there will be funding in this regard and to guarantee that it will happen promptly. What we have seen before now has been absolutely unacceptable and an entire neglect of our farming sector from the Minister and from the Government.

Deputy Michael Creed: I do not agree with the Deputy but I do not expect the Deputy to agree with me either. Our responses have been comprehensive and I never presented the Brexit loan scheme as the panacea for all Brexit challenges; far from it. The Deputy may have elevated it to that status himself. It is the third of three financial products that we have developed for the agrifood, farming and fisheries sectors. It is an important part of the jigsaw that is necessary to support the industry in all its manifestations. There are things the Government can do and has done in terms of market access, live exports and the other things I mentioned earlier such as the ANC scheme and beef producer organisations. We also have made the case at European Union level. The response initially in terms of Brexit was to make sure that should the UK crash out, there would be supports available from the European Commission and should the UK crash out, the Commission has stated that those supports will be available. Those supports are different from the supports we are looking for now in the context of current market difficulties.

Dáil Éireann
Beef Industry

2. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to address the crisis in the beef sector here in view of the fact that it is in danger of total collapse; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20266/19]

Deputy Martin Kenny: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. The issue in the Irish beef sector is the biggest topic that is concerning most farmers and indeed the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in recent months. We can see that around the country, where more and more farmers are considering leaving the beef sector. It is on the verge of collapse. It will need determined action now from the Minister and the Government to arrest the situation and to make beef farming a profitable enterprise into the future. It will require a big plan and a huge shift in where we have been going up until now.

Deputy Michael Creed: I thank the Deputy. The agrifood sector is of critical importance to the Irish economy, and its regional spread means it underpins the socioeconomic development of rural areas in particular. Brexit has the potential to have a very significant impact on the sector, given its unique exposure to the UK market, which accounted for 38%, or €5.2 billion, of agrifood exports last year.

There are ongoing discussions with the Commission regarding the difficulties Ireland would face in the event of a no-deal Brexit and the assistance that might be required for its agriculture, food and fishery sectors. Avoiding a no-deal Brexit continues to be the Government's overriding objective. I have held a number of discussions with the Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr. Phil Hogan, regarding the potential impact of a disorderly Brexit on the sector. I have stressed the need for the Commission to be ready to deploy a range of measures to mitigate the potential impact on agrifood and fisheries, including through traditional market supports and exceptional aid under the single CMO regulation of the CAP, as well as increased flexibility under state aid regulations.

It is also important to acknowledge, however, that the past few months have been difficult for beef farmers, in particular, following a difficult year in 2018 due to weather conditions. There has been a prolonged and exceptional period of depressed prices since last autumn, with the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the outcome of Brexit, among other factors, contributing to this market disturbance. In the light of the ongoing depressed market prices, in discussions with the Commissioner, Mr. Hogan, and my EU counterparts, I have said I believe that the deployment of exceptional measures under the CMO regulation, to provide targeted aid to farm families who have suffered a sustained reduction in returns from the market, is required. I made an intervention to this effect at the April meeting of the Council of agriculture ministers, which my officials have been following up with the Commission.

I am deeply committed to fully supporting and developing Ireland's beef sector. The existing range of supports available to beef farmers under the rural development programme, RDP, together with ensuring access to as many markets as possible, both for live animals and beef exports, are appropriate for the continued development of the sector. The beef data and genomics programme, BDGP, is currently the main support specifically targeted for the suckler sector and provides beef farmers with some €300 million in funding over the current RDP period. Furthermore, there is the beef environmental efficiency pilot, a €20 million pilot project for 2019.

My Department has rolled out a range of schemes as part of the €4 billion rural development

programme. In addition to the BDGP, other supports available for suckler farmers under Pillar 2 of the CAP include the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, areas of natural constraints, ANC, scheme and knowledge transfer groups. Suckler farmers also benefit from the basic payment scheme and greening payments under Pillar 1. According to the national farm survey, suckler farmers receive support equivalent to approximately €500 per suckler cow on average. My Department is examining all appropriate measures to support the various agri-food sectors, including the suckler sector, in preparation for the next iteration of the CAP, and through the next agrifood strategy to 2030. Such measures should support and encourage suckler farmers to make the best decisions possible to improve the profitability and the economic and environmental efficiency of their farming system.

Deputy Martin Kenny: There are a number of matters I wish to raise. It is my view, and the view of others, in general, that the beef market is the victim of a market system that does not work for beef farmers. There is a prime product, namely, premium Irish beef, or the champagne of beef, that is sold as an average product, in the same way that bottom shelf wine is sold alongside champagne. That is the situation of Irish beef and it needs to change, although it will not change overnight, and I do not expect the Minister to flick a switch and change it overnight. Nevertheless, it is the direction in which we need to go. We need to sell our beef product around the world as a premium product at a high price and ensure that high price is returned to the primary producer. In the meantime, to make that happen, there needs to be an aid package in the context of Brexit and the crisis of the beef sector, as the Minister indicated. A good aid package needs to be put in place to get farmers through this period because the next 12 to 18 months will be vital. We need to see money on the table from Europe to assist us in that regard.

The carcass-grading review has been promised for a long time. Most farmers who send their cattle to factories say they do not know what kind of price they will receive and they are dubious of how the grading system works, which we all understand.

A cartel controls the movement of offal. How that part of the sector is licensed and monitored needs to be reviewed as a priority.

Deputy Michael Creed: The Deputy has raised some interesting issues which I will try to address. Trying to secure the premium markets, where the price is highest, is a logical step for us to take. In that sense, we support Bord Bia, as the marketing State agency which works with the industry. We in the Department also examine what doors to market access we can open for our product. The more markets that are open to us, the better chance we have of navigating what might be a difficulty in the Asian market or geopolitical issues that might, for example, give us problems providing live exports to Turkey, as happened last year. Interestingly, a delegation from Turkey is visiting the country and Department this week, which, we hope, will yield progress in that area.

Bord Bia works with the industry and we open doors to allow new market access. That is a given. Where the industry decides to sell afterwards is an issue for it. It may decide to try to navigate a dip in a market if it has a long established foothold, or it might consider new opportunities. According to figures I have seen, in the first quarter of 2019, we sent nearly 1,000 tonnes of beef to China, compared with 1,400 tonnes in all of 2018. New markets, therefore, are important, as is working with the industry. I will travel on a trade mission to China with the representatives of the beef industry next week.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I appreciate that but the problem is that the new markets that have

been opened, by and large, are niche, for small volumes of product. That has been the case until now. The vast majority of our beef is sold in Europe, while an awful lot of it is sold in Britain. That is well and good, and we understand that. The point, however, that cannot be made often or clearly enough is that Irish beef and meat, in general, is grass fed, from family farms and traceable all the way. It is a unique product and it needs to be sold as such at a higher price. I do not cast any aspersions on Bord Bia but it has failed to do that adequately until now and that needs to change. Before that change occurs, the Minister can immediately examine the issues of an aid package for the beef sector, grading and the movement of offal. If those three steps can be taken quickly, we can at least see that the Minister is committed to trying to do something to help the beef sector. Passing the buck, however, and saying it is up to Bord Bia to try to find markets will not solve the problem. The farmer who has cattle to sell in the next two months needs an answer quickly.

Deputy Michael Creed: The Deputy presents the matter as though it is very simple. We sell most of our product in the UK and the rest of the EU because that market is the best paying in the world. It would be foolish of us, therefore, to vacate that market in pursuit of alternatives, given that we have a significant foothold there. It is important that other markets are open to us. I have spoken in some detail on the issue of pursuing an aid package and I will not dwell on that further because of limited time. As I have stated on numerous occasions, the grid is not the property of the Department. It is not for us to tear up and say we will change it.

Deputy Martin Kenny: If it is being abused, the Minister has an obligation to do something.

Deputy Michael Creed: I do not have a role in interfering in the market between suppliers and processors. By law, I am specifically precluded from that. If they have an arrangement that determines how they are paid-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: Who licenses the processors?

Deputy Michael Creed: The Department provides licences but the operation of the grid is not our function-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: There are conditions for those licences.

Deputy Michael Creed: The operation of the grid is an issue for farmers and processors. We have previously assisted in the development of the grid and if we are asked, we will assist in its review. It must nonetheless remain an issue between both parties.

Live Exports

3. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the targets his Department and Bord Bia have set for 2019 for live exports of cattle including those aged six months or greater; and the resources that will be put in place to achieve these targets. [20276/19]

Deputy Jackie Cahill: What targets have the Department and Bord Bia set for 2019 for live exports of cattle, especially those aged six months or greater, and what resources will be put in place to achieve them? In his reply to a previous question, the Minister referred to the considerable financial pressure currently on beef farmers. There has been a significant increase

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in costs incurred by farmers due to weather conditions. The price that has obtained since the middle of last year is utterly unviable. The only way competition in the trade can be encouraged is through live exports. What plans are in place to ensure that a significant number of cattle will be moved out of the country in the second half of 2019?

Deputy Michael Creed: Live exports are a critical part of Ireland's livestock industry. They play a significant role in stimulating price competition and providing an alternative market outlet for farmers. The Department facilitates this trade, recognising its critical importance to the agricultural sector and ensuring that live animal exports meet the highest welfare standards.

In 2018, total live exports of cattle increased by more than 30% to 246,000 head compared to 2017. This represents a value of €110 million to the economy, according to Bord Bia. This growth trend has continued into 2019, with live exports of cattle totalling 163,000 up to 28 April, a 28% increase on the same period in 2018.

My decision in 2017 to reduce the veterinary inspection fee payable on live exports of calves less than three months of age from €4.80 to €1.20 has brought greater equity to the inspection fee regime. Since then, there has been continued growth in the export of calves, rising from 102,000 head in 2017 to 159,000 in 2018, a 56% increase. According to the most recent Bord Bia figures for 2019, calf exports stand at 123,000 head, with consignments to the Netherlands and Spain accounting for 50% and 31% of this trade, respectively.

This increase in trade is also apparent with regard to the export of non-calves - weanlings, stores and finished cattle - which are approximately 23% up on last year, according to Bord Bia's most recent statistics.

The live export of cattle is a commercial undertaking. It is, therefore, not appropriate for my Department or Bord Bia to set targets; rather, they seek to facilitate the industry by creating the market opportunities for the trade. My Department will continue to prioritise efforts to deepen existing markets and gain access to new third country markets through the negotiation of new and revised health certificates.

This week, my Department hosted a visit by a Turkish technical team, including officials from the ministry of agriculture and ESK, the Turkish Meat and Milk Board. The objective of the visit was to conduct an on-site fact-finding mission to evaluate the technical aspects of live animal and germinal product exports from Ireland to Turkey. This is yet another welcome development as we seek to re-establish our live trade with Turkey. The visit by Turkish officials follows on from my March meeting with my Turkish counterpart, Dr. Bekir Pakdemirli, Minister for Agriculture and Forestry.

I also welcome the progress made on live exports to Algeria arising from the technical meetings between my Department and Bord Bia and their counterparts in Algiers last week.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I apologise for interrupting the Minister but I must ask him to hold the remainder of his reply until I allow him in again.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: The Minister mentioned welfare standards. In regard to the video in the media this week, the mistreatment of animals is unacceptable. It is essential that we adhere to the highest standards of welfare in our live exports. Anyone who is found to be doing otherwise should face the full rigours of the law.

The only way to ensure increased prices in the next six to 12 months is through increased live export of cattle aged six months or over. I am disappointed that Bord Bia has not set targets for individual markets. The Minister mentioned an increase in calf exports. Unfortunately, the increase in exports is not keeping pace with the increase in dairy cow numbers. Approximately 40,000 cattle per week were killed since October. We are unable to sell the product at a viable price. These numbers can only be reduced through live exports. I do not accept that Bord Bia should not set targets for individual markets.

The Minister mentioned that other markets had been opened. We have been hearing that this, that and the other market is open for live cattle for the past two or three years but the reality is there is no significant movement of cattle. The Minister stated that live exports of cattle have increased by 23% but that increase comes from a low base. Without a significant increase in live exports, we face depressed prices for cattle for the foreseeable future.

Deputy Michael Creed: I disagree with the notion that the Department or Bord Bia should set targets for live exports for any particular market. It is our job to facilitate exports but it is equally, perhaps more importantly in the context of the Deputy's opening remarks, our responsibility and obligation to ensure that live exports are conducted to the highest welfare standards, bearing in mind that our standards are higher than the EU minimum standards.

I welcome that the Deputy condemns the recent video of the mistreatment of Irish calves in a lairage facility, albeit in France. The record will show what I had to say previously in respect of lairage facilities in Cherbourg, which I stand by now. We will insist on the highest standards for animal welfare. The role of the Department is to open up markets and allow the industry to perform its commercial duties within a regulated space. That is critically important to ensuring that this trade continues.

The more markets open, the better, but none of the markets will be opened to facilitate exports of live cattle at a reduced welfare standard. Given the importance of live exports to the agri-economy - the value of which is more than €100 million as confirmed by Bord Bia - it is imperative that all players in the industry operate to the highest welfare standards. Nothing less than that will be condoned or tolerated by the Department.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I was on the board of Bord Bia for a number of years. When a market is opened, a target is set in respect of the tonnage of beef expected to be sold in any given timeframe. The beef sector is in crisis. We have to move cattle out of this country. To secure increased prices, we will have to reduce the number of cattle available for slaughter in the next six to 12 months. The onus is on Bord Bia to set a target for the number of live cattle it expects to be moved. My concern is that insufficient resources are being put in place to establish markets. Factories are good at utilising Bord Bia, which is as it should be. We have worked hard to secure routes to markets in various parts of the EU and across the world. However, I am concerned that there is not a similar emphasis on live exports. They are not getting a fair crack of the whip in terms of resources from Bord Bia.

We have increased stock in the country but there is no competition at the ringside. Competition will only come through live exports. I would like to know the level of resources Bord Bia is putting into live exports. I reiterate the need for a target in respect of the number of cattle expected to be exported live in the remainder of 2019.

Deputy Michael Creed: I fundamentally disagree. If a State agency or the Department sets

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a target, then we are chasing a target and the accusation will be that we are compromising on welfare. There will be no compromise on welfare standards.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I never suggested that.

Deputy Michael Creed: The Department and Bord Bia have adequate resources. We have significantly increased the resources available to Bord Bia in recent years to deal with the Brexit challenge and various opportunities. The market access unit of my Department is making significant progress in restructuring its endeavours in respect of processed beef and live exports. It must be borne in mind that the Department has to engage with competent authorities in other jurisdictions from which it takes terms and conditions in terms of market access, be that in regard to the age of the product that can be exported or the epidemiological background of the herd from which that product comes. We try to secure the most favourable trading relationships but we are engaged with competent authorities of jurisdictions. It would be wrong of us to set a target for live exports because that would leave us open to the charge that we are chasing targets at the expense of standards. There will be no diminution of standards on live exports.

Sea Lice Controls

4. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the actions being taken to control sea lice levels at salmon farm sites which are having an adverse effect on the successful survival of salmon and sea trout smolts or kelts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20261/19]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question is straightforward and I would appreciate a straightforward answer. What actions are being taken by the Department to control sea lice levels at salmon farms which are having an adverse effect on the successful survival of salmon and sea trout smolts? I raise this question in the context of the commentary of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment regarding an unprecedented increase in sea lice levels. I am particularly perturbed by the levels at a key time in the bay mentioned by the Department and the overall doubling of sea lice as per inspections from November onwards.

Deputy Michael Creed: The control protocols for the management of sea lice are operated by the Marine Institute on behalf of the State. All stocks of fish are inspected by institute inspectors on 14 occasions throughout the year. As part of this control strategy, farm operators are required to undertake treatments to control lice infestation levels once certain trigger levels are reached.

Mechanical methods of delousing are currently used in combatting instances of sea lice. In addition, several species of cleaner fish are used in Ireland as a method of controlling sea lice. The cleaner fish supplement their diet by removing and eating the lice. This biological method of control is very effective and can reduce the reliance on medicines to control sea lice.

In certain circumstances, treatments alone may not be the most appropriate strategy and, in a number of limited circumstances, an accelerated harvest may be required.

These protocols are more advanced than those operated in other jurisdictions for the following reasons: the inspection regime is totally independent of the industry, data obtained as a re-

sult of inspection is published and made widely available and treatment trigger levels are set at a low level. The sea lice monitoring and control programme in Ireland has been acknowledged by the environment directorate of the European Commission as representing best international practice.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not have a copy of the Minister's reply to hand but I asked what I said was a very straight question. What actions is the Department taking with the reporting of an unprecedented increase in levels of sea lice? The Minister's Department has been written to by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, which has pointed out the result of the monitoring system, indicating that orders to treat have repeatedly been given. Notwithstanding that, the levels of sea lice continued to increase and there were then orders to accelerate harvesting, which means all the stock was sold so as to start again.

I have a specific question relating to the unprecedented increase in levels of sea lice. It has doubled and tripled and in some cases salmon have 50 sea lice on them. There are implications for wild salmon and trout so will the Minister please answer the question? What actions are being taken by the Department?

Deputy Michael Creed: The question asked is written in front of me. It refers to the "actions being taken to control sea lice levels at salmon farm sites" and that is exactly what I answered with respect to the role of the Marine Institute and the actions it takes. It is a critical matter for the industry to control sea lice and I appreciate the concern of the broader fishing industry that sea lice is having an impact on wild salmon and other marine species. We are acutely conscious of the obligation in that regard. The Deputy knows the Marine Institute is headquartered in her constituency and it is the lead agency in dealing with sea lice in aquaculture settings. As I stated, the independent inspectorate publishes its results and its protocols are quite clear and deemed to be very effective.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not mean to take the Minister by surprise as this matter is too serious for that. The Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment has written to the Minister's Department. I asked the actions taken by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and these will clearly include actions taken following input from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and the inspection of the independent Marine Institute. The sea lice levels are unprecedented, although I do not have the time to go into detail on them. It is really not relevant anyway as the relevant part of this relates to the fact that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine was asked to give an urgent update on this by 12 April this year. This followed the concerns raised by the independent assessment and the notice to treat. Following all the orders, the levels of sea lice continued to rise, with the most serious consequences. This rests firmly with the Minister's Department.

Again, I do not wish to put the Minister on the spot but his Department has been aware of this as a response had to be made by 12 April. The Marine Institute has an independent system and if I had time I would go into how it is reliant on the workers on the farms. That is for another day. For the moment, I want to know the action by the Minister's Department on the unprecedented levels of sea lice.

Deputy Michael Creed: I am aware of the correspondence referred to by the Deputy and the requirement to respond to the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. The response was submitted by the Marine Institute to the Department on 11 April.

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Deputy Catherine Connolly: I appreciate that I am not entitled to ask another question but there has been some confusion. Will the Minister clarify if the response went from his Department to the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment by the required date?

Deputy Michael Creed: The Marine Institute is the competent authority and it functions at arm's length from my Department, lest we be seen as compromised because we promote the development of aquaculture. The Marine Institute is independent in the pursuit of its functions and it has replied in the necessary detail to the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That is okay.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Brexit Preparations

5. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which his Department can access particular European Union funding or other sources to address the issues for Irish agriculture arising in the context of Brexit and future uncertainty as a result; the steps he can take in the short term to address the issues drawn to his attention by the farming community recently on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20113/19]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question seeks to ascertain the extent to which his Department can assist the agrifood sector now and in the long term, having particular regard to the impact of Brexit and the destabilisation of markets as a result of the ongoing and drawn-out discussions on Brexit.

Deputy Michael Creed: The agrifood sector is critical to the Irish economy and its regional spread means it underpins the socio-economic development of rural areas in particular. Brexit has the potential to have a very significant impact on the sector given its unique exposure to the UK market, which accounted for €5.2 billion of agrifood exports last year. There are ongoing discussions with the Commission regarding the difficulties that would face Ireland in the event of a no-deal Brexit and the assistance that might be required for its agriculture, food and fishery sectors. Avoiding a no-deal Brexit continues to be the Government's overriding policy priority.

I have held a number of discussions with Commissioner Phil Hogan regarding the potential impact of a disorderly Brexit on the sector. I have stressed the need for the Commission to be ready to deploy a range of measures to mitigate the potential impacts on agrifood and fisheries, including through traditional market supports and exceptional aid under the Common Agricultural Policy's Single Common Market Organisation, CMO, regulation, as well as increased flexibility under state aid regulations. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the past few months have been very difficult for beef farmers in particular following a difficult year in 2018 due to weather conditions. There has been a prolonged and exceptional period of depressed prices since last autumn with the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the outcome of

Brexit, among other factors, contributing to this market disturbance. In light of the ongoing depressed market prices I have, in discussions with Commissioner Hogan and my European Union counterparts, said that I believe that the deployment of exceptional measures under the CMO regulation to provide targeted aid to farm families who have suffered a sustained reduction in returns from the market is now merited. I made an intervention to this effect at the April meeting of the Council of Agriculture Ministers, and my officials are pursuing that matter with the Commission.

One of the unique strengths of the Irish agrifood sector has been the shared vision for the sustainable development of the sector in Food Wise 2025. It is crucial that we all continue to work together. I have highlighted the need for stakeholders to recognise their interdependency and to increase the strength of all links in the supply chain, including the development of beef producer organisations. I am deeply committed to fully supporting and developing Ireland's beef sector. I am strongly of the view that the existing range of supports available to beef farmers under the rural development programme, together with ensuring access to as many markets as possible, both for live animals and beef exports, are appropriate for the continued development of the sector.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. In light of the ongoing and drawn-out discussions on Brexit, is there scope for an intervention with interim measures that may offset the negative impact and potential instability arising in the market, particularly in the beef area? Does the Minister believe it may be possible to move forward a plan in this context in the near future?

Deputy Michael Creed: The Deputy will appreciate that the substantial emphasis up to relatively recently has been on dealing with the supports that would be necessary if the United Kingdom crashed out of the European Union. Fortunately, that scenario has been avoided to date and the deadline has been moved down the road substantially. The issue has not gone away but we have some respite from it in the immediate future.

The difficult market conditions are partially related to market sentiment arising from Brexit, sterling differentials and high costs associated with last year because of weather difficulties. There was static consumption at a time when there was an increased beef kill because of that bad weather. We have made the case to the Commission that there is reason for an interim support package not related to Brexit at all. It is a view that has some traction from other member states as well. I have been engaged with the Commission since we raised the matter in April and I await its response in that regard.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister and he has very correctly assessed the position. It is also important to recognise that as time drags on and there is continued indecision with respect to the outcome of Brexit, there will always be a potentially destabilising factor for the markets. In light of this, will the European Union institutions and colleagues in the Union be sufficiently alert to and aware of the vulnerability of the agrifood sector in this country and the absolute necessity to ensure its viability in the medium and long term? Damage can be done in the short term as well.

Deputy Michael Creed: There is no doubt about that level of awareness in the European Union. One of the Brexit strategies we deployed was increasing awareness of our unique exposure to the UK market and this is clearly understood. There is less understanding of the immediate difficulties we face because Brexit has not happened yet and the consequences cannot

be felt. However, the reality is there is a market sentiment associated with Brexit and sterling which is currently having an impact. We are prosecuting the case with officials from the Commission. We have been doing other things such as on areas of natural constraints and with the beef environmental efficiency producer organisations to build resilience within the sector in terms of what we can do ourselves. It is a comprehensive response but a significant part of the strategy is a response from the Commission to our proposals and we await that.

Hare Coursing

6. **Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide the minutes of the annual meeting of the hare coursing monitoring committee; if he is satisfied with the make-up of the committee; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16674/19]

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: Will the Minister provide the minutes of the annual meeting of the hare coursing monitoring committee, is he satisfied with the make-up of the committee and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Michael Creed: A monitoring committee on coursing is in place, comprising veterinary and administrative officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Irish Coursing Club and the National Parks and Wildlife Service to monitor developments in coursing. In that regard, the situation is kept under constant review to ensure that coursing is well run in a controlled and responsible manner in the interests of hares and greyhounds. The work of the monitoring committee focuses on the maintenance of the highest standards of animal welfare and safety for both hares and greyhounds. It is critically important that the monitoring committee continues its work to ensure that those in coursing operate in accordance with the regulatory framework and that the welfare and safety of hares and greyhounds are kept to the forefront at all times. The committee meets annually and, *inter alia*, considers any issues arising from the previous coursing season.

Wildlife rangers from the National Parks and Wildlife Service and veterinary inspectors from my Department attend coursing meetings throughout the coursing season and report on their findings. These reports are reviewed by the monitoring committee, which also arranges to have any complaints or reported incidents investigated. I have no plans to change the composition of the monitoring committee. The report of the monitoring committee on coursing for the meeting held on 18 December 2018 was released on receipt of a recent request under the Freedom of Information Act 2014. I can supply a copy to the Deputy. The report covers a review of the 2017-18 coursing season, the provision of new reporting forms, the issue of illegal hunting, the problems caused by buzzards, the media coverage of a disease outbreak in the United Kingdom and a single item under any other business.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: Can the Minister clarify the date the report was released?

Deputy Michael Creed: The report of the monitoring committee on coursing for the meeting held on 18 December was released on receipt of a recent request under the Freedom of Information Act 2014. I do not have the date but I can provide a copy of the minutes to the Deputy.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: That would be useful. The question arose from a freedom of information, FOI, request by the Irish Council against Blood Sports, ICABS, which was look-

ing for the minutes of the monitoring committee, which it received in 2016 and 2017 but not in 2018. No independent animal welfare body is represented on the monitoring committee. At the 2017 meeting the CEO of the Irish Coursing Club, ICC, stated that “Coillte lands were largely free of predators and therefore have a thriving hare population.” The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine agreed to contact officials in Coillte for permission for Coillte lands to be used by the ICC to capture hares but, thankfully, Coillte refused to allow this. Is it, therefore, appropriate for officials from the Department to intercede on behalf of hare coursers to net vulnerable hares for use as live lures for greyhounds? I believe the Department overstepped its remit by facilitating this request and this is why the FOI request was put in.

Deputy Michael Creed: I would be pleased to give the Deputy what has been released under the freedom of information request. My understanding is that there was a meeting on 18 December 2018 to review the 2017-18 coursing season. Arising either from the review or an ongoing inspection by the National Parks and Wildlife Service or the veterinary service in the Department, one coursing club was sanctioned.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: One other aspect brings this out into the open. There was a coursing meeting last January at Seven Houses in County Kilkenny. The coursers reported that four hares were confirmed by the vet as dying of natural causes but the ranger from the National Parks and Wildlife Service said four hares died of injuries received after being hit by greyhounds. The vet reported that six hares were examined for injuries, that none was confirmed injured, none was euthanised, none died from injuries and there was no post mortem. The vet’s name was redacted.

There are serious questions for the monitoring committee. Video footage from the coursing event showed coursing officials running across the field pulling a hare from dogs before carrying off the doomed hare to whatever was going to happen to it. The Minister and I do not agree on live hare coursing but at the very least we could agree on the need for transparency at meetings and truthfulness about what exactly is happening. Earlier, the Minister said there could be no compromise on animal welfare but there is compromise in this instance in the case of hares.

Deputy Michael Creed: The function of the Department is to provide veterinary supervision and I would not like to cast aspersions on any official. I am not familiar with the meeting to which the Deputy alluded. One of the functions of the National Parks and Wildlife Service is in the area of licences to capture hares for coursing purposes. I am surprised the Deputy alluded to a hare being released because greyhounds at coursing events race with muzzles and there should not be such a situation. My Department insists on compliance with the law in the appropriate running of these events. People have different views but I strongly believe that a regulated coursing industry is better than one that is driven underground and is unregulated.

Brexit Preparations

7. **Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the timeline of his interactions with the EU in relation to his submission for assistance for the seafood sector in the event of a no-deal Brexit; the indicative amount of contingency funding he is seeking from the EU in the event of a UK crash-out from the EU; the state of readiness of such assistance should the seafood sector have to avail of it post October 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [19852/19]

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Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher: The industry and I are concerned about the impact of Brexit. Further to a question I asked of the Minister in January this year, I ask him what steps he has taken to ensure the marine sector is fully protected as far as possible in the event of Brexit at the end of October.

Deputy Michael Creed: Both my officials and I have had intensive discussions with the European Commission, other relevant member states and stakeholders regarding the potential negative impact of a disorderly or no-deal Brexit on the Irish fishing industry and the wider seafood sector. These discussions intensified in recent months and were based on preparatory work already done. While the immediate threat of a no-deal outcome has been averted, the preparatory work and the discussions will continue.

The key issues in a no-deal situation, which I have stressed in all discussions, are the potential loss of access for Irish and other EU vessels to the UK fishing zone, the need to ensure ongoing protection of fish stocks in the waters around Ireland from a subsequent increase in fishing activity and potential mitigation measures for the seafood sector at EU level. It is also important to be aware that in such a no-deal situation, the EU and Ireland could also face a loss of quota share.

Throughout the discussions, I emphasised the necessity for a co-ordinated European response to ensure that there would be proportionate and equitable use of mitigation measures overseen by the Commission. The outcome of these discussions can be seen in the EU Brexit contingency plan that was published on 10 April. This highlights fisheries as one of the most immediately critical issues facing the EU in a no-deal Brexit. We now have identified and agreed co-ordinated and fully prepared measures that will be immediately available to address a no-deal Brexit on 31 October if the UK were to decide to deny EU vessels access to UK waters. As I have stated previously, I am seeking additional EU funds to support these mitigation measures if they ever become necessary, which of course I hope they do not. Such financial discussions are ongoing and there are many variables at play, but I assure the Deputy that the seafood sector will, along with agriculture, be a key priority for this Government.

Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher: The Minister will agree that either a no-deal Brexit or an orderly one will be serious for the sector because we are all aware that 60% of our mackerel, 40% of our nephrops and, on average, approximately 30% of our fish are caught in UK waters.

The Minister has mentioned the co-ordinated response, mitigation measures and funding. I want him to clarify if the funding will be additional rather than a rebranding of the funding that is available under regulation 508/2014 of the European Parliament and the Council which relates to the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, EMFF. I understand that some of those funds would be siphoned off to deal with the Brexit situation, and that is not acceptable. There must be additional funds.

Much of the focus has rightly been on agriculture, but the same focus must be brought to bear on fisheries. There must be contingency plans for every eventuality, and it is never premature to plan. What concerns me most is that, at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting last December, we were told that all of the fish could be caught, irrespective of the 30 March deadline, until the end of the year. That was only an informal agreement and the result has been that the landing of fish for the year has been front-loaded. The Minister and I both know the consequences of that. There is not a square inch of cold store in this country. The industry caught them all before 29 March. Greater assurances should be given and we should learn from

that.

Deputy Michael Creed: I am acutely aware of the latter point and appreciate the difficulties to which that has given rise. The Deputy and I have engaged on that issue. Those difficulties were hard to avoid because, as the Deputy alluded to, more than 60% of mackerel, the most valuable stock in our pelagic sector, is landed from UK waters. The fear of a crash-out by the end of March drove the industry, understandably, to catch that stock in the first quarter of the year. That is regrettable but understandable because the industry feared being locked out of UK waters.

Our response on the broader issue is, in the context of the future trading relationship, to ensure that the fishery sector does not get isolated, because the scale of the challenge for the fishing industry is almost existential, given the amount of pelagic, prawns and others that are caught in UK waters and the consequences if boats are displaced into the Irish exclusive economic zone, EEZ. There are implications and consequences that would arise from that for the sustainability of those stocks in our waters. That is critically important.

We are still engaged with the Commission about the funding that is necessary, and I share the Deputy's view that redirecting funding from the EMFF is not the appropriate response. The Commission has a co-ordination role and must ensure there is equity in the consequences for all member states. It also requires funding because we could not countenance a situation where we were ceasing fishing activity temporarily while others were fishing in our waters, visible from shore. The equity that would be required would require EU funding.

Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher: In the Minister's deliberations with Mr. Barnier, is there still an inextricable link between fisheries negotiations and access to markets? When considering the necessary funding that will be required, emphasis must be given to the producers, processors and services sectors and not forgetting the many seasonal workers who would have had such work for many weeks throughout the year, none of which is available now. All of those must be taken into consideration and, in short, there are considerable consequences across the board which we must ensure that the Minister protects.

Deputy Michael Creed: In direct engagement with the Commissioner and the lead negotiator, Mr. Michel Barnier, and indeed in negotiations that we facilitated between the industry and Mr. Barnier, we are satisfied that the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration ensure that the link is there between trade generally and the fishing industry. We will not find ourselves in a situation where fisheries is dealt with in isolation because it must be acknowledged that the UK holds the aces in that context. In the broader context, Britain will want things from us, including passports for their financial services, access to open skies and the broader trade relationship. We feel that our best interests are served by having fisheries as part of the broader trade agreement and we are satisfied that remains the situation.

Common Agricultural Policy Reform

8. **Deputy Tom Neville** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position with regard to discussions regarding the next CAP reform and the protection of the CAP budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2010/19]

Deputy Tom Neville: I ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position

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with regard to discussions regarding the next Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, reform and the protection of the CAP budget, and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Michael Creed: The CAP post-2020 legislative proposals were published by Commissioner Hogan on 1 June 2018. Since then, intensive discussions have taken place. A significant number of working group meetings have been held under both the Austrian and Romanian presidencies. The proposals have also been discussed extensively at the Special Committee on Agriculture meetings and have been a standing agenda item at every Council meeting of EU agriculture ministers.

The Romanian Presidency has outlined its ambition to achieve a partial general approach on the CAP post-2020 proposals at its final meeting of EU agriculture ministers in June. To that end, the Presidency is undertaking ongoing discussions in Brussels on all elements of the proposals. While I am supportive of this ambitious timetable, it is very much dependent on a number of factors progressing in a timely manner. The European Commission's objective has been to have the proposals adopted by the co-legislators prior to the European Parliament elections in May. However, the European Parliament has not fully achieved agreement on the proposals and, until the position of the newly elected Parliament is known, it is difficult to have a clear timetable for the CAP reform process.

The draft proposals present a number of new and significant challenges for member states. The move from a compliance-based system to a performance-based system with a focus on results is perhaps the most significant change for member states to have to contend with in the new proposals. Member states will be required to prepare a CAP strategic plan, covering Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 expenditure. This will allow member states greater flexibility to design measures that are best suited to their own strategic needs. While I welcome this flexibility, preparation of the CAP strategic plan presents a number of challenges and complexities for member states, not least of which is the requirement for member states to submit their draft CAP strategic plans to the Commission for approval before the deadline of 1 January 2020. My Department is working towards this deadline, albeit amid uncertainty surrounding agreement on the funding for the next CAP as well as the finalisation of the regulations.

While significant progress has been made in the negotiation process to date, decisions on key issues, such as the provisions for direct payments and the new delivery model, have still to be agreed upon at EU level. The CAP proposals also point to a more significant environmental ambition than the current CAP. Member states will be required to design a specific climate and environment scheme in Pillar 1. This is something that I support as it is consistent with my Department's long-term strategy for the agricultural sector, which recognises the critical importance of environmental sustainability. I believe that farmers play a vital role in the provision of public goods and need to be appropriately recognised and recompensed for this role.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

With this in mind, the retention of a sufficient budget for the CAP post 2020 is an essential requirement for Ireland. I have been very firm in my view that the proposed 5% cut to the CAP post-2020 budget as outlined in the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, proposals for 2021 to 2027 is completely unacceptable for Ireland. I have been strongly advocating for the CAP budget to be restored to current levels for the EU 27 post 2020, and I will continue to work towards achieving this objective until agreement on the MFF post-2020 proposals has been reached. There is also consensus on this point among my EU agriculture ministerial colleagues.

However, EU budget negotiations are led by ministers of finance.

Furthermore, agreement on the overall EU budget must be reached by unanimity and this is a challenging task. I have also sought to continue this work as part of ongoing bilateral meetings. Since May 2018, my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Doyle, and I have met EU agriculture ministers from Germany, France, Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Hungary, *inter alia*, to support a strong CAP budget post 2020. I have also met ministers from the Netherlands, Estonia, Belgium, Poland, Luxembourg and Austria. My officials engage regularly with counterparts in other member states on this issue. Ireland needs to work closely with its EU colleagues to build a consensus around the need to reverse the proposed cuts in the CAP. I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to do this and to fight for a strong CAP budget as the negotiations progress.

Deputy Tom Neville: The Minister mentioned the environmental side and the development of agriculture. We already know that agriculture is our most important indigenous sector. I represent County Limerick and agriculture is the backbone of where I am from. Nationally, 8.6% of the working population is involved in agriculture and there are associated industries.

There are big things coming down the track, including that we meet EU commitments to Food Wise 2025. There are also challenges related to Brexit and climate change. Climate change is a challenge for agriculture. I was a member of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, and over recent months the committee heard from the agricultural and climate change sectors about this matter. We were milking cows in Ireland while the country was going down the Swanee to help drag us out of where we were. The main thing is to protect agriculture as much as we can and, in tandem, protect the environment. The two should go hand in hand. What came out of the report of the Committee on Climate Action was not that there was a conflict between agriculture and climate action but that the two would work together, hand in hand, and that farmers, as custodians of the land, would be enabled to help with climate change and would be rewarded for doing so. Could we explore that through CAP negotiations and funding? There should be a bottom-up approach to consultation.

Deputy Michael Creed: Farmers being rewarded for that is a critical issue. The big challenge in the current CAP is that the proposals as they stand see a significant cut in the budget for the Common Agricultural Policy. We can have all the ambition we want but if we do not have a budget to implement it, it will be for naught. Much of our endeavour has been about the political manoeuvres required to see that budget restored at least to its current levels. That is challenging because it is not a decision for the Council of agriculture ministers but for the Council of finance ministers. Some member states have critiqued the proposals as published, stating that the cuts do not go far enough. That is a challenge. I think the Deputy is right in the sense that the environment will be a critically important part of farming in the future and the CAP must support that. It is abundantly clear that the market is saying that it is not enough any more to have just safe, nutritious or traceable food. It wants to know what is being done about numerous climate-related issues, including carbon footprint, antimicrobial resistance and animal welfare standards. In many ways, we have been on that treadmill already. We just need to speed it up somewhat and I think that farmers are up for that challenge.

Deputy Tom Neville: As part of the work of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, we spoke to the farming organisations. There is a 28-point plan from Teagasc to follow. To give a brief outline, it includes agricultural mitigation, improved breeding, changing fertiliser types and slurry spreading, land use, carbon sequestration, increased broadleaf forestry, improved

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pasture management and energy efficiency, fossil fuel displacement, biofuel and anaerobic digestion. These points all came up. I have learned through commentators and media that the farming organisations are on board with and welcomed the report of the Joint Committee on Climate Action. We want to drive it forward. With regard to CAP, communication and consultation will be vital. The bureaucracy relating to CAP has come up constantly as one of the issues under some of the research that I have just looked up on it. If that can be addressed, that will help to drive change and help the relationship.

Deputy Michael Creed: We will go out to public consultation on all of these issues again later this year. The views of farmers on simplification and having less bureaucracy will be a critical part. That message is coming from the Commission too. We are already acting on matters such as improving the genetic merit of the herd, which reduces its carbon footprint, and on slurry management and low emission slurry spreading, which releases less methane. That reduces the amount of greenhouse gases produced. As for what is published, there will be conditionality on Pillar 1 payments, which will contain a significant environmental element. The direction of travel is abundantly clear and that suits us because we are global players with regard to exports. The markets that pay the highest dividends ask the most challenging questions. Those are the markets we want to be in. It is a good fit for us. It is challenging. How we send the message and bringing the farming community with us will be important. From all the soundings from farm leaders, I think it is recognised that we do not have a choice about this but it is the right thing to do for economic reasons and for future generations.

Questions Nos. 9 to 11, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

Questions Nos. 12 to 14, inclusive, replied to after Question No. 22.

Questions Nos. 15 to 21, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

Brexit Preparations

22. **Deputy Pat Deering** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the efforts he is making to seek new markets in the context of Brexit; the efforts being made by agencies under his remit to provide support to agrifood businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20103/19]

Deputy Pat Deering: My question is to ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the efforts he is making to seek new markets in the context of Brexit; the efforts being made by agencies under his remit to provide support to agrifood business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. Brexit is a significant challenge. The beef sector is going through a difficult time. Some 40% of our beef exports currently go to Britain. In order to ensure that all our eggs are not in one basket in the future, what efforts are being made to ensure that we have other markets developed to replace those markets that perhaps have a limited time left?

Deputy Michael Creed: The pursuit and development of new markets for Irish agrifood exports is an ongoing and central component of the strategic development of the agrifood sector as set out in Food Wise 2025 and is of particular relevance given the need to diversify our markets and to reduce our exposure to the United Kingdom market in light of Brexit. Over the last number of budgets, I have significantly increased funding to Bord Bia to allow it to identify alternative priority markets, to support market diversification efforts by individual companies

and to support promotional campaigns for Irish agrifood exports to international markets, for example, in the case of beef to Germany and the Netherlands.

Since the UK referendum, I have led trade missions to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, China, Hong Kong, Canada, the United States, Mexico, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia and, in February of this year, to Turkey. Further missions are planned this year to China, which commences this weekend, to Japan and South Korea in June, and to Algeria and Egypt in November. Trade missions play an important role in securing greater market access and in deepening trade with existing markets, and destinations are chosen in accordance with market access requirements, industry intelligence and the market prioritisation activities of Bord Bia.

I highlight my Department's plans to expand its staffing in international locations over the period to the end of 2024 in accordance with the Government's Global Ireland 2025 initiative. This will see the creation of new agriculture attaché posts in a number of new locations, primarily aimed at supporting the market development activities that will take place in these regions over the coming years. More generally, my Department will continue to seek out and identify new markets, and I am ready to respond as appropriate to other opportunities that may arise.

Deputy Pat Deering: There is no doubt but that there have been many trade missions recently, which are very welcome. The result is that we have seen the Chinese market in particular open up but progress seems to be slow. What efforts can be made to accelerate the pace of these markets opening? The amount of beef that has been exported to China and other markets which have opened is quite small in the overall scheme of things. For us to be able to replace the market that we have in Great Britain, we will have to accelerate exports to other countries at a greater speed than is the case at present. Bord Bia can obviously do quite a bit and the Minister can do a lot in trade missions but what can be done to accelerate getting to the final destination?

Deputy Michael Creed: I am not sure that we should be in a headlong rush, although I know the Deputy is not suggesting this, out of existing traditional and high-paying markets, with the UK being the obvious example, since it is probably the best-paying market for beef in the European Union, if not in the world. We have significant market exposure there. I am not sure that we should be rushing headlong out of that market since it is hard won but we should be strategically looking for new market opportunities. The volume that we export outside the European Union, including the United Kingdom, is small but it is growing and all of the market intelligence would suggest that the Asian market, where there is an increasing middle class with more disposable income, is looking to replicate western dietary habits with regard to protein sources etc. We see opportunities there for dairy, beef and other proteins in the short term.

It is a question of trying to work with the industry. They are the people who are in the marketplace trying to make a living. We operate on the intelligence that is accumulated from them and from Bord Bia in our endeavours to open new markets but deliberately moving product into one over another is an industry call. The function of the Department is to have as many markets as possible open and we are making significant progress in that regard. The market access unit in my Department has received significant additional resources, as has Bord Bia. It is never a case of saying that we are always right and all-knowing but we continually test our systems against the intelligence available to us from the industry and from Bord Bia.

Deputy Pat Deering: The Minister was right to say I was not suggesting that we should

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displace our total Great Britain market. It is an important market and we should try to continue to develop it. In the event of difficulties, having seen recently when difficulties arose and having seen the consequences of a price drop, we need to have something to replace that market in the event that situations develop in future. Hopefully we will not have a catastrophic situation whereby there will be a hard Brexit, which obviously would be difficult. It is difficult when we have all our eggs in the one basket. Traditionally, we have seen that when everything was in the one basket, there was a difficulty because we did not have an alternative. It is important that we develop these alternatives as quickly as possible. That will create greater competition in the market. Competition is the life of trade in any business. The more markets we have, the better the competition. What can we do to speed up the veterinary process, which is very important, to make sure these markets are ready when we have the supply of beef, for example, at its prime level?

Deputy Michael Creed: In terms of market access, we are dealing with the competent authorities of other jurisdictions who see their function as being to make sure that they are protecting their consumers in terms of the quality of the product. If it was a case of meeting a universal standard, I have no doubt we would meet it. No individual country is going to cede its sovereignty in that area, so we have to work and engage with the competent authorities in every country. The Turkish authorities are in the Department this week to consider how we might improve our trade there. The Department received communication this morning from our embassy in Egypt about a delegation coming from Egypt later in the year. We are constantly on alert and working with the industry to improve the terms and conditions under which we trade with those countries. The UK market is geographically the closest to us and geography is a huge determinant of where we should and do trade, but the China market will grow significantly this year. In the first quarter of this year we have put in nearly 1,000 tonnes where we put in 1,400 last year.

Animal Welfare

12. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which he can address concerns of residents close to fox hunting events regarding encroachments into residential areas; and the measures taken to address this reality to date. [20110/19]

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: My question relates to fox hunting and how to address the concerns of those residents who live close to fox hunting events regarding encroachments into residential areas and the measures being taken to address this to date.

Deputy Michael Creed: As the Deputy will be aware, detailed debate was held around the issue of hunting during the passage of the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 and the Dáil voted overwhelmingly to allow the continuation of fox hunting in accordance with an appropriate code of conduct. The Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 specifically prohibits the hunting of animals which have been released in an injured, mutilated or exhausted condition. Section 25 of the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 also allows for the establishment of codes of practice and for the adoption of codes published by other persons for the purposes of providing practical guidance relating to any aspect of the Act, including fox hunting. Voluntary codes of practice have been established by the Hunting Association of Ireland, HAI, which detail the conduct to be adhered to in respect of the hunting of foxes and the treatment of the animal dur-

ing the hunt. The code prohibits the hunting of foxes where the animal is injured and advocates the humane disposal of a fox when captured. The code also takes into account local concerns and the concerns of the landowners on whose land hunting takes place.

In light of the concerns raised by residents regarding encroachments into residential areas, officials of my Department met the Hunting Association of Ireland to discuss several such incidents. My officials underlined the need for those involved in hunting to take greater action to avoid such incidents. The association committed to avoiding any recurrence of incidents such as this. In light of this, it is noteworthy that there do not seem to have been any recent reports of such incidents in the media. The need to strengthen the existing code of practice to avoid such incidents where hounds entered housing estates was discussed. The association undertook to review the existing code of practice.

I am fully committed to promoting good practices that respect the welfare of animals, and my Department devotes considerable resources to protecting animal welfare and in dealing with breaches of animal welfare legislation. Under the Act, on summary conviction, a person can receive a fine of up to €10,000 and, on indictment, €250,000 and-or imprisonment up to five years. There are fixed penalty payments for lesser offences. The Act provides the framework within which the welfare of animals can be safeguarded, and I am hopeful that the substantial and significantly increased levels of penalties for offences of animal cruelty provided for under the Act will act as a deterrent to animal welfare abuses.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: The Minister’s reply is very much like a previous one he gave me. The codes of practice for the Hunting Association of Ireland are voluntary. Therefore it does not have to abide by them. The Minister says the Department has been in contact with the association, which said it would review and update this area, but we have not seen any real changes to date. I accept that there does not appear to have been any encroachment recently, as the Minister said.

For hunts to take place in an area, they rely on the “express or implied” permission to be on land. I understand that the Minister was going to approach the association to remove the word “implied” so that hunts will need express permission to be on somebody’s land. Hunts are encroaching on land whose owners do not want them. That is not to mention encroachment on housing estates where, as the Minister knows, a dog was killed by the hunt in a collision and somebody’s pet was also killed.

As the Minister said, the Act also prohibits the pursuit of animals “released in an injured, mutilated or exhausted condition”. When the hunt comes out and the dogs are in a frenzy to get after the fox, they do not know if that fox has been injured or mutilated. It is a very loose area. The Minister spoke about the fine but the one fine in Macroom of €1,000 between more ten people was like a slap on the wrist.

Deputy Michael Creed: I met one of my constituents who had this experience and I accept that it was a traumatic incident. On foot of that and indeed other incidents which had a media profile and perhaps others that did not have the same profile but occurred, we engaged with the HAI to ensure that this never happens again. I was satisfied from the engagement that there was a commitment that steps would be taken in the association’s code of practice. Compliance with its own code is important, and in so far as the code omitted to refer to issues in housing estates, that would be addressed. My information is that the written code has not changed yet but that there has been communication with hunts. I will ask officials in the Department to engage again

with the express view of updating the code to reflect the concerns that arose in those incidents.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: That is far too loose. There are three areas of concern, one of which is the dogs being used. I do not think there is any inspection of the way the dogs are kept. There are alarming reports from people involved in animal welfare of the conditions in which the dogs are kept. There is also a report from one group of a particular huntsperson who exceeds the number of breeding bitches allowed under the Dog Breeding Establishments Act 2010. Who is following up on this?

Just before Christmas the Cork Dog Action Welfare Group had to close because it could not take in any more dogs. It had in excess of 70 dogs in its care, and 30 of those were hunting dogs. Is the HAI really taking responsibility for its own dogs as well as for what it does with fox hunting? Fox hunting is a relic of our colonial past when we were oppressed by a colonial power. While that same colonial power has banned fox hunting, we still see it as a worthwhile practice in rural Ireland. That beggars belief.

Deputy Michael Creed: Anybody who breaks the law should face the rigours of the law. Our 2013 legislation is considered to be best practice. The Deputy refers to another jurisdiction that has travelled a different road. It is considering our legislation. The current minister responsible there referred to his proposal to update that jurisdiction’s legislation, which I believe was the same as the legislation that existed here prior to 2013, going back to prior to the foundation of the State. Ours is considered to be fit for purpose, although – and we would not agree on this – there are carve-outs in respect of coursing, fishing and hunting.

The Deputy refers to people breaching the welfare regulations in respect of breeding bitches in kennels. Anybody who does that will find no comfort. They should be reported and action should be taken. The responsibility for that legislation does not rest with the Department but with local authorities. Those issues should be brought to the attention of the relevant local authorities and action taken if people are found to be in breach.

Beef Industry

13. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the price beef farmers are receiving for their produce from factories; the details of recent discussions at the beef forum; the actions and deadlines agreed; the steps being taken to protect beef farmers from a hard Brexit and a Mercosur deal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20060/19]

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: What are the Minister’s views on the price the beef farmers are receiving for their produce from factories? I ask the Minister to provide details on the recent discussions at the beef forum, including any actions and deadlines agreed at that forum. I also ask him to update the House on steps that are being taken to protect beef farmers from a hard Brexit and a Mercosur deal.

Deputy Michael Creed: As the Deputy will be aware, in accordance with competition law, neither I nor my Department has a role in determining market prices for any commodity and I cannot intervene in this particular process. The agrifood sector is of critical importance to the economy and its regional spread means it underpins the socio-economic development of rural areas in particular. Brexit has the potential to have a significant impact on the sector given its

unique exposure to the UK market, which accounted for 38% or €5.2 billion worth of agrifood exports last year.

There are ongoing discussions with the European Commission regarding the difficulties Ireland would face in the event of a no-deal Brexit and the assistance that might be required for our agriculture, food and fishery sectors. Avoiding a no-deal Brexit continues to be the Government's overriding policy priority. I have held a number of discussions with Commissioner Hogan regarding the potential impact of a disorderly Brexit on the sector. I have stressed the need for the Commission to be ready to deploy a range of measures to mitigate the potential impacts on agrifood and fisheries, including through traditional market supports and exceptional aid under the CAP's CMO regulation - Regulation (EU) No. 1308/2013- as well increased flexibility under state aid rules.

It is also important to acknowledge that the past few months have been difficult for beef farmers in particular, following a difficult year in 2018 due to weather conditions. There has been a prolonged and exceptional period of depressed prices since last autumn, with the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the outcome of Brexit, among other factors, contributing to this market disturbance. In light of the ongoing depressed market prices, I have said in discussions with Commissioner Hogan and my EU counterparts that I believe that the deployment of exceptional measures under the CMO regulation to provide targeted aid to farm families who have suffered a sustained reduction in returns from the market is required. I made an intervention to this effect at the April meeting of the Council of Agriculture Ministers and my officials have followed up with a detailed submission which is under consideration by Commission officials. In addition, I have consistently stressed at EU level the need to protect the EU beef sector in trade discussions with Mercosur.

Finally, I chaired the 12th meeting of the beef round table last October. A press release summarising the discussions and presentations made at that meeting is available on my Department's website. The round table dealt with issues such as the interdependence between the primary producers and processors and progressing the producer organisations.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Minister for his reply. I note that while he covered the engagement he had with the Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr. Hogan, regarding the fallout from Brexit, he gave very little attention to the other part of the question relating to the beef forum and any actions, timelines or deadlines agreed at the most recent meeting of same. That is because the beef forum has become irrelevant and has not been doing the job it was set up to do. I understand and accept that the Minister does not have a direct role in setting prices but the price that farmers are getting for their produce is central in the context of Irish agriculture. The income of farmers is an important matter and should be a matter of concern to the Minister. Unfortunately the beef forum, which was set up by his predecessor, Deputy Coveney, in 2014 has become little more than a talking shop. Indeed, the President of the IFA, Mr. Joe Healy, said recently that under the Minister's chairmanship, the forum has become a "mudguard for inaction". The Minister must engage seriously with the beef forum to ensure price transparency in the sector. A commitment was made to introduce price transparency to the sector but there has been no action on that to date.

Deputy Michael Creed: The functioning of the beef forum is contingent on all of the stakeholders participating in it but the latest meeting that we held saw the withdrawal of all of the farming organisations. If we are to meet the challenges facing the sector we must sit down together and work collaboratively on that endeavour. I cannot force people to attend meetings

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and while the forum cannot address issues related to price, it can address a host of other issues including markets, the next CAP and how we can best structure supports for the industry. I am open to that but there is little point in convening meetings of the forum if members do not want to attend. Obviously, in the intervening period I have met all the constituent members of the beef forum and I continue to engage with farming organisations and other stakeholders.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The reason that stakeholders have not attended recent meetings is that they have lost faith in the beef forum. They have also lost faith in the Minister and his party in the context of making national agriculture policy work for farmers. They have seen that the beef forum has been little more than a talking shop. One of the key commitments made by the Government, through the Minister's predecessor when he set up the beef forum, was that there would be more beef price transparency brought into the system. In particular, a commitment was made to introduce a wholesale price index, which would be published by Bord Bia and the Department, but that has not materialised. The Minister and this Government have failed to deliver on the original aims of the beef forum. A core commitment associated with the establishment of the beef forum was the introduction of a wholesale price index. Where stands that and why has it not been delivered?

Deputy Michael Creed: It is untrue that there have not been any achievements through the beef forum. One achievement is the application on beef prices which is now regularly used by farmers to find out the price being quoted on a daily basis by all of the beef processing plants. There is more work to be done and some of that work involves stakeholder engagement on price transparency issues. I know that Bord Bia and the industry are working on that but it is not as straightforward as the Deputy suggests. As I said earlier, the functioning of the beef forum is dependent on members sitting down and engaging. If it becomes entirely about the current price of produce, then it will miss a host of other areas that can contribute to the viability of the industry.

Beef Environmental Efficiency Scheme Pilot

14. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the beef environmental efficiency pilot; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20104/19]

Deputy Martin Heydon: I ask the Minister to provide an update on the beef environmental efficiency pilot, BEEP, scheme. It is a very good scheme that is in its first year. Have farmers been contacted about it and what is the position with regard to the roll-out of the scheme?

Deputy Michael Creed: In January of this year, I launched the BEEP scheme with a funding provision of €20 million in 2019. BEEP targets the weaning efficiency of suckler cows and calves by measuring the live weight of the calf pre-weaning as a percentage of the cow's live weight. BEEP was announced in budget 2019 as part of the €78 million Brexit package for the agrifood industry. As well as clear environmental and climate benefits, BEEP will provide additional farm income at a time of market volatility and uncertainty relating to Brexit.

Some 18,883 farmers had registered their interest in participating in the pilot by the closing date of 22 February 2019 and they will qualify for payment provided they comply with the requirements to weigh each cow and calf and provide the requisite data to the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation, ICBF, in accordance with the terms and conditions of the scheme. The

€20 million funding available will allow for payment of up to a maximum of €40 per calf.

The ICBF has been registering privately-owned scales and accepting weight records from participating beef farmers since 8 March. More than 1,700 individuals have registered privately-owned scales to date and some 30,000 weights have been recorded. Last week, I welcomed the roll-out of rental scales to 70 Irish Co-operative Organisation Society, ICOS, affiliated livestock marts and co-operatives across the country. Scales are now available to rent from these locations allowing those farmers who do not have access to privately-owned scales to record eligible cow and calf weights to meet their requirements under the pilot. The roll-out of rental scales is in conjunction with the earlier release of smart phone applications for both Android and Apple devices to facilitate the quick and accurate submission of weight records. Weights may be submitted online, by smart phone application or on a paper form available from the ICBF.

12 o'clock

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Minister for that update. When can farmers enrolled in the scheme expect to receive payment? Will the Minister outline the climate and environmental benefits of the scheme? How does the weighing of animals provide benefits to farmers and the environment?

Deputy Michael Creed: On the most important element, payments are scheduled for early December.

The data that will be collected will be very useful to the ICBF, as it will complement the BDGP, which is part of the endeavour to improve the genetic merit of our beef herd, thereby driving down its carbon footprint and helping the Department fulfil its climate change obligations. Apart from the financial support it delivers to individual farmers who apply through the payments they will receive, it is also part of the bigger picture in terms of reducing the carbon footprint of the industry.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Timmy Dooley: For the avoidance of doubt I reiterate Fianna Fáil's position, which is that we fully support the rapid roll-out of high-speed broadband to the 542,000 homes, farms, schools and business premises dotted throughout rural and semi-rural parts of this country. The Government announcement on broadband, within two weeks of the local and European elections, does not indicate a rapid roll-out, and the plan does not represent a transparent, value for money proposition for the taxpayer. It is an attempt by the Taoiseach to portray Fine Gael as the champion of rural dwellers. If people had any doubts about the motives behind the timing of this announcement, their suspicions will have been confirmed the following morning when each Member of this House was presented with a glossy pack specific to each constituency outlining the relevant positive aspects of the announcement to assist Fine Gael representatives attempting to convince rural voters on the doorsteps over the final days of an election campaign. It is a rather bizarre move when no contract has been signed and when we are told by the Government that it may not be signed for a further six months. In fact, there are real concerns as to whether it will ever be signed.

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I assume that at this stage the Tánaiste has realised this spin just will not wash with those people who have been waiting patiently for the broadband they have been promised on numerous occasions. The announcement is, in fact, a further betrayal of rural dwellers. Far from being a breakthrough, this announcement confirms further delay in broadband delivery on top of the many delays already experienced. The Fine Gael manifesto promised high-speed broadband to 100% of homes, farms, and business premises by 2020 but this week's announcement is a confirmation that this will not happen until 2027. That is the best case scenario; it is more likely to take much longer. Could it be 2030 or 2040?

Today's edition of *The Irish Times* carries another leak from a Government source that indicates the total cost of the broadband project will be approximately €5 billion. It is clear that the motivation behind this leak is to imply that Granahan McCourt is investing €2 billion. However, any analysis of the redacted memo from the Secretary General, Mr. Watt, would conclude that the actual capital to be invested by Granahan McCourt is much less. Will the Tánaiste confirm that there is no commercial impediment to the publication of this figure? Will he outline to the House what that number is?

Over recent days the Taoiseach and a number of Ministers have sought to play down the value of the asset at the end of the 25-year period. This assertion is entirely disingenuous as their comments have concentrated on the value of the physical infrastructure after 25 years. Will the Tánaiste confirm that the real value at the end of the intervention period is the monopoly access to a customer base which, by the Government's projections, comprises more than 400,000 homes and premises? These homes and premises will have no alternative but to use this infrastructure, for which they will pay a monthly fee. Will he also confirm that Granahan McCourt's investment will be paid back after eight years and will continue to earn substantial returns over the remaining 17 years? Will he further confirm that, in the end, it will own the network and the potential revenue generated by those 400,000 customers while the taxpayer will have no stake and will receive no return on the investment?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this question and giving me an opportunity to clarify matters relating to some of the concerns he has outlined. If the Government had not made the decision we have made, Opposition parties would attack us on the basis of delays, indecision, and a betrayal of rural Ireland. We made this decision as soon as we could stand over it. The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton, made a recommendation to Cabinet, which was accepted after approximately four hours of debate. I was not there myself because I was in the UK, but I have had long conversations with the Minister, the Taoiseach, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Donohoe, on this issue.

The rest of the Cabinet and I are satisfied that we have made the right decision. We have not made it because the local elections are a few weeks away. This is a decision for the country for the next 35 years and beyond. It is about future-proofing rural Ireland for the technological change we know is happening. It is about ensuring that there is not a digital divide across this country based on where one lives or one's address. We are making the largest capital commitment in terms of investment in rural Ireland since electrification. I hope we will get support from other parties in our efforts to do that.

Of course, Opposition parties need to test the Government and to hold it fully to account. That is why we have released all of the information relating to the debate that took place within Government and within Departments before this decision was made. The Department of Public

Expenditure and Reform has tested this decision very robustly. The Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment has very robustly defended that decision and has made the case for it using independent cost-benefit analysis and so on. The job of Government, however, is to make decisions and to explain them. Its job is to make decisions in a transparent manner and in the full knowledge of the cost, which may be up to €3 billion but may well be much less in light of the different scenarios that may unfold. It should also be taken into account that the €3 billion includes VAT and a very significant contingency of more than €500 million. This is a significant decision, but it is one which will be transformative for rural Ireland in terms of opportunity. If we did not make it, we would restrict the availability of what will become essential services through high-speed broadband in the future.

Regarding what is commercially sensitive and what is not, the Government is not in a position at this moment in time to give a figure for what equity the bidder itself is putting in because there is still a negotiation to conclude with regard to finalising the contract. That figure will be published in time and it will be proportionate to the commercial return available to the bidder in the context of the infrastructure it has an obligation to deliver on.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: If this was not an election stunt, I doubt the Government would have produced this document in advance of the contract being signed. Considering that the tendering process is over, there is no reason whatsoever that number cannot be published. As I have said, any analysis of the memorandum from the Secretary General, Mr. Watt, would show clearly that the contribution being made by Granahan McCourt is rather small in comparison to the return. I ask the Tánaiste again to confirm a number of things. Will he confirm that Granahan McCourt will have all its money back after eight years, that it will have the capacity to earn substantial amounts over the remaining 17 years, and that, at the end of that period, it will own the network and will have exclusive access to those 400,000 customers and the revenue they will generate? The Tánaiste is not prepared to tell us now what Granahan McCourt is putting up to get all of that money in the future. That is highly disingenuous of him and I suspect it has more to do with him not wanting to put that information before the electorate in the throes of an election campaign.

The Tánaiste: If the Government was in the business of trying to hide information, it would not have published what it published yesterday. The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment will take questions on all of these issues for two hours after today's sos. I am sure he will appear before a committee on this issue for many hours over several months and, in particular, on the finalisation of the contract, which, hopefully, will happen over the next six months. What is being paid for, and what will be provided under a regulatory model, is a wholesale infrastructure proposition. Many others will also be able to use this infrastructure. It is clear that without significant State intervention, the market would not and could not have delivered this commercially. The State will be contributing up to and probably less than half of the cost of delivery of this infrastructure. The numbers bear that out. That is what we have negotiated over about 800 hours of negotiation with the various bidders during this process. After all of that, the Government has rightly concluded that this is the right decision. It does represent value for money even though it is a significant investment. The absence of this investment would open up a divide in Ireland that we certainly cannot support.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: As a Deputy representing a largely rural constituency, I know first hand the importance of rolling out broadband to every home across the State. It is essential that we deliver high-speed broadband in rural Ireland. People want, need and deserve it. However, that actually means delivering it and being sure that the capacity exists to do so. Unfortunately,

the national broadband plan as currently constituted could amount to a red herring, costing us billions of euro and still leaving homes and businesses without access to adequate broadband. That is the crux of the problem. This process began back in 2012 when the then Minister, former Deputy Pat Rabbitte, in the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government, promised high-speed broadband would be delivered to every home, farm and business across the State, ending by 2020. That promise has been broken spectacularly. Eight years on we do not have a yard of fibre laid under this plan. Under the new plan, many in rural Ireland will be lucky to have high-speed broadband by the later stage of the next decade. This simply is not good enough.

The documents published yesterday highlight serious significant flaws in the plan that no one in government has yet addressed. The documents we have seen from officials and the Secretary General in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform raise questions about the capacity of the bidder to deliver this project. I share those concerns. They have called into question the capacity of the Department to oversee the project and I share those concerns. They recognise that the bidding process has failed to deliver a competitive tender and that the bidder has been able to name its price. They say the cost-benefit analysis is simply not credible and that it appears there has been cooking of the books in this matter. The strongest criticism, which worries me and my party the most, is that the bidder does not have adequate skin in the game and could walk away from this project any time after it has recouped its investment. That is highlighted in numerous documents and it is extremely worrying. It amounts to abandoning rural Ireland once again. What we have is a botched process. There is a big worry that it is not going to be delivered at all. Rural Ireland needs high-speed broadband: we can all agree on that and no one disputes it. However, the Government has made a complete and utter mess of this process and it is flawed. The unfortunate reality and real casualty of all this is the 500,000 houses and businesses that are still without broadband. Many will be without broadband for years to come.

There is time to put things right. No contract has been signed. There are alternative solutions that need to be considered in a serious light, giving the stinging criticism from officials in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The Tánaiste says they have been robustly tested. They could not have been. The criticism only landed on the Minister's desk last week. He had no chance to test them. The memo was only sent to the Minister on 3 May. There are options there, for example a State-wide provider to deal with broadband, as we called for many years ago. Will the Tánaiste look at the other options? Will he give us full clarity as to how much skin this private equity firm has in the game? We might then at least be confident that the Department's comments may not be credible when it tells us time and again there is no incentive for the bidder to complete this project.

The Tánaiste: I am glad we agree on one thing, namely that rural Ireland needs broadband. We have been talking about this for far too long and not delivering it for homes and businesses in what is now referred to as the intervention area. There are 540,000 premises that have no prospect of getting the kind of high-speed broadband that most people in this House would accept that everyone - homes and businesses - will need in the not-too-distant future. We now have a plan that the Government believes will work. It has been robustly tested. It is true that concerns have been raised but those concerns have been responded to in a lot of detail. One of the letters that was released yesterday from the Secretary General of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, which is three pages long and outlines serious concerns, got a comprehensive response from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It was a very long response.

The Tánaiste: It is a letter of 14 or 15 pages. That is why the Government spent four hours in its meeting on Tuesday talking through these issues and getting detailed explanations from the Minister, Deputy Bruton, as to the response to some of the concerns raised by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. I am satisfied that those questions have been answered. This is about laying 147,000 km of fibre. It is about delivering speeds of 150 Mbps increasing to 500 Mbps from year ten. It is about ensuring that customers in rural Ireland are charged the same as in urban Ireland, which costs the State significant amounts of money. That is what we are committing to. The contract is not just about rolling out fibre and delivering the speeds, however. It is also about operating it for the next 25 to 35 years. It also ensures that the risk management linked to this project is by and large carried by the bidder. If there is down-side risk, in other words, if there is not sufficient uptake of this infrastructure, that risk is carried solely by the bidder. If there is more uptake than is anticipated, the benefit is shared by the State in terms of claw-back. Let us not forget that there are conditions in this arrangement, which will become a contract, whereby the State essentially pays in arrears. The infrastructure is delivered first, we meet certain targets and then we pay out. The bidder needs to provide the working capital, which is significant, to be able to build out that infrastructure in the meantime until they meet the targets which will trigger staged payments as the infrastructure is rolled out. As the Minister, Deputy Bruton, has said, they have looked at the risk and management of this up, down and inside out to ensure we have provided as much certainty as possible from the State for one of the most important infrastructure roll-outs that we have seen in a generation.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The final submission from the Department only arrived a couple of days ago. How the Government looked at it upside down and inside out and all over the place beggars belief. The problem is that there are serious criticisms and question marks over whether this plan will ever be delivered. They have not been answered. A senior official is saying there are questions whether the bidder has the capacity to deliver it. Set that to one side. It is repeated in three different documents that there are questions about the bidder abandoning the process using language stating there is no incentive to honour the contract for its duration, risking further losses. This is because there is so little skin in the game on the part of the investor. He will have recouped all of his investment before the project has been delivered. The Tánaiste has failed to address those issues. They have not been addressed by any official or by anybody. Rural Ireland has had to wait and listen to promise after promise being made by political parties in government that this will be delivered. Now there are serious questions from senior officials and other officials saying the project may never be delivered because the Department does not have the capacity to oversee it. The cost-benefit analysis is not credible; they are saying there was cooking of the books. They are saying that the bidder does not have the capacity and that there is no incentive for the bidder-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please Deputy, the time is up.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----to deliver on this project after a number of years if further losses are incurred.

What I want on behalf of my constituents who do not have broadband is certainty. If we are going down this road, we need to be sure it will be delivered. Those questions have not been answered. This is why there is an onus on the Government to consult with the rest-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, I ask you please-----

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Deputy Pearse Doherty: I will finish with this. There is an onus on the Government to consult with the rest and look at the alternative options that will provide certainty that we will finally have broadband in our rural communities.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy asked whether the alternatives have been assessed. They have been assessed through this process but also before it. Some people ask why we are committing this amount of money when technology may change over the next 25 years and we may be able to do this through mobile networks, wireless systems and so on. This argument has held up progress in Ireland for decades. If we look at what the private sector is doing today, we can see that it is investing in fibre because that is what is being demanded in the marketplace, households and businesses. That is what the State is also committing to do now - investing in rolling out 147,000 km of fibre on existing poles.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer my questions.

The Tánaiste: We are satisfied that through this bidding process, which one should not forget has taken three years, there has been the appropriate due diligence to test the capacity of the remaining bidder to be able to deliver on the scope of this project, which, after all, is about rolling out fibre. It is not rocket science. It is about rolling out fibre into more than 500,000 premises. That is what this is about - providing a wholesale platform to be able to ensure that rural Ireland paying effectively a subsidised rate can ensure it gets access to the services that infrastructure is providing to urban Ireland today.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The EU is losing 1,000 farms each and every day. That is the stark finding from a recent report from the European Court of Auditors. I want to raise it today because it brings some additional context to the challenges faced by rural Ireland apart from the farcical roll out of the national broadband plan. I believe we will never see the contract signed. The issue of generational renewal - getting young people to take up farming - has been described as the single greatest threat to agriculture and the fabric of rural Ireland as we have been privileged to know it.

According to the report from the European Court of Auditors, the first problem is the large reduction in the number of farms. In 2005, there were 14.7 million farms in the European Union. The latest available data put the number at approximately 10 million. Almost 5 million farms have disappeared in the intervening period. There is no indication that the speed of this trend is slowing down. This was recently confirmed by the Western Development Commission when it found the number of people working in agriculture in the west of Ireland has decreased by 41% in the past 20 years. We know that and the Government knows that. Its candidates are finding out on the doorsteps. What is equally disturbing is the finding that not only has there been a reduction in the number of young farmers, there is also a serious reduction in the amount of land held by them. The problem is that 80% of European farmers are over 45. One third of farmers are older than 65. The outcome of all this is that the threat to the family farm is growing at an alarming rate. We are now at a point where the largest farms, which make up just 20% of farms, received 80% of European subsidies for agriculture while the other 80% received only 20% of those subsidies. This is a disgraceful figure. According to the European Court of Auditors, this is the political choice we face in deciding the future CAP agreement.

Will the Tánaiste, therefore, accept that we are facing an unprecedented threat to the fabric of rural life in terms of the inability to make farming financially attractive to young people and young families? Small farms right across this State and indeed Europe are being gobbled

up daily by large conglomerates. It is happening in my own county, in south Tipperary, with Coolmore's equine industry. Gobbled up and not in the interest of farming. There is no commitment to rural Ireland. They are only interested in bank balances and corporate affairs. They are corporate investments. There is no interest in our schools, our future or our clubs. This was made explicit by members of the European Court of Auditors when they appeared before the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine. They accepted that there was a long discussion of a proposal of the European Commission to cut the payment for the big farms and to give more to the family farms. However, the proposal was not accepted because of the strength of the big industrial farming lobby. This is outrageous. Will the Tánaiste provide assurances as to the measures that we are adopting here to combat this trend of family farms vanishing from the face of the earth?

The Tánaiste: I know a bit about this issue because I was very much involved in the last discussion on the Common Agricultural Policy and how we would structure both Pillar 1 payments, which are direct payments, and Pillar 2 payments in terms of supporting more sustainable agricultural activity and maintaining and protecting the family farm structure, which is core to the make-up of rural Ireland. If we want to talk about investment in rural Ireland in terms of the volume of money, this round of the CAP will invest €12 billion in Ireland in the form of supports for food producers and farmers in many different ways. My view is that it represents good value for money for consumers because of the guarantees that it provides in terms of food safety and quality and environmental protections and it protects and sustains the fabric of rural Ireland, of which the Deputy is very much part and as I have been.

It is important that the Deputy does not misrepresent what we tried to do in the last round of the CAP and what I certainly will advocate for in this round as well. The idea that everybody who owns land in Ireland would get the same payment per hectare with no differentiation and taking no account of history or productivity in the past would be a fundamental mistake because one essentially would be paying people for land ownership and not farming. I suggest that the Deputy talks to the farmers in Tipperary, who lobbied incredibly heavily to ensure that I managed what was called the equalisation of funds in a way that was progressive but gradual and did not see dramatic changes in the income of full-time farmers, which is what would have happened if some people had their way, to ensure that we maintained farming as a productive sector, rather than some kind of social engineering project in rural Ireland. Farms and farmers can be and are profitable across the country if we can provide the marketplace that allows them to survive, grow and expand. The CAP needs to be a combination of things from protecting food quality and safety, animal welfare and a broader environment that we all have a responsibility to protect, to keeping productive farming intact and in parts of the country where it is not possible to make money in the marketplace through farming, keeping people on land as stewards of the countryside. It can do all of those things if we ensure that it is appropriately funded in the next round of CAP, for which this Government will fight.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I do not need a lecture about looking after farmers.

The Tánaiste: It seems the Deputy does.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We need the Government to pay attention to them. We need the Government to look at the likes of Coolmore Stud buying up 27,000 acres and driving all other family farms out. I thank the Tánaiste for the reply but, ultimately, the issue is the result of political choices on the part of the Tánaiste and his party but it was always the party of the landed gentry, not na daoine beaga or the small farmers. This was made clear by the members of the

European Court of Auditors who appeared before the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Indeed it was well said that a core problem of European agriculture is that although we plan the CAP from a seven-year perspective, I believe it should be a 27-year period. Seven years is too short a timeframe. The Government needs to pay more than lip service. The Tánaiste talks about farmers being profitable. Tell me what sector is profitable at the moment? Dairy farmers are profitable by the skin of their teeth. All other sectors are slipping significantly. Things are very volatile with weather conditions and the onset of Brexit and the protracted negotiations, delays and uncertainty. What the Government needs to do is reassure farmers. We need to bring back something like a land commission to stop corporate conglomerates buying up land willy nilly. They can do it because they can avail of tax incentives in the equine sector and everything else. What is required is a level playing field. We need support for the daoine beaga and the small farmer because without families living on farms and people living in villages, we can see what is happening in the case of our schools, GAA clubs and other sporting clubs with people fleeing the land. I gave the Tánaiste the figures. One thousand farmers a day across Europe are leaving the land. It is a perilous situation and we need to respond to that.

The Tánaiste: There are issues in what the Deputy has raised, which I do not want to dismiss. We need to be careful though not to interpret trends in Irish agriculture on the basis of what is happening broadly across the EU. The starting position of many of the newer member states when they joined the European Union was one of very small farmholdings, in many cases with dairy herd sizes of five or six milking cows, which is a totally different farming model from what we have here. What we need to focus on is Irish agriculture and its future, how we facilitate the sustainable growth story that currently is happening in the dairy sector and how we support the beef sector through what has been a very difficult two-year period, particularly linked to Brexit and the uncertainty surrounding it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The cereal sector and everything else are being hit.

The Tánaiste: It is not a coincidence that my party and this Government advocated to get the agricultural commissioners for Ireland because we prioritise farming and agriculture as an essential part of rural Ireland-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The big farmers.

The Tánaiste: -----and of the Irish economy and we will not be found wanting in terms of supporting agriculture, particularly the beef sector, through this difficult period also.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The housing crisis continues unabated with people on average incomes essentially being locked out of the prospect of buying a home of their own and a great many people literally being bled dry by soaring housing rents. The number of people who are homeless continues to rise and, most shameful of all, there are now almost 4,000 children among this number. The cost of housing is now the single biggest driver of the high cost of living for people yet the Government continues to drag its heels in responding adequately. Throughout this crisis Fine Gael continues to pretend that the market can solve the problem. It has taken the least effective and most expensive approach to increasing housing supply. Over-reliance on the private sector has gone hand in hand with the stated objective of raising house prices. That was first made clear by the then Minister, Deputy Noonan, and continued by successive Ministers. What has mattered most to Fine Gael is the balance sheets of our disgraced banks and bailing out speculators and developers. This has taken complete precedence over

what should be people's right to affordable housing. How else can the Government explain the failure to build on the substantial public landbanks that we have? How else can it explain the inordinate delay in finalising an affordable housing scheme? That scheme has been promised for years and it has yet to take effect.

A number of the larger approved housing bodies have come together to respond to this crisis and are putting it up to the Government to support them. They have capacity to provide a major social and affordable cost rental building programme commensurate with the scale of need that exists. To do so, however, they have three asks of Government. First, tier 3 approved housing bodies need to be reclassified as off-Government balance sheet in order that they can avail of funding, which is available and being offered to them on a constant basis, and which should be utilised. The Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, has promised this but there was no timeline set out for when this will happen. It seems we are yet into another long period of promises from the Minister without any action. Failure to act on this will have a negative impact on the potential major output of social and affordable homes from this sector. Second, new and sustainable, affordable, rental and cost-rental schemes beyond the current small pilot schemes are urgently needed. Why is Fine Gael delaying the introduction of these schemes? Action is urgently needed to accelerate the availability of social and affordable homes. Third, changes to the capital advance leasing facility have caused cashflow problems for these housing bodies and these constrain output. They need to be reversed as soon as possible.

The Tánaiste: I do not believe we disagree that we need to significantly increase the output of housing of all types but the Deputy, like many others, misrepresents what the Government is doing in terms of its housing policy, and whether it is deliberate or not, I do not know. The idea that the Government has an ideological approach of relying on the market to solve the problem is simply not borne out by what we are doing. We have spent €2.4 billion this year building public housing. We will add an extra 10,000 housing units this year to the social housing stock. Next year, the number will be higher than that, probably close to 12,000. We have committed over a number of years to dramatically increase our social housing stock. What we must do in the meantime, because of the pressures in regard to social housing, is to try to find accommodation for people in the private rental market where possible. Last year, approximately 25,000 housing solutions were provided for people in need through social housing, as well as through supported rental accommodation. Clearly, we want to move away from the current reliance on the private rental market to find homes for people who cannot afford to pay for themselves, but the social housing stock must be built up to do that. We have also committed to a €300 million affordable housing scheme, which was signed off in the last budget and which will be delivered over the next two years. We are strategically managing public landbanks in a different way now from what was done in the past. The rent Bill, which was finalised yesterday evening, provides more protections for tenants, as are needed, and changes to rent pressure zones to make sure that effectively we are putting in place limitations in terms of rental inflation in parts of the country where there are significant pressures.

The Deputy should not misrepresent what we are trying to do. There are genuine problems in terms of housing pressures. We are reminded every week, as we should be, of the challenge in regard to homeless families, homeless individuals and, in particular, homeless children. An urgency is needed from Government to solve the pressures that many of those families are under but we are not doing it, as the Deputy would suggest, by simply relying on the market to deliver over time in its own time. Quite the opposite is the case. We have intervened in the market in multiple ways and we are spending billions of euro over a number of years to deliver

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a social housing stock that can meet demand.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Eight years into government and the Tánaiste is still talking about what he will do about the housing crisis.

The Tánaiste: No, we are doing it. It is happening.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Government's record has been appalling in this area. It is spending vast amounts of public money on housing but most of that is going into the pockets of private landlords or else it is buying expensive turnkey housing rather than building it directly through local authorities. It has promised for years to introduce an affordable housing scheme. The Tánaiste is still talking about it but it has not started yet. I have raised this umpteen times and he has denied that this is the case. We do not have affordable housing programmes under way at present. Local authorities are crying out for them. The approved housing bodies have the capacity to deliver large numbers of social and affordable rental schemes if the Government would take those three actions they require. Why is the Government holding back on those? What we need now is action not empty promises, which is all we have had to date. There are ways to address this effectively that would ensure we have an effective response and that it would be done in a cost-effective way. Unfortunately, Fine Gael is yet again using the most expensive approach to tackling a major issue.

The Tánaiste: At the very end of the Deputy's contribution we got what this is about, which is about party politics rather than delivering.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: No, it is not. It is about Fine Gael wasting public money.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste without interruption.

The Tánaiste: I did not interrupt the Deputy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Shortall is well aware of the rules.

The Tánaiste: So we are now wasting public money trying to put people into stable accommodation-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not stable.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Answer the question.

The Tánaiste: -----and trying to take them out of inappropriate but improved emergency accommodation. By the way, I am a big believer in approved housing bodies, as they know from when I was Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, and the current Minister is as well. That is why we are funding them to the tune of tens of million of euro each year. That is why we brought the European Investment Bank into Ireland to fund approved housing bodies and build the estates that have been built and are housing people right now.

With regard to reclassifying approved housing bodies to take them off-balance sheet, we would like to do that and we are in process of trying to get that done with the European Commission through a review that is being held currently by the Department of Finance.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: What is the timeline?

The Tánaiste: I have had direct conversations in that regard and it is not straightforward.

It certainly is not being held up because of a lack of appetite from the Government. The issues raised by the Deputy are being addressed. We are not just talking about it; we are delivering thousands of homes now that were not being delivered a few years ago.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: There is no timeline.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask Members to listen to me for a moment. This is about questions on promised legislation or the programme for Government. Please do not ask questions on other issues. I know very well how important constituency matters are and the importance of saying, "I raised it in the House." There are other ways and means, whether it is Topical Issue matters, Priority Questions or Other Questions. I ask Deputy Dooley to commence. I know he will lead by example.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: In February, the Government produced a set of commitments to support the implementation of the National Biodiversity Action Plan 2017-21. A global assessment report was published this week showing that the health of the ecosystem, on which we and all other species depend, is deteriorating rapidly. Can the Minister provide an update on the necessary urgent implementation of the national biodiversity action plan? What additional resources are there and what investment is being made to stem this biodiversity emergency in Ireland?

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): We had the first inaugural national biodiversity conference this year. I also introduced a biodiversity duty this week in Cabinet, which was passed and which puts an onus on public bodies to ensure they take biodiversity into account in terms of the work and business they do.

There is an issue in regard to biodiversity globally and not just in Ireland. There is a severe problem and we are very conscious of that. We are putting a huge amount of money into this, a huge amount of investment and a huge amount of initiative. I will take on board the Deputy's comments.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I want to raise the commitment in the programme for Government in regard to keeping people in their homes. Just this morning, at the finance committee, Ulster Bank confirmed it is going to sell another portfolio of loans, this time loans on family homes, to a vulture fund, and it expects this to happen before the end of the year. This comes on top of last year's sale of almost 4,000 properties between family homes and buy-to-lets. I have raised this with the Tánaiste on a number of occasions. That sale last year has seen people being sent letters telling them, "Clear your arrears within 30 days or we will take your property". The tenants in those properties will be evicted.

It is very clear that the policy of this Government of rolling out the red carpet to the vulture funds, giving them sweetheart taxation deals, is completely failing the Irish people and throwing them to the mercy of these vultures. I ask the Government to do the right thing at this late stage, given the line-up of banks that are about to sell to vultures. Will the Government support the No Consent, No Sale Bill in committee, which will give statutory effect to the code of

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practice of the Central Bank so permission will have to be sought before a family home is sold to a vulture?

The Tánaiste: The question was whether we will support the No Consent, No Sale Bill. I do not believe the Government can support that Bill.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Tánaiste will recall that it is many years since we had the first ban on smoky coal and a clean air strategy that affects many of our towns. We were promised a national clean air strategy to enforce a national ban on bituminous coal. For some reason that I cannot get my head around, the current Government has decided to delay that. My questions are very direct and simple. When will we have a national smoky coal ban and when will the national clean air strategy be published?

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I am very disappointed, as I am sure the Deputy is, that despite two Ministers before me indicating there would be a smoky coal ban, there has been a legal challenge to that. I am seeking advice from the Attorney General as to how this can be done in a legally robust way. I have also asked the Environmental Protection Agency to assemble detailed data for us about the state of the air quality in various towns. I am very keen to proceed with this but I have to do so in a way that will be the legally robust.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: What of the national clean air strategy?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The national clean air strategy will proceed and this is one of the items everyone wanted to see included.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Has the Minister set a date for publication?

Deputy Richard Bruton: We have not set a date because we are seeking to resolve this issue, which is an integral part of what we are hoping to deliver.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This week, we had yet more terrifying evidence of how we in this country, in Europe and across the world are careering towards a climate, biodiversity and ecological disaster. It is a fact that 1 million of the world's 8 million species are now threatened with extinction. Here in Ireland, it is worse, and the Irish Wildlife Trust states that one third of species are facing extinction. A report today shows that Europe is more than two and a half times over-consuming the natural resources necessary to sustain existence on this planet. The school students who were on strike over the climate emergency are coming out on the day of the European and local elections calling for further protests. In Leinster House today we had Extinction Rebellion saying how the Government's policies around planning to ramp up the use of gas for energy is an environmental disaster.

My questions are very simple. Will the Government follow what has been done in Britain and declare a climate and biological emergency? Where is the promised all-of-Government plan to deal with climate change? When is it going to happen? Are we going to see the radical emergency action that is necessary to deal with an ecological and climate disaster coming at us?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy has raised a lot of genuine issues. I reassure the House that, from a biodiversity and species perspective and from a climate change perspective, Members will see a lot of action from this Government. Before the end of this month, the Minister, Deputy Bruton, will bring a national climate action plan to Government for approval, and I am

sure it will have many hours of debate in this House once it is launched. The issues raised by the Deputy are real and genuine, and need the kind of response this country has not provided to date but needs to from now on.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I want to refer to the needs of small businesses under the programme for Government. Business people all over Tipperary were delighted when the Valuation Office decided to examine the process for rates valuation in Tipperary. A problem has arisen where it has reclassified the forecourt areas of petrol stations, where the fuel sold is of high value but there is very little profit, and cigarettes. There have been savage increases, in some cases of 200% to 300%. An issue was previously raised in regard to products deemed to be health foods, and the Government rolled back on that. This will have to be examined because it would put many out of business and many others will stop selling fuel, when filling stations are scarce enough in rural Ireland. While some, such as those with smaller shops, have been pleased with the revaluation, will the Government do something to examine this situation, which has arisen because of the reclassification of petrol stations and forecourt areas? There have been punitive increases of 200% to 300%, which they cannot pay.

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I thank the Deputy. The question relates to the Local Government (Rates) Bill, Committee Stage of which is due to be scheduled in the coming weeks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have a list of Deputies from yesterday. In the absence of Deputies Michael Healy-Rae, Jackie Cahill, Niall Collins and Michael Moynihan, I call Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I refer to the Health and Social Care Professionals (Amendment) Bill 2018. The Rehab Group does excellent work by providing a much-needed service for people with disabilities. The group has announced that it needs another €2 million to continue to operate. It has also given 12 months' notice for the termination of all care contracts. There are 3,000 people in care with 1,500 staff providing 140 services in 117 locations all around the country, including in my home town of Dundalk. This includes respite and residential services for 186 children, many with serious support needs. It is vital that the care service provided by the Rehab Group continues. This requires urgent intervention on the part of the Minister for Health. The Rehab Group is doing its best. It is selling off property, closing loss-making services and downsizing staff. I refer also to the closure of the defined benefit pension schemes. This is a fantastic service for respite and residential care. Can the Minister for Health intervene and ensure that these services continue and do not close in the next 12 months?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is right. The Bill needs to proceed. It was actually listed for Report Stage last night but was not reached. It must now be relisted, hopefully for the next couple of weeks. No amendments have been put down on Report Stage, so there is no reason it cannot pass through the House very quickly, be finalised and become law.

Deputy John Brassil: Pages 86 to 95 of the programme for Government commit to providing adequate educational facilities, particularly in our primary schools. I want to bring the Tánaiste's attention to a situation in a primary school in Rathmore, County Kerry. The new school was built approximately ten years ago. There is now a significant problem with the roof, which is leaking into the school's electrical system. The management is very concerned about this from a safety point of view. Approximately €200,000 is needed to fix the problem. The school cannot seem to qualify for the summer works scheme or the emergency works scheme.

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The school's insurance will not cover it and the authorities are at a loss as to how they will solve the problem. I would greatly appreciate the Tánaiste's intervention in resolving this very critical issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point but this is a constituency matter for the Minister for Education and Skills, who I assume will be asked to revert on this matter.

The Tánaiste: I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy on this.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: In regard to health, the programme for Government made a clear commitment that as the finances of the country improved, we would ensure that the most vulnerable people who needed help within the health system would be prioritised. I refer to the announcement of worries that the Rehab Group will not be able to cater for the 3,000 people it is catering for at the moment. I offer the example of the Rosalie unit in Castlerea, which I have brought up on numerous occasions. The Government is inclined to state that this is a matter for the HSE but it is the agent of the Government. Can we get a clear commitment from the Government that the Rehab Group centres and facilities like the Rosalie unit will not be closed? A lot of people are worried. A lot of people are calling our constituency offices about these situations. It seems they are all being run down and closed. That is a serious worry for me and others.

The Tánaiste: Policy and spending are matters for the Minister for Health, but I will certainly pass this matter to him and ask him to come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This is a question for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. Once again it unfortunately relates to the lack of progress and delivery on a redress scheme for the estimated 5,000 homeowners in Donegal and Mayo affected by mica. I raised this with the Minister of State, Deputy English, before the Easter recess. He indicated that he hoped the scheme would go before that week's Cabinet meeting or last week's Cabinet meeting. Not surprisingly, however, we are unfortunately still without a scheme.

The 2019 budget committed to such a scheme. The Minister said he hoped to have a scheme published before Christmas, with houses being fixed by the start of the year. That was 211 days ago and still no scheme has been published. Homeowners are fed up and they need an answer soon. Can the Minister outline the situation to us today? Moreover, I call on him to get on with the job and confirm today that he actually will publish the scheme, so that we can get on with building and fixing houses.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The question qualifies as it pertains to a Governmental promise.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Deputy. We have discussed this a number of times. It was my intention to bring the scheme to a Cabinet meeting during the recess. That did not happen, but that does not mean that progress has not been made. During the last two weeks there have been several contacts between myself and the Minister for Finance on this issue. This morning I met officials and requested the latest version of the scheme that we have drawn up, which I hope to take to Cabinet next week. That is my hope, but I am working with forces outside my control to get this over the line. I appreciate Deputy McConalogue's patience on this issue.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: The programme for Government contains a commitment to an enhanced health service. During the recess, the President of the High Court suspended a doctor from the medical register who had worked in South Tipperary General Hospital, Mayo University Hospital and in Navan, in my own area. I am very concerned with ensuring that entirely substandard practitioners are suspended. More importantly, the guidelines must provide for various sanctions when an inquiry takes place. That is not clear. I am particularly concerned as this is not the first occasion when such an issue has emerged. Doctors appear to be hiding behind suspension or being struck off in cases where criminality is suspected. I want to know what measures have been taken to ensure that the Medical Council informs the Garda Síochána about doctors who appear to carry out criminal activity and are merely struck off.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is legislation pending on this issue?

Deputy Declan Breathnach: I raise this in reference to the programme for Government and the fitness to practice inquiry. I wish to ask if the Government is satisfied that the latter is operating correctly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Tánaiste in a position to answer?

The Tánaiste: There is an obligation on the Medical Council to prioritise patient care. If it is aware of anything that may compromise that it has an obligation to act. I am not familiar with the court judgment the Deputy refers to so I must be careful in what I say. If the Deputy wishes to send me more details I can come back to him.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: In view of the impending industrial action in this area, what is the Government’s position on implementing a 2009 directive of the Labour Court concluding that community employment supervisors should be paid pensions? I remind the Tánaiste that when I raised this recently, the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection attacked the Opposition. I remind the Tánaiste that his party has been in government for nine of the ten years since the Labour Court recommendation was issued. I also remind him that two thirds of this House voted in favour of that recommendation. Moreover, the last time I raised this matter, the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection said the Government would sort it. Ten years later I must ask when the Government will sort it.

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy knows, the perspective of the Government and the Department of Finance is that community employment supervisors are not employees of the State, even though their salaries are funded by the State.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: That is official nonsense.

The Tánaiste: That means there is a different onus on the State in terms of pension entitlements. That is at the core of the issue.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: The Government is not going to sort it, then.

Deputy Mary Butler: I seek an update on the length of time the results of regular smear tests are taking. I have been contacted by several women who took regular smear tests in October of last year. The results are taking up to 28 weeks, which is causing undue stress for those who are waiting. What plans are in place to reduce this lengthy wait?

The Tánaiste: This is a real priority for the Government and the Minister. In certain parts of the country, women have to wait far too long to get their results. The HSE has now secured

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additional laboratory facilities, which we are told can be used over the summer months to dramatically reduce those waiting times and return them to acceptable periods. The appropriate benchmark is a matter of weeks rather than months. I look forward to seeing progress on that. We have heard a lot of rhetoric on this issue and we must now secure the delivery of increased capacity at laboratory level to cut turnaround times dramatically over the summer months.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: Yesterday, the Irish and UK Governments signed a memorandum of understanding, MOU, to cater for citizens' rights and reciprocal arrangements post Brexit. Could the Tánaiste outline to the House when the MOU will be published and when he will provide details to this House on what exactly is contained in the agreement?

The Tánaiste: It was published yesterday immediately after we signed it. The MOU has essentially been in gestation for a number of months and it is backed up by the legislation that this House facilitated in key areas from healthcare to social welfare and education, among other areas, to ensure that the rights and access to supports British people living in Ireland and Irish people living in the UK get today can be maintained regardless of the outcome of the Brexit negotiations. I will send the document to Deputy Lisa Chambers this afternoon.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I wish to raise the ongoing feud in Drogheda under the programme for Government and crime prevention regarding ensuring more responsive and visible policing in the community, and in particular the announcement of 25 additional gardaí for the town. That is to be welcomed, however belated it is. Serious concerns arise in Drogheda on whether the 25 additional gardaí will be all new recruits fresh out of Templemore who have had no first hand experience of dealing with a serious drugs feud of this nature or if they will be experienced gardaí. We seek clarification in that regard.

We also wish to learn how much longer we must wait until we see the additional gardaí on the streets and whether they will be deployed on a permanent basis. We never again want to see what happened in December, when we were given 12 additional gardaí but nine of them were taken away by mid-January. We saw what happened following on from that in terms of the intensification of the feud. I would welcome clarification from the Tánaiste.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is in the programme for Government and perhaps the Minister for Justice and Equality ought to respond.

The Tánaiste: I can give a brief response if I am allowed to do that. The assistant commissioner for the northern region is putting immediate arrangements in place for additional uniformed patrols to be conducted within the district, thereby providing reassurance to the community, which is needed. The patrols will be supplemented by the emergency response unit from Dublin and supported by the regional armed support unit within the northern region.

On Tuesday, 30 April Commissioner Harris announced that he would appoint an additional 25 Garda members to Drogheda next month. This influx of Garda members to the Drogheda area will, I hope, go some way to comfort and reassure the citizens of the area that their safety and the safety of their communities is a big priority for both An Garda Síochána and the Government. Deputy O'Dowd has been vocal on this issue as well as Deputy Munster.

Deputy Michael Harty: My question to the Tánaiste relates to the funding of the health service, in particular to the programme for Government and the funding of voluntary organisations. As the Tánaiste is aware, earlier this week Rehab issued a statement that it may have to

terminate its contracts of care with the HSE because of inadequate Government funding, as its service level agreement requires it to give one year's notice. The issue arises because section 39 organisations such as Rehab must comply with increased regulation, standards and demand for their services, yet there is no adequate Government funding to respond to the increased demands. That is an issue that faces many section 39 organisations, not just Rehab.

An independent review group reported recently on the services supplied by section 39 organisations and it made two recommendations. The first is to move to multi-annual funding so that they can plan their services in a more meaningful manner. The second is that there needs to be a meaningful review of the funding of section 39 organisations. Could the Tánaiste tell me when the recommendations will be acted upon?

The Tánaiste: I acknowledge the important services and the commitment of staff to people with disabilities and their families provided by Rehab, one of the many disability service providers. The Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, held a joint meeting yesterday with Rehab and the HSE, both of which have committed to working together intensively over the next week with a view to making substantive progress in reaching a solution to the issues Deputy Harty outlined. It is welcome that Rehab will now not issue a notice of termination today, pending the intensive work. Our collective aim is to ensure service continuity for service users and their families.

I am familiar with section 39 organisations in my constituency that do fantastic work, for example, Marymount hospice, among others, and the consequent pressures. On the broader issue of the challenges facing section 39 organisations, following engagement through the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, and subject to a verification process currently under way, Rehab is one of 50 section 39 organisations that is expected to receive some funding to commence pay restoration for its staff in the near future. I do not have an exact date.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Cullinane was not here at the outset when we got unanimous approval in the House for my suggestion that we would focus on a question about promised legislation or the programme for Government. I know Deputy Cullinane will comply as well.

Deputy David Cullinane: I always do.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will see. We will judge Deputy Cullinane after he has spoken.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Deputy Cullinane can beg our indulgence on this occasion.

Deputy David Cullinane: I wish to raise the Government's commitment in the programme for Government to higher levels of transparency and accountability in An Garda Síochána. Two issues arose in recent days that are of concern in that regard. The first is the view of the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, that full accountability and transparency and its ability to do its job and hold the Garda to account is "impossible" because of the actions of An Garda Síochána.

Yesterday, the Garda Commissioner, Drew Harris, announced an anti-corruption unit within An Garda Síochána that will essentially involve the Garda investigating the Garda. He acknowledged at the Committee of Public Accounts today that he did not even consult with GSOC on the establishment of the unit. That goes back to the bad days of gardaí investigating

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gardaí and not having the highest levels of transparency. Surely the Tánaiste is concerned that GSOC has put on the public record its concern about its ability to do its job independently to hold An Garda Síochána to account. In responding to those two questions could the Tánaiste say why it is the case that the Garda Commissioner would set up such an anti-criminal unit in An Garda Síochána and not consult with GSOC on it?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy asked a number of questions. I have long responses I could read to him but it is probably more appropriate to put those questions to the Minister for Justice and Equality so that he can answer them comprehensively. The chair of GSOC did raise issues in the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality in recent days that require a comprehensive response, and the responses are there.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I wish to ask a question that I have asked countless times in this Chamber. It relates to the cannabis access programme. I hope the Tánaiste can give a definitive date for the commencement of the programme because I am contacted on a weekly basis about it by parents and patients who need access to medicinal cannabis for their children or themselves. People have been waiting for the programme to commence for the past two and a half years. Could the Tánaiste give a definitive date for the commencement of the cannabis access programme?

The Tánaiste: I acknowledge that Deputy Gino Kenny has become a go-to person in the House on this issue for many individuals and families who are looking for answers. I spoke to the Minister about this many times. He wants to conclude this issue and provide clarity once and for all. A considerable amount of necessary work has been done to get us to this point. I do not have an exact date but I will try to get a more accurate timeline for the Deputy because this issue has been ongoing for some time and must be brought to a conclusion.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There has been a vast improvement. For the end of year report marks between six and nine will be allocated. Due to data protection issues I cannot give the marks. It is important to note that we dealt with the questions within time and everybody got an opportunity. In future, the Ceann Comhairle will want the same approach. We will focus on the purpose of the business at hand, namely, Questions on Promised Legislation.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Well done to the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: Well done on his leniency.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That is the kiss of death.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputies have not seen my other side.

Road Traffic (All Terrain Vehicle and Scrambler Motor-cycle) (Amendment) Bill 2019: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We must now deal with a postponed division relating to the Road Traffic (All Terrain Vehicle and Scrambler Motor-cycle) (Amendment) Bill 2019, taken on Wednesday, 8 May. On the question, “That the Bill be now read a Second Time”, a division was claimed and, in accordance with Standing Order 70(2), that division must be taken now.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 65; Níl, 41; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Breen, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	
<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	
<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	
<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Deasy, John.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Lisa.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Halligan, John.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Neville, Tom.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Rock, Noel.</i>	

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<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>	
<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>		
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>		
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>		
<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>		
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>		
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>		
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>		
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>		
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>		
<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>		
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies John Curran and John Lahart; Níl, Deputies Seán Kyne and Tony McLoughlin.

Question declared carried.

Sitting suspended at 1.25 p.m. and resumed at 2.05 p.m.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputies Fergus O'Dowd, Declan Breathnach and Thomas Byrne - to address the recent drug-related violence in Drogheda and the allocation of additional Garda resources in the town; (2) Deputy Robert Troy - to address the capacity issues affecting Irish Rail; (3) Depu-

ties Mary Butler and David Cullinane - to address issues relating to the mortuary at University Hospital Waterford; (4) Deputy Seán Crowe - to discuss the increased number of attacks on taxi drivers; (5) Deputy Sean Fleming - to discuss the implications of GDPR regulations regarding the taking of pictures and videos at family-centred events; (6) Deputies Niamh Smyth and John Lahart - to address the crisis in RehabCare; (7) Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin - to address the requirement for funding for a second bridge in Newbridge, County Kildare; and (8) Deputy Joan Collins - to discuss the by-laws relating to horse drawn vehicles.

The matters raised by Deputies O'Dowd, Breathnach and Thomas Byrne, Crowe, Joan Collins and O'Loughlin have been selected for discussion.

National Broadband Plan: Statements

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I will share my time with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney.

Before speaking to the substance of the matter, I take this opportunity to thank my predecessors and, in particular, Deputy Naughten, who put great effort into developing the national broadband plan, NBP. I also thank my officials who have worked tirelessly over a long period. They have done the State a great service, regardless of what one believes about the decision we are taking. A massive effort has gone into teasing this matter out and putting us in a position to make this decision.

I make no apology for stating that we have made a very important decision. In every office I have held as a Minister in recent years I have seen the powerful transformation that digital technology is delivering in business, enterprise, education and every walk of life. The reality for rural Ireland is that 1.1 million people would be left behind if we did not make this commitment to intervention by the State to deliver this technology. We would be cutting them off. Worse, rural Ireland would be hollowed out as opportunities go elsewhere. I cannot countenance that, and that has been the motivation of the Government in making this decision. Since we decided to sell off Telecom Éireann the reality is that we have depended exclusively on the commercial sector to decide the state of our telecommunications network. That has worked very well for 75% of our population. That 75% will have access to a largely fibre-based system within the next five years. The process has worked very efficiently. However, from the State point of view, it is clear what has happened. The State has not intervened apart from the €400 million investment in metropolitan area networks, MANs, which was an important decision. There has been no other investment in telecommunications. The contrast is there for all to see. The investment the State has made in telecommunications has been that €400 million, compared to €10 billion in water and €40 billion on roads. Between 1985 and 1996, some €2 billion was invested by the State in telecommunication infrastructure in just one decade. The reliance on the private sector has, unfortunately, left almost a quarter of our population behind in terms of access to the sort of broadband service that is now being universally adopted by the European Union as the standard we have to reach. It is important that we make this decision.

There has been considerable questioning as to why we chose a model that involves subsidisation and not ownership. The reason is that we have been very strongly advised that the best and most cost-effective way of dealing with this is to use the existing infrastructure, including

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the MANs network, as the base, and the existing Eircom and ESB lines and poles as a platform from which to roll out 146,000 km of fibre. We are piggybacking on that existing infrastructure, which keeps down the cost. By leaving it as something that will be owned and managed by the successful bidder, we ensure that continuous investment occurs so that in 25 years or 35 years a system simply consisting of fibre on rented poles that requires substantial reinvestment is not handed back to the State. This ensures that we will have a stand-alone service, standing on its own two feet and delivering a high-quality service to 1.1 million people in the country.

There has been much comment on the sceptical scrutiny of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. As I have said, that is exactly what that the Department is there to do. Any healthy system has sceptical scrutiny within government, and, at the end of the day, politicians and governments must make decisions. I assure the House, and I will be happy to repeat this next week before the committee, that every one of those concerns has been carefully scrutinised. We looked at all the costs and all of the possible alternatives, which amounted to 12 or 14 alternatives all together. We looked at how best to manage risk and worked out a way to do it. We ensured that the cost is spread over a significant period. We carried out the detailed scrutiny and due diligence necessary when only one bidder was left in the process. We have ensured that the State is protected by clawbacks, rigorous performance clauses and governance requirements, which will ensure that this company will deliver in the State in a way which protects the taxpayer.

There has been criticism, too, of the benefit to cost ratio, and that the ratio is relatively low, at 1:3. The reality is that this is based on a very conservative assessment of what can be included as potential benefits. It cannot look at the future potential that e-health, e-government services, digital learning, the use of the cloud or an increase in the uptake of remote working. None of those can be taken into account in this. Those reasons, not taken into account, have provided much of the impetus for committing to providing high-speed broadband. I also assure the House that the only cheaper alternative to doing this is to leave some of our people in rural Ireland behind. That is something that the Government is not willing to countenance.

I strongly recommend this proposal to the House as being the best way of delivering equality of opportunity for 1.1 million people in rural Ireland. I also assure the House that no other capital projects will be postponed, delayed or in any way affected by the decision the Government has taken. Part of that decision is that this will be funded from future revenues.

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Canney): I am proud to talk about the major investment decision we have taken this week. As chairman of the Atlantic economic corridor task force, I am very proud to be able to go to its next meeting to tell members that in the nine counties, from Donegal to Kerry, we are going to invest a sum of €938 million. We are going to empower 238,000 premises and homes along the Atlantic economic corridor route. The Atlantic economic corridor has been set up as a basis for transforming our economy so that there is balanced development across this country. We have been working over the past number of years on the basis that we need to provide new infrastructure. One of the main infrastructure items we require is connectivity and telecommunications. We have been left devoid of this for a long time, starved of opportunity, and now is the time to release people from this. We will release 1.1 million homes, 56,000 farms, 44,000 businesses and 630 primary schools to ensure they can join the digital age.

I am very proud that we have made this decision. It has been made because we want to

make sure that Ireland can be the leader in the digitalisation of the world. We are here, and we can do it. We have the confidence to do it and the population to take on the challenge. Some €152 million is being invested in Galway, along with €151 million in Mayo. We are going to empower thousands of people to ensure that they can join the digital age. Our students cannot live at home at the moment, having instead to live in Galway, Athlone or Sligo because they cannot do their dissertations and projects due to a lack of access to broadband. Farmers cannot fulfil their obligations in terms of online payments because they do not have the infrastructure in their homes. We talk about the smart economy and smart farming, but if one does not have the tools to do it, one is lost.

I am a rural Deputy, and I am delighted that we are doing this on the basis that we cannot leave anyone behind. Everyone will be included. It has been accepted that fibre to the home is the only technology available that will guarantee a proper service to every house which is compatible with every urban area. It is important to remember that. I was canvassing for the local elections, and one of the main issues arising on the doorsteps in my constituency was the lack of broadband in large areas such as Clarinbridge, Headford, Tuam and Ballinakill. Many of these areas have been spoken about in this House over the past two to three years and the question of what the Government is doing about it has been asked. The day of reckoning has come. We are going to deliver it, and I am very proud that we are going to deliver it.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I ask the indulgence of the House in sharing my time with Deputy Cowen, our spokesperson on public expenditure. He is detained at another meeting, but should be here well before the conclusion. I ask that I be allowed to take five minutes and that the other five minutes be retained for him on his arrival.

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

Deputy Timmy Dooley: There is no difference between us in terms of the necessity to rapidly roll out high-speed broadband to those rural and semi-rural areas that have been promised it for the past seven years. It is imperative that we do that. I agree and recognise the impact of the digital divide on those communities. However, the announcement made in the past number of days is anything but a rapid roll-out. It is an absolute confirmation that there will be continuing delays. It is dressed up as a good news story to assist the Government's candidates in the local elections, but the reality is that it is an announcement of delay. What was expected to be delivered in a three-year period will now be delivered under this particular plan in seven to ten years. The Minister of State may believe it is good news and may be able to provide the figures to the people of Headford and other places. When the people there mine into the detail and it becomes apparent to them that they will not have broadband anytime soon, then they will react differently. A period of seven years to some families will see children go through school and college without access to high-speed broadband at home. Moreover, it will see an entire life cycle on their farms and in their businesses. This is not rapid roll-out.

The Minister has suggested that this is not electioneering, but it is electioneering of the worst kind. The Government produced a pack for each of us the day after the decision setting out the details for our constituencies, but this has been done before the contract is signed. My understanding is that the decision taken by the Government should have been taken when a contract was agreed. Will the Minister tell us whether the Government will again have to decide on the conclusion of negotiations around the contract? Will the process need another Government decision? Has the Government ceded some of its negotiating capacity by taking the decision the other day? Has the Government created a further legitimate expectation on the

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part of Granahan McCourt that will make it more difficult for the Minister to negotiate on behalf of the State as he reaches a conclusion to contract negotiations?

The reality is that in recent days the Minister and the Taoiseach as well as several other Ministers have sought to downplay the value of the asset. The Minister has done it again today. He has downplayed the value of the asset after 25 years, suggesting that it is only fibre strung across poles that the Government is renting from others. He has also suggested that the Government would not have invested in it otherwise. The contractor seems to see the value in it. The assertion put forward by the Minister is entirely disingenuous. The comments have centred around the value of the key infrastructure. Will the Minister confirm that the real value at the end of the intervention period is the monopoly access to a customer base that will be, by the Minister's projections, 400,000 or 80% of the 540,000 figure by the end of the contract period? These people will have no alternative but to use the infrastructure for which they will pay a monthly fee. It is the access to that customer base that will be the real value.

There is nothing to suggest that if the State owned the network, just as the ESB owns its network, it would not upgrade the infrastructure under the normal amortisation process that goes on in all companies. Of course that is the case, and of course those responsible would do that. There would be plenty of money to upgrade the infrastructure.

Let us go through in detail the document or memorandum provided by the Secretary General, Mr. Watt. He asserts that Granahan McCourt will have all its money back after year eight of the 25-year period. The company will go on to gain additional resources and revenues for the following 17 or 18 years and it will own the network at the end. Of course the company will be writing down some of its profits against upgrading the network, as the State would have done had it operated under a commercial semi-State mandate.

From every particular aspect and every way we look at this project it is not fit for purpose and does not meet the objective we all signed up to and want to see realised, which is rapid roll-out of high-speed broadband. With the greatest of respect, there is nothing rapid in a period of seven to ten years. It is bad value for money for the State. There will be no ownership at the end of the period. All in all, it is a rather bad deal.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to address the issue. There is no doubt about whether rural broadband is needed. I represent a rural constituency and I see the urgency of it. We have been banging this drum for several years since 2012 and especially since I took over this brief three years ago. We are all in agreement in that sense. The issue is whether the taxpayer is getting value for money, whether the State will have ownership of the infrastructure, and whether it would have been given full transparency.

Some light was shone on these matters yesterday. The document released yesterday by the Department outlined how flawed the procurement process has been from the beginning and why the Government must have a plan B, something I have called for many times. The Government has been told repeatedly by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform that this project, under the current model, is doomed. The Government has completely dismissed the evidence-based advice from high-ranking senior civil servants in that Department. The Fine Gael Government is acting in a completely reckless way and is leaving the taxpayer open to unprecedented financial risk while major question marks remain over the credibility of the private operator to deliver the project. This is nothing short of being fiscally irresponsible.

This comes only a short time after the revelations around the national children's hospital and the waste of €500 million on water meters that are not now being used. Some of those meters are being pulled up out of the ground. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has warned the Government about its major concerns in respect of the credibility of the cost-benefit analysis of the national broadband plan, under which the taxpayer is putting in almost €2 billion or €1.95 billion up to 2026. In fact, Mr. Robert Watt, the most senior person and the Secretary General of that Department, went so far as to say that the vast majority of the risk of this project would be retained by the State, that is, the taxpayer, while the private operator is insulated from risk since the company is putting up a fraction of the equity and will recoup its full investment by 2028. In reality, the taxpayer is putting up the bulk of the money but it will not own one metre of cable or one pole at the end of the project, by which time we will have a valuable network in place. The private operator will get the full benefits of the profit and will pick up a nice network. It will have landed into the company's hands.

Is it any wonder the Department has called so clearly for this to be stopped? Mr. Brendan Ellison, a principal officer in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, has strongly recommended that this plan does not go ahead on the grounds that it does not reflect value for money. In fact, both Mr. Ellison and Mr. Watt have called for the cancellation of the procurement process.

As far back as 2012, Sinn Féin argued that we should proceed with a model of ownership based on the ESB network. There can be no doubt about what the Department has said. I have before me a document from 2018 in which the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment sets out clearly that the most likely way of achieving the results needed in terms of the Government objective of providing high-speed broadband would be to mandate an existing or new semi-State or State agency to build high-speed broadband. The 2019 contingency plan states that the creation of a dedicated broadband agency in State control would most likely result in advancing Government ambitions of providing high-speed broadband. This year, Mr. Robert Watt went further. He said that the alternative course of action should be pursued and that the procurement process should be cancelled. That is what he said.

We have the infrastructure to do it a different way. I have been constantly highlighting the point in the Chamber and outside during the past three years. The State-owned metropolitan area networks, MANs, infrastructure covers 94 regional towns and the backhaul system criss-crosses the State. The Government has completely ignored the possibility of using this.

It is interesting to note that the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform have proposed that in the event of the procurement process collapsing, we should not retender to the private market but move instead to an alternative State ownership model. In 2019, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment contingency planning report concluded that the best model to proceed with to deliver high-speed broadband to every home in Ireland would be the State model. Under that process a mandate would be given to an existing or new semi-State or State agency to build the network and provide the service. The Department also estimated that the capital and operating costs would be similar to that of the current contract. Furthermore, both reports argue that a new broadband State agency to deliver the service would comply with state aid rules. That is something the Minister has turned his face against. He has told us that it would not, but our research has told us differently. The Department is agreeing with what I have been saying about this. Mr. Brendan Ellison in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has gone further and called for the immediate cancellation of the current process in

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order for an alternative State-owned model to proceed within the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. The Minister needs to explain comprehensively to the House why the Government has chosen not to consider this model of ownership as an alternative, given that both the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment have pushed this as a viable and affordable alternative.

Sinn Féin is of the view that it is essential for the State to retain control of this large project and vital infrastructure. This is no tiddlywinks project. It is a major project. The Minister outlined the problems with the privatisation of Telecom Éireann in 1999 by Fianna Fáil and the difficulties that caused for us, and we can all see that. Here we go again with another major telecommunications infrastructure project. Mr. Ellison suggested that there is a high risk that the private operator may not even have the capacity to deliver the project. Rural Ireland needs to know whether this plan is even feasible. These memorandums from the Department suggest that the plan is already doomed. In the contract, the State has the opportunity in year 4 and year 6 to either halt or take back control of the project in the event of the private operator not being able to deliver. I have heard the Minister trumpet this but by that stage, the taxpayer, after four years, has put in €1.2 billion. After six years, the taxpayer has put in €1.95 billion. That is what it states in the documents. The taxpayer is taking all the risk. How much will Granahan McCourt have put in by then? Is it damn all? That is what I believe it will have put in by year 6. One has to ask why the taxpayer is front-loading the project and taking all the risk.

How much is the private operator putting in? By 2026, the taxpayer will have contributed €2.2 billion to this project. We were made aware yesterday that the private company will have all its money back by 2028. The taxpayer is essentially bankrolling the project to the tune of €3 billion and in eight years' time, when it has made its money back, this company can just flip the project, sell it on for a profit and abandon rural Ireland. We have been asked to put much in and the documents yesterday clearly indicated that the private operator has been asked to contribute far less than the taxpayer.

Will rural Ireland be left stranded with no control, and with this House having no control, despite having put in €3 billion and being left at the mercy of one private monopoly? The whole network could be stripped of assets as we have seen in the past, or parts of it could be obsolete. What about the standard connection fee of €100? Much has been made of this. I learned in the briefing with departmental officials yesterday that some households in rural areas will have to pay several thousand, or even tens of thousands for hard-to-reach households, as a connection fee. That issue has been glossed over and needs to be addressed. The Minister is asking the taxpayer and householders to support this project when we still do not know what the private operator is contributing. Every key figure relating to this deal was redacted in the documents that we received yesterday.

The Government is hiding behind commercial sensitivity when there is only one bidder left for a once-off deal. It does not make sense. The fact is that the Minister has agreed to go ahead with it. The figure was agreed with Granahan McCourt months ago. The Minister should now clear up whether the State or the private operator will invest the bulk of the money. It jumps out off the pages of yesterday's documents that the taxpayer will invest more. Could it be the case that the private investor is putting in damn all in the crucial first six years? There are another six or seven months, according to yesterday's information, until the contract will be signed. We said back in 2012 and again last October or November, when the pause button was pressed on this, that there was an opportunity to stop and look at this project. There is no doubt that we all

want it. I have not heard anybody say that we should not go ahead with it. There is an opportunity during these extra seven months to test this matter. It should be tested before the Committee of Public Accounts and the Joint Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment. We need another plan. Is this project fatally flawed? Are there alternatives such as suggested by officials in the Minister's Department? We now know from the contingency documents produced by the Departments that there are viable options. These options include State ownership. We need to tease these out and come up with the best one for rural Ireland to deliver broadband where it is badly needed.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I am sharing two minutes with Deputy Breathnach. The question of rural broadband is not about whether or not we should deliver it. Everyone agrees that we should have comprehensive broadband for everyone in this country. Everyone wants the benefits for regional employment, e-health services and new opportunities to access education. Labour wants equality of access to high-speed broadband across the country. Access to the Internet is now essential for social inclusion as well as for economic opportunities. Our European manifesto seeks the formal recognition of digital rights. In our view, everyone should have a legal right to access to the Internet. As part of digital rights, everyone should also have legal protection of their personal privacy online and protection from online bullying and harassment.

Labour has a very different vision of how access to the Internet should be achieved, in a way that is better and safer for the Irish people. This week's announcements can only be understood as being political. They were clearly designed to influence the local and European elections in two weeks' time. The Government is proposing to spend €3 billion of the people's money on a private monopoly which will own the network forever. The proposed contract will last for 25 years. What happens then? The private monopoly will then be in a strategic position to charge significantly more. We also understand that the current private venture capital company involved in the Government's plan will be able to sell its shares in nine years' time, which means that the Government has no idea who will ultimately own this network. The proposed contract will only allow the Minister to block the sale of shares in the first nine years.

We know the sole bidder in the national broadband plan is a venture capital firm, not a telecommunications company. It seems obvious that it sought, and was given, the option of selling Ireland's rural broadband network at some point in the future. Our biggest concern comes down to the question of ownership of the national broadband network. In the current plan, it is possible that vulture funds could buy up the body to be called National Broadband Ireland to squeeze more money out of the quarter of our people who will be reliant on it. It would be an entirely different matter if the public was to own the network rather than a private monopoly, even if the final cost needs to be €3 billion. There is no reason why we cannot set up a national broadband company as a commercial semi-State company. That is how we delivered electrification and the national gas network. Fianna Fáil should never have privatised the national telecommunications network because the current situation shows that the public keeps on paying more for that grievous mistake. In this case, Eir has positioned itself as the gatekeeper for broadband outside of the towns. Fine Gael's National Broadband Ireland will have to pay Eir for the use of its ducts and poles. If we had kept telecommunications in public ownership, we would not face hundreds of millions of additional costs as part of rolling out rural broadband.

We need to be clearer with people about the scale of this project's costs. Some €3 billion is an extremely large sum of money. It was only a few years ago that we were desperately trying to find a few million here or there to protect vital health services and other public services from the 2008 economic collapse. If we divide the €3 billion over every household in Ireland,

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it represents a cost of more than €1,750 for each family or individual householder. We will recoup some of that cost through VAT and other taxation, but we could have reduced the cost and recouped more if we cut out the profit-making part of the project. A significant portion of the cost of this project is to give the venture capitalists a large profit on their investment. The Secretary General of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has described the level of profit to the investors as “very high” for the level of risk they are taking with this investment.

What exactly are these venture capitalists bringing to the project that could not be provided by a publicly-owned broadband company? It is hardly expertise, as they have only 20 or 30 employees engaged on this project at present. They are yet to employ the bulk of the projected 265 staff for National Broadband Ireland. We do not need them for access to money. We rescued the public finances in order that Ireland can borrow once again on the international market and interest rates are at an all-time low. Is there something the Government has not told us about this project being on or off the State’s balance sheet? If the private investor is paying significantly less than 50% of the cost, as seems to be the case from the figures we have received, and the State is paying more than 50%, I understand that the project will be on the State books regardless of who owns the network at the end.

Why on Earth will the people not own the network after the 25 year contract? Almost all previous public-private contracts involved the public ownership of the asset at the end of the period. That is the norm. Why is this project different? According to the papers released yesterday, this was a Fine Gael Government decision taken in July 2016. That date is significant. Labour left Government on 6 May 2016. At that point, the Government had made no decision on the future ownership of the broadband network. A few weeks later, the new Fine Gael Government made the most unusual decision that, rather than the network reverting to the State after 25 years, it should be owned entirely by the minority investor. Every PPP we contracted ended with the project, be it a road, a school, or a health centre, being owned by the public. Why was this policy not applied to the broadband network? That is the nub of the issue.

Not only has the estimated cost of the project gone up even as the number of homes to be served has gone down but it is incredible for the public to pay so much money and still not own the network. It is not just the Labour Party saying this represents poor value for money. Senior officials in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform have said so. We established that Department to safeguard the public’s money and we thought that we had moved into an area of greater political responsibility with the public’s money. Instead, what we have seen in recent weeks is not one but three major cost overruns in capital spending under Fine Gael. The national children’s hospital will be the most expensive in the world. The Dublin metro may now cost €4-5 billion, according to the Taoiseach and €3 billion is to be given to a profit-making private monopoly for a broadband network that the public will never own.

The Labour Party wants to see high-speed rural broadband delivered as soon as possible, and we are committed to covering the necessary cost as long as the network remains in public ownership. We must have public ownership so that we control costs more effectively in future years. In 25 years, access to broadband will be even more essential than it is now. People will be routinely accessing healthcare advice and consultations from their homes, and conducting business from their homes and farms using broadband and a private monopoly will own the network. Potentially, vulture funds will own the network. Fine Gael has failed to explain what added value a venture capitalist brings to this whole consortium at a time where the State can easily borrow the money.

When we delivered rural electrification, it was through a public enterprise that has served this country well and faithfully for generations, as a quality employer and as a profitable company that paid €1.5 billion in dividends to the State following the 2008 crash. Modelled on rural electrification, we should have an ESB-style national broadband company to retain control over prices into perpetuity and to eliminate the possibility of ruthless investors taking over rural broadband. Twenty-five years might seem like a long time, but learning the lessons from 2008, which is now 11 years ago, it should be clear that there are too many risks involved in letting a private monopoly run our broadband network. The public was rightly determined, as was the Labour Party, that Irish Water should never be privatised. Why does Fine Gael think that the public would accept that a utility as important as broadband would be privatised from the outset?

Deputy Declan Breathnach: The delivery of modern instant communication, be it mobile phone coverage or high-speed broadband, is a necessity in this day and age, not a luxury as some people seem to think, particularly for people in the countryside. Whether for a farmer, for a schoolchild, for someone who does not want to have to commute to the city, or for a rural school, it is essential. The announcement yesterday reminded me of the old colloquialism about buying a pig in a poke. It is a phrase used around the world, or it may be called a cat in a bag, to describe looking at the face of the object, not the quality of what is in the bag. When we hear the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform say that it is not credible, that it is concerned about the level of risk, and that clarity is needed, I have no doubt that we will be back here within three weeks of the European and local elections, still procrastinating on this issue. I agree with many of my colleagues that this is an election stunt to pacify or attempt to pacify rural communities in particular.

Where will we get the €1.4 billion to bring us up to the €3 billion when we have allocated only €1.6 billion in the national development plan? The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform can say what he likes about not cutting projects but the Department and others have been saying that Dundalk Institute of Technology will lose its €19 million. That worries and concerns me greatly. We all want to see rural broadband delivered to every house. Anyone from across the House looking at a map of my county can see the areas not covered, and we are living on the east coast.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This Government is completely incapable of delivering major infrastructural projects of huge importance to the people, our economy and society. That is the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the shambles that continues to unfold around rural broadband. For our part, People Before Profit from the beginning opposed the model for delivering this vitally important project which we all want to see happen and which rural Ireland desperately needs. We said all along that the privatised, outsourced, tendering out model simply could not deliver the infrastructure that we need, that it would cost us a fortune and land us in the sort of mess we are in now. We have been thoroughly vindicated in that. The inability of the State to deliver vital infrastructure goes back further, but the common thread in our failure in this regard is privatisation, going right back to Fianna Fáil's disastrous decision to privatise Bord Telecom, the asset stripping of that company by mostly Irish vulture capitalists, which denuded us and the State of its capacity to deliver vital communications infrastructure. If the left-wing concern and criticism of this process was not taken seriously, and it rarely is, it seems today that those concerns have been absolutely vindicated by the letter from Robert Watt outlining his concerns about this project where effectively a single consortium in what is supposed to be a competitive process has the State over a barrel. When the most senior civil servant in the

area of public expenditure says we should not go ahead with this, that we cannot trust that the tenderer has the interest in carrying it through, and that there is a massive risk that it will not be delivered, it is quite astonishing that the Government perseveres. The only explanation for this announcement is that it is a pre-election stunt to make people in rural Ireland, who are rightly desperate to have infrastructure and services, believe that this Government is championing their interests. It is deeply ironic that the Government would present itself as the champion of rural Ireland given the way it has denuded rural Ireland of post offices and public transport services. It cannot be trusted to deliver broadband.

There are many other concerns about this, not just those that Robert Watt outlines. Is there, for example, the potential for legal action to be taken by other bidders in the market against the way this is proceeding? What about the cases that are pending against Actavo and Denis O'Brien and so on in respect of Siteserv? There are many serious questions about the capacity of this consortium, one which, by the way, bears absolutely no relationship, apart from the presence of Granahan McCourt, to the original consortium that put forward the bid. This process is fatally flawed. We should stop it now. We have said this several times already. What we need is for rural broadband to be delivered directly via a State company, either through the ESB or through a State telecommunications company. As Deputy Bríd Smith has said, if we had relied on this model to deliver rural electrification, we would still be operating by candlelight. We should not take that risk with something as important as this. We must break from the privatisation, outsourcing, for-profit model. The State must deliver this vital infrastructure directly and own it at the end of the process.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to clarify what this debate is about and what it is not about. It is not about making an argument against providing rural areas with broadband. Broadband is essential and it is scandalous that people have had to wait so long for what is now vital communications technology. The question we are debating is why the Government is striking such a rotten deal for the taxpayer and such a good deal for private companies. Yesterday we asked why it is not possible for the State to invest in and provide this service. The Minister acted as if these companies were doing the Irish population a really big favour and intimated that the State is not capable of doing this.

These companies will have the potential to price gouge in the future. The media coverage of this issue makes it clear that the bidder will have recouped by 2028 all of the cash it invested. The money that it invested will have to be recouped when it is operating the network. How will it do that? It will sell off the network to others who will price gouge people in rural areas in the future.

If one looks back at Eircom and Telecom Éireann, one sees a common thread. The Minister acted yesterday as if we got a great deal out of the privatisation of Telecom Éireann. I am very proud to say that in 1999, the only Deputy in this Dáil who stood up and spoke against that deal was Mr. Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party. I looked back at the transcript of a debate, during which former Deputy Higgins said:

It is a sad reflection that I am the only Deputy who stands in this Dáil in opposition to what will turn out to be a robbery of a vital State asset. The Minister and the Government are masterminding this robbery.

Now we are seeing a repetition of that. Another common thread is the involvement of companies connected with Mr. Denis O'Brien, including Actavo, as major investors. We warned

in 1999 that privatisation would lead to a terrible underinvestment in infrastructure, and here we are now. We cannot provide a broadband service to people in rural areas for another seven years, potentially, because of underinvestment in this infrastructure over the years.

The ICTU report entitled *Learning from the Eircom Debacle* is so instructive. It outlines exactly what happened after Telecom Éireann was asset stripped in a deal done by Fianna Fáil, which cannot be relied upon today to provide this service either. In May 2001, the asset stripping commenced. In September 2001 the Government announced that it would fund 90% of any investment by the private sector in telecoms infrastructure. In November 2001, Eircom was bought by Valentia and was floated on the Stock Exchange. More debt was loaded onto its balance sheet and the mast network was sold off. In 2010, Eircom was sold to a state-owned company, Singapore Technologies. As the ICTU report points out, Eircom returned to state ownership, but unfortunately it was the state of Singapore. That is the reality of what happened. That company could have been owned by the State and could have been very profitable. It could have generated significant revenue and provided services at a very reasonable cost to ordinary consumers. Instead, vultures, millionaires and billionaires were allowed to benefit. The role of the Labour Party in this has not been exemplary, despite what Deputy Jan O'Sullivan said earlier. Mr. Dick Spring was appointed to the privatised Eircom board. Deputy Eamon Ryan said it was wonderful as well and some trade union leaders connected with the Labour Party were also big backers of privatisation, which is shameful.

What people in rural Ireland want is a broadband service, but this Government's ideological affinity with full-blown neoliberal capitalism underpins its belief that nothing can be provided directly by the State. Obviously housing cannot be provided thus and has been handed over, in the main, to private developers and landlords. Housing assistance payment is being paid to landlords and the State will not build public housing. Hence we have the suffering and misery that is taking place today. The same thing is being done with broadband. A tiny number of people are being enriched at the expense of the State. This deal has to stop but I have no faith that Fianna Fáil will stop it. That party needs to outline its position clearly. Is this an issue over which it will pull out of government?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá mé ag roinnt mo chuid ama le mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Broughan.

I have only six minutes so I will get straight to the point. I ask for sense to prevail here. I do not think the Minister will listen to me but it is important, for the sake of the people who elected me and for the public record, that I ask for sense to prevail. The Minister and his Government are being disingenuous on every level in trying to frame this in the context of saving rural communities. I represent the Galway West constituency which includes three Aran islands, Inishbofin, all of Connemara, rural areas of south Mayo, along with Galway city. I am more than familiar with rural constituencies. I have been knocking on doors and can assure the Minister that broadband is not the issue that is coming up, although I acknowledge that I have received many representations relating to difficulties with broadband. What is coming up is that rural areas have been left behind by successive governments. That is why I was elected along with several other like-minded Deputies. We said that we would stand up in the Dáil on behalf of rural communities and argue for regional balance. Let us stop the *cur i gcéill* and the pretence. I am here speaking with a strong, loud voice on behalf of my rural constituency. Yesterday I raised the issue of the absence of physiotherapy services in Connemara and the lack of social workers on the ground. Only two or three weeks ago there was a protest in Connemara about the lack of roads. Rural areas have been left behind. Kilmaine, Shrulle and south Mayo, along

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with the islands are struggling. Over the past three years we have tried to hold the Government to account and to roll out a policy for rural areas to provide regional balance.

Various telecommunications providers have appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts. I have read a considerable amount of documentation on this issue, apart from the documentation that was published yesterday. Some of the documentation from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform dates from 1 April, which is April Fool's Day. That would be funny were it not so serious. On 1 April, the Department strongly recommended against this plan on grounds of "cost, affordability, value for money and risk". That is repeated throughout all of the other documents. In May, the Department went into detail on the questions of cost and affordability, the impact on the national development plan and on projects forgone as a result. In the context of value for money it refers to "uncertain benefits" and points to "unprecedented risk" for the Exchequer. It calls into question compatibility with the spatial objectives of Project Ireland 2040. On the cost-benefit analysis, which comes up repeatedly at meetings of the Committee of Public Accounts, the Department argues that it is simply "not credible". The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is telling us that the cost-benefit analysis is not credible. This is against the background of a report by Mr. Peter Smyth which told us that the meetings between the former Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten, and Mr. McCourt gave "cause for concern".

I ask again for sense to prevail. There are alternatives. We need broadband in rural areas in a reasonable time and at a reasonable cost. There are other ways of doing this. The Department itself has pointed out other ways. Údarás na Gaeltachta is in the process of rolling out gteic centres on the ground and is crying out for money. In stark contrast to Enterprise Ireland and the IDA, Údarás na Gaeltachta has had its budget significantly reduced. I ask the Government to stop the spin. I thought that we had got rid of the spin unit, but clearly the Government has internalised the spin and actually believes it, which is even more frightening than the €3 billion cost of rolling out broadband to areas where the take-up will be very low. We know this from our discussions on the report on the metropolitan area networks, MANs, at the Committee of Public Accounts. The record of the Government in this regard is disgraceful. A review of MANs was commissioned and a report produced. Has the Minister or the Minister of State read that report? Have they read the Analysis Mason report? Is the Minister aware that the Department did not publish the report until just before the Committee of Public Accounts meeting? There was a significant drop in prices on the very day that the aforementioned committee extracted this report. That is the Government's history in relation to these projects. The Minister spoke about trust and the rural-urban divide, but this Government has stood over and increased the rural-urban divide and intensified it. The Government produced a national development plan which has sustainability written through it, but it is doing the complete opposite.

I ask the Minister to go back and to look at Údarás na Gaeltachta and at the alternatives for delivering this broadband. Ba chóir dó deireadh a chur leis an gcur i gcéill. Tá daoine na tíre i bhfad níos meabhraí ná mar atá an Rialtas. Ba chóir ceist a chur ar dhaoine sna ceantair tuaithe: cad atá ag teastáil uathu? Tá seirbhís shláinte, seirbhísí tithíochta, córas iompair taistil agus leathanbhanda ar leibhéal agus costas réasúnta ar bharr liosta na rudaí atá ag teastáil. Sin iad na rudaí atá ag teastáil seachas an cur i gcéill agus na bréaga.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: All citizens of our republic, whatever their location, should have access to the same level of public services, and that includes broadband facilities. As we heard earlier, it is clear that if the Fianna Fáil Government under Bertie Ahern and Mary Harney

had not privatised Eircom 20 years ago in 1999, a State-wide roll-out of Internet infrastructure would probably have been complete by now and reasonable speeds, at least, would be available. We have to remember that the national electricity grid was only completed around 1964, although the ESB was founded in 1929. Fianna Fáil with the strong support of the then Ministers, Mary Harney and Michael McDowell, and of Fine Gael got us into the current mess. Some 13 years after the Eircom debacle, the then Minister, Pat Rabbitte, launched a national broadband plan but, by 2017, Eir was able to leave 542,000 Irish homes and businesses without up-to-date telecommunications and broadband. From listening to earlier discussion, an equally conceivable plan might be to simply renationalise Eir and to take back the national infrastructure which this House should not have allocated to a private company 20 years ago.

We have also seen the further debacle of the resignation of Deputy Denis Naughten as Minister, which we discussed in this House last year. I strongly believe that on the basis of the circumstances surrounding the forced resignation of the Minister alone, we should not proceed with the Granahan McCourt consortium. In fact, it is outrageous that the Minister proposes that we should.

We learned today that the expected cost should we proceed is now €5 billion, with the implication that the State itself is committing at least 60% of this cost, although we do not know that as the Minister has not told us. We will be paying €400 million per annum all the way through the 2020s. This cost will rise year after year. The incredible result is that in 2028, or perhaps 2043, the Irish people whom we represent will not own a single pole or fibre optic line of that network.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's observations on the NBP, which we have all read, are truly shocking and unprecedented. The Minister referred to second level education yesterday but it is not a comparable situation. We were going to move on to second level at some stage. We should have moved on to it in the late 1940s, as England and Northern Ireland did, but we did not because of the influence of Fine Gael on government at that particular time.

Many of us have been very critical of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, its management meetings, and so on with regard to the national children's hospital, but the Secretary General, Mr. Watt, and his officials, whose job it is to critically evaluate all budgetary expenditure proposals, are now discharging their responsibilities and clearly recommending against proceeding with this plan, which they say totally lacks credibility. We were very critical of officials in the national children's hospital debates and how they missed the flashing warning signs. The Minister would not tell us about these signs because the Government was going to hold a general election last October and did not want to give us bad news about the children's hospital. The Department has stated: "We strongly recommend against approval of the appointment of the preferred bidder to the current NBP procurement process". It goes on to list all the grounds for this recommendation, including cost and affordability and the cost-benefit analysis.

Given his academic history, the Minister will know a good bit about cost-benefit analyses, as do many of us on this side. It is quite clear that the cost-benefit analysis does not add up. Why is he proceeding when this is the case? The officials outlined their "major concerns" about the cost-benefit analysis. They said it "is not credible and it is questionable whether it is consistent with the Public Spending Code". Is this decision legal? Is the Government acting legally in attempting to proceed with this half-baked proposal?

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Deputy Sean Fleming, whose past work I respect, outlined in an article in *The Irish Times* this morning - an article which I support - the reasons he, as Chairman of the Committee of Public Accounts, believes we should not proceed. He gives additional alternatives to the very good alternative which the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has proposed.

There is now a heavy responsibility on Deputy Brophy and all the other members of the Committee on Budgetary Oversight, including myself and Deputy Boyd Barrett, to ensure value for money in the final roll-out of broadband. Deputy Brophy must urgently call a meeting of the committee. As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will know, we are supposed to be responsible for future spending. The Parliamentary Budget Office should also immediately proceed to examine the details of this proposed contract.

I am one of those who believes there should be a separate Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. One of the few proposals on which I agreed with the previous Government was having a Minister for Finance and a Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, however, cannot stand over this and nor should he. He and the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment must come before the Committee on Budgetary Oversight and explain the situation to us. This process should immediately be halted and then done again differently in one of the ways which has been suggested from this side of the House.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I will share time with Deputy Eamon Ryan.

We have been told on several occasions that Fine Gael is the only party which can be trusted with the economy and fiscal prudence has been preached constantly. This makes it all the more astonishing that the Government is ignoring the quite robust advice of the Secretary General of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

I have listened very carefully to Fianna Fáil on this issue and I have not found anything to disagree with in what its Deputies have said, but this has to be a make or break moment. It is one thing for Fianna Fáil to talk about this issue, but what it does about it is quite another. That will be watched very closely. I do not play those political kinds of games. I rarely say that kind of thing about Fianna Fáil, but this is a significant issue.

The timing of this announcement is quite cynical. We knew there was only one bidder, which is one part of this very flawed process, and so it was not going to be a surprise who the preferred bidder was. That preferred bidder has now been announced but the reality is that a contract will have to be gone through in some considerable detail. There are significant issues in that respect. We will spend up to €3 billion and own nothing at the end of it and we will leave people in rural Ireland to fend for themselves in dealing with this particular entity.

We have seen an example of this when the same company, Granahan McCourt, was involved in a contract for MANs. Under this contract we were delivered the most expensive broadband in Europe. The Analysys Mason report was helpful from that point of view and there have been some changes recently, although we are not sure if they completely translate. We have seen what this forerunner did. The lack of transparency with respect to wholesale to retail sales is a serious issue because not only could this cost a State a fortune, but we will own nothing at the end of it and people in rural Ireland could have expensive broadband if the same circumstances that arose in respect of the MANs contracts occur again.

There is also the issue of National Broadband Ireland. We were told at the briefing yester-

day that there would be one nominee to the board, but we do not know to whom that person will be responsible. That has not been worked out yet. In the past some such nominees have been responsible to the company rather than to the State, even in cases where they have been public interest directors. We should also consider the contractors who are going to build this. We need to know more about KN Network Services and Kelly Comms Limited. We know something about Actavo Ireland Limited because it is the company formerly known as Siteserv. We need to know more about 4site and other subcontractors. We do not really know. We are told there are 1,500 contractors engaged by the subcontractors, but they would be the primary contractors.

People in rural Ireland, including in the parts of my constituency that are included in the intervention area, require broadband. I do not think I heard anybody in this Chamber say otherwise. The big objection is to spending €3 billion by giving it to a private company and owning nothing in the end. That could be very precarious in terms of the cost, take-up and delivery of broadband. The process was flawed throughout. The Smith report was a facade. We were astonished when we saw the results of that report, which looked into the issues prior to the resignation of the previous Minister. Nobody disputes that high-quality broadband is required but the way in which this is happening is just plain wrong. We will look back on this and ask who made the decision.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is the real difficulty here. We are faced with difficult choices. Everyone recognises the imperative of providing rural broadband. We need our young people to return to live in rural areas. They need to be able to work remotely. We need to create opportunity for new businesses. We need to make sure that all the benefits of this digital revolution are delivered everywhere in the State. Delaying, abandoning or not proceeding present massive difficulties in that regard. However, the process has been highly unsatisfactory to say the least. The fact that it has taken seven years to get to the end of the design phase is a failing. I have heard commentators say the European Union forced us to hive off the 300,000 more attractive customers from the original mapped area. I do not believe that. I believe it was a political decision at Government level to tell Eir to go ahead with that. My recollection of the debate is that it was clear that the Minister had effectively signed off on it. In doing so, he fundamentally undermined the process.

In effect, this process is creating a monopoly and turning it into a private monopoly. That is not just in terms of the national broadband Ireland company. It is also giving Eir an ongoing monopoly on the delivery of the service in the last mile provision and the backhaul, which is how the data is taken from these broadband connections and connected back to the Internet. I have concerns with all of that. The fact that this is being done two weeks before an election rightly raises questions about whether political timing rather than anything else is triggering this debate at this time. As I understand from the briefing we had yesterday, at least we have several months before any contract is signed. It is critical in those few months that we try to address concerns and reduce the downside risks to the State, which are very large.

On the last mile issue, from listening to the officials yesterday I understand they are still open and would still wish to see that the options are considered regarding how we get to the final house, which I believe would be very healthy. I have been saying for a year or two that I would like to see the use of ESB electricity poles and wrapping fibre around electricity wires as an effective option within this project. It would not undermine the process because the bidder would have the capability to negotiate with the ESB as well as Eir. The State needs to act, though. We need to give a clear and immediate signal to the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities to set up the pricing and other regulatory mechanisms that would have to be in place

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to be able to sign contracts in respect of the ESB delivering the last mile service rather than the Eir pole network. One of the mistakes the Government has made is not to look at the option of reducing it to a single network of poles delivering services to every house in the country. We do not need two. That is the big missed efficiency that has been the result of this process.

With regard to the backhaul network, the officials were saying yesterday that as a percentage of the overall cost of the scheme, it is relatively low. Success will be achieved here not by creating a private monopoly but by incentivising development of the backhaul network and using a variety of backhaul operators. Certainly the MANs should be there but it should go beyond that. I hope and believe there is still flexibility in the contract process to undo some of the damage from a badly handled political system. It is not easy. I have been there myself in the past, negotiating a broadband plan. We did it in two years while this has taken seven. We still have some months to improve what has been a flawed process. The Government should use that time well.

Deputy Barry Cowen: After the debacle of the national children's hospital, here we are discussing another capital project that has been mired in controversy from day one. What happened on Tuesday was yet another in a series of announcements on the rolling out of broadband in Ireland. The first such iteration was as far back as 2012 and that promised high-speed broadband to 100% of homes and businesses by 2020. In 2016, Fine Gael made yet another commitment to roll out broadband to every home and business within three to five years. Last year the national development plan was published and these commitments were yet again reiterated.

Again this week we have seen the latest announcement. The common thread is that the Minister and Taoiseach have been at the heart of all those announcements. However, no contract has been signed. Here we are in 2019 and not one metre of fibre optic cable has been rolled out. I have serious concerns, as does the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, with the risk and exposure the Irish taxpayer is being asked to take. We learned this morning in *The Irish Times* that, despite the commitment given by the Taoiseach some months ago when he said the Dáil would be involved in the decision, the full cost of rolling out broadband could be as much as €5 billion. Is this true? How much will the Granahan McCourt consortium be coughing up? Is it the case that it will have recouped the initial expense of the roll-out by 2028 as raised by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform? How much private equity is being provided and how much by way of debt is being put on the table? If the taxpayer is going to have to foot this bill, the Government needs to be upfront with the people on what exactly it is committing to. The Minister says he that he cannot divulge this information because it confidential and commercially sensitive. When there is only one bidder remaining, this argument does not stack up. Simply put, the Minister cannot divulge this information because it is not certain. It is not certain because there is no contract. There is no contract because the Government is not ready. The reason it announced this before it was ready is simple and obvious. It is as plain as the nose on my face: 24 May, election day.

At the end of it all, the State will own nothing. Presumably after 25 years the State will have to negotiate a new contract with the private consortium, whoever that may be. It appears that this infrastructure could be sold to anyone from anywhere and at any time. After 25 years, if the Government's take-up estimate is correct, the consortium will have a wholesale revenue stream of about 400,000 customers. We have no idea of the risks that may be ahead and nothing in this week's announcement has allayed my fears. This week we have seen the same old spin machine in full action. We are told that Fine Gael is doing this for rural Ireland and that it is the saviour of rural Ireland but this is nothing more than political guff. If Fine Gael was

serious about rural Ireland, it would have provided more than just eight houses in eight years in Offaly and would have established a transition fund to help the region I am from to deal with the debacle that is the loss of Bord na Móna and the peat briquette and harvesting business. If Fine Gael had the back of rural Ireland, it would have insisted that the Department of Education and Skills adhere to pupil-teacher ratios in small three-teacher schools and would have reinstated Midoc facilities considering it tells us it has a new GP contract that heralds the saviour for rural Ireland. This happened on our watch up to last year because of Brexit and, but for that, we would be well out of here. Fine Gael has failed rural Ireland and this week's announcement has in no way convinced me that it can deliver this plan on time.

If we speak about the deluge of documents released yesterday at 1.55 p.m., it emerged that over the life of the national development plan, an extra €1.5 billion will be required to pay for this plan. Yesterday, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform said that no projects will be impacted because of this decision. His Department has outlined the possible implications of spending an extra €1.5 billion on broadband. I could go through it but it is on the public record and involves the loss of 2,000 social housing units, the Tralee wastewater network, the Kilkenny regional water supply scheme, the Sligo western distributor road, the Killaloe bypass, the Dunkettle interchange, the Moycullen bypass, 18 primary schools serving 8,600 pupils, new ambulance bases and deployment points and nine to ten primary care centres. It also involves significant reductions in allocations from remaining programmes, including flood relief works, prisons etc. This is unprecedented. Given this advice from the Minister's own Department, the Minister insists that no capital project will be impacted. Who is he trying to cod? Clearly, there will be an impact. The Minister will pay for this out of the capital envelope outlined in the national development plan or he will raise taxes or he will pay for it out of current expenditure. Will we see less spending in mental health, education and housing? Will there be fewer resources for nurses, doctors and consultants? Will there be sufficient funds to pay for social welfare reforms?

The bottom line is that we will not get those answers in the limited time here today. I have asked that the Minister and the Secretary General come before the Committee on Budgetary Oversight. Then we may get to the root cause of this and get some idea or conception of what is contained here because at the moment, it is ludicrous that we could be told that one bidder remains and that the Government now has a preferred bidder. Is a split personality involved? It does not make any sense.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That completes the ten minutes allotted for statements. Each party or group has six minutes in total for questions and answers. It is a matter for each group or party. They can take three minutes and ask their questions and there will be three minutes for answers. The Minister will not get any extra time either.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Can the Minister tell us how much Granahan McCourt will invest as capital in the new broadband company?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The position regarding the investment of equity by Granahan McCourt is that it must make an initial investment, fund the working capital and may be called upon to invest additional equity in certain eventualities. In other words, it is taking all the risk in respect of how this project might unfold. As the Deputy is aware, many commentators have said that the take up might be much lower. That would obviously call on the company to put in additional equity. There will be initial equity - working capital equity - in the contract, which is confidential at the moment but nobody knows. The company is taking the risk regarding what

the full cost will be. The Deputy asked about the statement in *The Irish Times* that the cost over the 25 years of designing, building and operating would be €5 billion, excluding VAT. That is a true estimate at this stage of what is expected. The State has a capped amount, which is €2.6 billion if we take out VAT. Of that, close to €0.5 billion is contingency and will be only be drawn upon in very specific circumstances. The Deputy will see from Mark Griffin's letter that the State's contribution to the overall cost of design, build and operate will be less than 50%.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: If the overall cost is €5 billion, the State is contributing in or about €3 billion and the capacity of the company that will be established to borrow significantly against that and against the asset that will be the contract, it is fair to assume that when one takes in debt and equity, the equity being put in by Granahan McCourt is probably somewhere in the ballpark of €300 million to €400 million. Can the Minister confirm that?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I do not want to confirm anything ahead of the finalising of contracts. That is a process that we are undertaking. To deal with Deputy Cowen's point, from the start of this process the appointment of a preferred bidder has been a very important milestone and stage in this. It is not the case that because we are not ready to sign a contract, we are picking out a preferred bidder. A preferred bidder stage was always intended from the outset, and Members can see it in the documentation. We would then proceed to a finalisation of contracts, which will be a 1,500-page document.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Given that the Minister is neither denying nor confirming it, I take it that €300 million to €400 million is in the ballpark in respect of the equity that Granahan McCourt will contribute to this. My assumption is that thereafter, the rest will be by way of debt or syndicated debt. We are also conscious that the project will generate somewhere in the region of €1.5 billion to €2 billion over the life cycle of the contract. Will the Minister confirm that in respect of the information contained in the document from the Secretary General, Mr. Watt, all of the investment by Granahan McCourt will have been paid back to that company by year eight, that the company will go on to make significant profits over the remaining period of the intervention period and that, as I pointed out earlier, the very considerable benefit of the asset, namely, access to the 400,000 people who will receive the service, is the residual value that will reside with this contract?

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I am looking for more information. A lot of peculiar carry-on happened here over a long period. I do not know how many people remember the changing of the goal posts and Enet being involved and then pulling out. A major announcement was made in Ballinasloe that broadband would be put into Ballinasloe, Roscommon and Manorhamilton as part of an overall plan for broadband. After a few months, that was taken away. The Taoiseach told the Minister at the time, Deputy Naughten, and us that he had no confidence in him. Much has gone on behind the scenes. Given what has happened, does the Minister not think that rather than continue in the way we are going, it is time to have an inquiry into all that has happened in this debacle? We all want this broadband and we want it as quickly as possible. The way this has been handled along the way leaves serious questions to be answered.

Deputy Richard Bruton: First of all, it is not possible to predict how this company will recover equity and whether it will recover it in year one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten or 25. That depends on the success of this proposal. The company is taking on risk here. It is taking on risk with regard to the roll-out and take-up. Obviously, it is coming in here in the hope it will make a return on its investment but there is no way I can say when it will recover its equity.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Does the Minister accept what the Secretary General, Mr. Watt, is saying?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Obviously, it will depend on its success in managing the project. For example, if it fails to reach some of the roll-out, and some Deputies expressed scepticism about its capacity to deliver, it certainly will not get its equity because it will be paying penalties for failing to deliver. In response to Deputy Eugene Murphy, I will make myself available to the committee next to answer questions. I am happy to answer questions. I have gone through this as rigorously as I can. I have looked at 13 or 14 options and, although the Deputies from the People before Profit group are not here, that process included looking at buying back Eir, for example. There were no holds barred. The change in the make-up at every point had to go through a pre-qualification test and show that they were compliant with the pre-qualification test that applied to all applicants in the bidding process.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): I call Deputy Stanley who has six minutes, including for questions and answers.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Once Granahan McCourt was left as the only bidder, the process was flawed. The Deputy, having been a Minister for a long time, understands that and he has seen commercial activity going on over the years. The Cabinet decided to go ahead with this plan this week. It made a statement that it was committed to proceeding with it. Granahan McCourt has held nearly all the cards up to now. Since the Government made this decision, will the Minister agree that if the process was flawed, it is now banjaxed for the simple reason that the Granahan McCourt consortium has a full grip on the whole process and over what the final figures will be? Does he agree with that assertion?

Deputy Richard Bruton: No, I certainly do not. The way we approached this was by way of a competitive dialogue. The State did not have a firm view as to what the best technology or best approach would be, so a competitive dialogue was held. State companies, including the ESB, entered into that competitive dialogue, but two bidders, as the Deputy indicated, dropped out at a certain stage. Five started, three got to the bidding stage, two dropped out and one remained. Because there was only one bidder left, we applied a much more rigorous due diligence. We went through every element of its costing and model and we brought in experts to assist us to evaluate those. We applied the strictest terms to doing that. In the UK, virtually all the roll-out of broadband has been with just one bidder at the end of the procurement process. This has not been unusual and we have applied vigorous due diligence to deal with it.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Regarding the infrastructure being sold on, Robert Watt in his letter stated, “a decision by the private operator to abandon the project, for whatever reason, [the selling on of it or whatever] could result in a ‘stranded’ obsolete asset, despite Exchequer investment of ... €2.275 billion by 2026 - in an asset that we will not even own”. Does that line alone in the documentation that was made available yesterday, which I have looked over in as much as I could overnight and again this morning, not raise a major concern for the Minister?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Under the contract, if the bidder abandons or is unable to complete the project, the asset reverts to the State, so the State will own the asset in that situation. At that point should that happen, the State will have only paid for the fibre that has been rolled out at that point. We pay in arrears only on performance. At that point, should that occur we will have the value of the fibre and the connections that have been made. That will be an asset that can be used for any retail supplier to supply to those who will have been connected at that

point.

Deputy Brian Stanley: We had detailed briefing from the Minister's officials yesterday morning and we spent nearly two hours with them. They gave us some documentation. I have looked at the structure set out in that documentation. I am not an expert on company law but I have served as a chairperson of a small company and I can tell the Minister that this process and structure will not work. It cannot because that structure is dependent on too many agreements. If any part of it goes, one leg will be pulled from under the stool. Furthermore, the Minister is in a position where he has agreed that eight of the nine members of the board of National Broadband Ireland, NBI, will be representing the entity that is putting in the least amount of money. The taxpayer, as we know and as confirmed in the documentation made available yesterday, is putting in the bulk of the cash but he who is paying the piper is not calling the tune. The board of NBI is controlled. I probed this yesterday with the Minister's senior officials and with the Secretary Department of the Department. Those who will be appointed to the board will be put on it by David McCourt and the investors. Those are the people who will be appointed to it, not the Minister and not a representative of this House or of any future Government. We will have only one vote at the board table where the key decisions will be made. The Minister has tied the hands of future Governments behind their backs with this decision. That process cannot work. There are too many complications in it and it depends on too many factors and moving parts. Worse than that, in terms of the board, which is supposed to hold the middle of the structure together, the private investors have the Minister's arm twisted up his back. Those are the facts. Is the Minister not concerned about that?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The position is that this company will operate under the very strictest governance. We will have an office overseeing it with financial, technical and full reporting capability. Every element of the roll-out of this will be reported. There are very strict reporting requirements. In terms of the pricing, this will be a single wholesale provider but there will be multiple retailers operating on that network. The price it charges to those retailers is strictly governed by the contract and will be regulated. The contract, which cannot be drilled down to a one-page illustration, extends to 1,500 pages. The obligation of this company set up especially for the purpose is to fulfil the obligations of that contract. It will have a legal obligation to do so. My representative on the board will be seeing that that company, in everything it does, meets its obligation to fulfil the contract into which it has entered. We have a very strong governance structure with strong performance tests, strong clawbacks being applied to protect the taxpayer, and rigorous oversight and reporting of the activities of the company.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Where the decisions will be made, we will have only one vote out of a total of nine.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: If we look back 15 years ago, and I was a communications spokesperson at the time, we were examining exemplar projects abroad. I recall one involved the state of Alberta in Canada, which has a population similar to ours but is three or four times the physical size of the Republic. The Minister said there were 16 exemplars he can give where this roll-out took place. I would like to know more about those in terms of how successful they were and the cost of them. Were other states left holding the baby as we are fearful this State may be in 2023 or 2024 after the roll-out by this company?

We have all had to upskill in terms of IT, our offices and so on. We are familiar with the fast-changing nature of broadband and website developments. One of the key points the Secretary General, Robert Watt, and his colleagues made in the redacted letter is that technology is chang-

ing rapidly and we do not know what new and cheaper technological advances will be made in the coming decades that could make this particular model outdated or even obsolete. Is that not a major risk this country is taking and putting €2.5 billion beside the risk? A number of us heard President Trump talk about rolling out a 5G network for the whole of the continent of the United States, and the Minister would probably advise that this would require 400,000 masts at least to make that happen. Given the point Robert Watt made about the technology is so prescient and important, is there not a fundamental case for proceeding with the plan the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has, which is the immediate procurement by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment for the 300 broadband connections and the 1,000 locations after that? The Minister said an office is being set up but why would the Department not deal with this directly? The staff in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform seem to be indicating this would be a better plan and that we could watch developments as time proceeds, particularly after 2021 or 2022, to ensure we get the best value for money. Is this not something the Minister is totally pre-empting, given the way technology is changing so dramatically? We are just beginning to get used to 4G, and 5G is coming down the track. We do not know what other parts of the spectrum the wireless companies are going to utilise. That is the second point. I will leave it at that for now.

Deputy Richard Bruton: On the second point, officials in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform proposed to recommend that €1 billion be spent. That would have reached 127,000 premises, which would have left 420,000 premises abandoned under their project. Rural Ireland would be waiting not only for the roll-out of that project but those 420,000 premises would have no prospect of getting service in the roll-out.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: They are not saying that. They are saying we should do it step by step.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Look at what they said. This is the option they preferred. They also expressed the view that we should go back to what was rejected in 2014, which was to deliver fibre to just 1,100 village points, again relying on the commercial sector to go beyond that. We did not accept that this would meet the requirements for rural Ireland.

On the issue of technology, we have had detailed evaluations both by ComReg and by our own Analysys Mason analyst, who came in to look at what was the best technology. Every one of the bidders came in with fibre to the premises as being the preferred and optimal technology. That is what is happening in urban Ireland; Eir is rolling out fibre to the premises, as are the others in urban Ireland. Fibre is the most future-proofed and the proof of the pudding is that we provided a minimum 300 Mbps as the delivery speed. When this is rolled out, by year ten it will have 500 Mbps. Fibre is the best at building capacity to meet new needs in the years ahead. By contrast, 5G and wireless depend on line of sight, so if one cannot reach the area, one has to keep building additional masts to get the penetration. Given that masts are shared, if more people come on, the capacity is shared and the service to each one is diluted. These options were analysed in great depth and that is why we have confidence in the choice that was made by the three bidders but also in terms of evaluating international experience to decide the best option for rural Ireland.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: What about the point on the other jurisdictions? The Minister should give us examples from where Granahan McCourt operates.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I presume the Deputy is referring to where Granahan McCourt

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and those who are involved have 40 projects and have €40 billion-----

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Where?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I can provide the Deputy with that detail. It has very long experience. It has senior executives drawn from both Irish telecommunications companies and from international companies. If anyone looks at the names of the people, including the new CEO and the new CTO, whose names are published, they will see they have very strong CVs.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: We need that information.

Deputy Richard Bruton: That information has been published.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Will the House get a chance to approve or disapprove this decision of the Government?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Government has made a decision that it is a preferred bidder. It is up to the House. I have offered to go to the committee next week and I hope to convince members of the committee that this is the right decision. Of course, it is up to the House what-----

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: The Minister agrees the House should have a say.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): I call Deputy Harty, who is sharing time with Deputy Fitzpatrick.

Deputy Michael Harty: I want to ask some questions to clarify in my mind what is happening. The Minister might respond to each one in turn. Why was the gap funding model chosen for this project?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The gap funding model was chosen after a very detailed evaluation which was originally carried out on behalf of the State by KPMG. It went through a financial test and also went through a number of non-financial tests, and it was found to be cheaper to go this way. The biggest reason is because we are using rented poles and ducts that are already in the core service. We are not building from scratch; we are not setting up a new company to build fibre on new poles that we erect. It is the lowest cost it can be in terms of rolling this out. More importantly, it minimises the risk to the State of having to come back at the end of 25 years and having to invest again. It provides an incentive for the owner of the fibre to get on board a lot of business and make this viable in order that it can continue to fund the replacement costs and the impact of weather, and make sure it can operate this profitably into the long-term future.

By contrast, if this was coming back to the State in year 25, the risk is that the asset would not be future-proofed and we would not see the new capacity. It would be managed with a run-down date to the point where the company had to hand it back.

Deputy Michael Harty: Is that the reason the State will not own the network after 25 years?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Yes. A certain contract model was chosen. The model is that the State does not own the asset. The State provides a subsidy and it piggy-backs, to the maximum extent, off the existing network. It seeks to have it integrated into that network to maximise the overall business system that the whole system delivers. It stands on its own two feet, so the

State does not get involved.

Other Deputies have said it would have been much better if we had hung on to Telecom Éireann and we would now be building off a State-owned asset. However, that is not where we stand. This was clearly the most advantageous option for the taxpayer and the quickest to deliver.

Deputy Michael Harty: Will the Minister outline why there has been cost escalation to €2.79 billion from a starting point of €500 million?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The €500 million estimate was for the project Deputy Broughan was advocating, which was just bringing fibre to the 1,100 villages, and that was as far as it would go. In terms of getting to 540,000 premises, or, as it then was, 750,000 premises, it would be for commercial interests to bring it from the village out to all of those individual premises. That was rejected as an inadequate approach. The next big escalation in cost was, of course, the decision that had to be taken when Eir said it would commercially deliver 300,000 of these premises, which meant that had to be carved out of the intervention area, which had been 750,000 premises. Some Deputies expressed scepticism as to why that had to be done. It had to be done because, under state aid rules, if a commercial entity is offering to deliver it, one cannot offer state aid to someone else to do it. That is an obligation of state aid rules. It was communicated to us by the EU but also confirmed by the legal experts at the time that decision was taken.

Those were among the decisions but there is also the risk assessment of the market. Only when the competitive dialogue was complete would one get an understanding of how risk was assessed of lower than expected take-up, of more difficult terrain and all the things that we know are involved in reaching out to 100% of the population. As the last quarter occupies 96% of the territory, this service has to go through 96% of the land area to reach just a quarter of the population. That is a significant challenge.

Deputy Michael Harty: On that point, there were originally three bidders and now there is only one bidder, otherwise called the preferred bidder. Is the Minister happy that Granahan McCourt, or National Broadband Ireland as it now is, has the capacity to deliver this?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Yes. There were three bidders but at the time draft bids were made, two companies made draft bids and they were both of the same order of magnitude. It was not that some of the others were coming in with very different scales of bids. We then entered into the very detailed due diligence process that I described to Deputy Stanley, where we went through international benchmarks for the cost of each component of what was being proposed, such as how we would deal with clawback, the management of risk and performance tests. This was to ensure that, with international advice, we got the best value and that the deal we would bring forward to the preferred bidder stage would be robust from the taxpayers' point of view. That exercise was carried out. That is what took the very considerable time between the lodgement of the preferred bid in September and the point when the Government was able to take a decision.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: What has been announced is the preferred bidder. The Minister tells us that there will be a draft contract which will run to about 1,500 pages. Can he confirm that this will be debated by the Dáil and the committee? Can he tell us who will ultimately make a decision on this?

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Deputy Richard Bruton: Obviously the Government will have to sign the contract at the end of the day. Our legal, financial and technical experts will sit down with the company that has been appointed as the preferred bidder and go through those arrangements. A lot of work will then have to be done in setting up the contracts. We will set up a governance structure to make sure we can oversee and execute every element of the contract. At the end of the day, the Government will sign off on the contract along with the bidder.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The Minister did not answer the question about whether we will see the contract.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Does the Deputy refer to the publication of the contract? The contract will be published.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Will it be debated here and in the committee?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I am absolutely free to make myself available. That is what I have said throughout this. I am happy to sit down with anyone and answer questions. Of course, this is a contract between the State and a private operator.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: As this is a minority Government it will require the support of this House. If it does not get the support of this House will the Government still sign off on the contract?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I am here to convince people that this is the right approach, as I believe it is. I will go to any committee and to every highway and byway in the House to convince Deputy Murphy and others that this is the right thing to do. Of course, I only act on the permission of the Dáil. If the Dáil fails to support what is being done, that is its prerogative, as the Deputy knows. I believe we have done the work. When the House sees details of the work we have done, the alternatives and options we have evaluated and the way we have looked at technology and management, I think Members will be convinced we are doing the right thing.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Given that the figure is multiples of what was expected and there were not supposed to be any big surprises, did the Minister notify Fianna Fáil, the Government's partners in the confidence and supply arrangement? Was that discussed?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I was not at the recent discussions between the parties but I know that my officials briefed the other parties and Fianna Fáil. The final price could only have been clear to the House or any party much more recently. A lot of the work has been in creating a structure through which we are committing €3 billion at one level, while providing for a number of contingencies that can bring that down. Some €545 million may not have to be paid. We have structured the agreement in such a way that this money will only be payable in certain circumstances. The final price is only emerging following a Government-----

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Fianna Fáil was not aware. The Minister said that the gap funding model involving a single bidder was used in the UK. Scotland broke coverage up into three or four parts to allow the maximum possible competition. We were told at the briefing yesterday that costs would be €28 million this year and somewhere around €100 million next year. We were advised that depending on uptake, the bulk of the money will be front-loaded. Costs could certainly be in the region of €2 billion over ten years. Between that and the national children's hospital there is a very significant difference with the available funding envisaged under the national development plan, NDP. Has the Government reconsidered that plan in light

of this spending? What is likely to be removed from the national development plan as a consequence of those two infrastructure projects?

Deputy Richard Bruton: We considered the option of breaking this up into smaller contracts or smaller areas. That was among the alternatives that were assessed. The detailed analysis of that option has been published. It was found that a single contract that treated the country as a unit was more cost-effective and that greater economies of scale would emerge in delivering it that way. That alternative was very carefully considered.

Regarding the assumptions under which the NDP was drawn up, I note that the NDP contained no figure for the national broadband plan, as the Deputy knows. That was because a procurement process was underway and a figure was not known.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Did the Government anticipate a cost of €3 billion?

Deputy Richard Bruton: As part of a public expenditure code there is a requirement for a Department to provide a notional figure. However, we were very clear that we needed a competitive dialogue to ascertain exactly what the figure would be. No figure was included in the NDP. As I said, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has indicated that no capital project in the NDP will be affected and that this will be funded from revenues.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister now has five minutes to wrap up.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I thank the Deputies. I have no problem with scrutiny from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. That is its job, just as it is the job of the Oireachtas to ask challenging questions. I do not know if they set any store by the assurances of Ministers, but I can assure Members that long before I was part of this process my officials did voluminous amounts of work to evaluate the alternatives. We examined whether we could do this more cheaply, unbundle the work, carry it out through State agencies or use the ESB. All of these alternatives were assessed. In every case it was objectively found that the alternatives would create greater costs, impose a longer delay or cause the State greater uncertainties and risk. We have chosen what I believe is the most cost-effective approach. I do not dispute that it is expensive, but it is a cost that will be incurred over 25 years. We are designing something to be operated for 25 years with some level of State support and to continue on its own two feet for the following ten years and well beyond.

People did not like me drawing parallels with free education. However, I am absolutely convinced that although it is right to ask all these hard questions, when we reflect on this decision we will see it as the correct one. By providing fibre to premises in rural Ireland we will underpin our ambitions for rural Ireland with connectivity. Its citizens will be able to live a lifestyle that is fully participative in the transformation that digital technology provides. This will allow them to lead a more resilient and better-adjusted life, with more working from home, more connectivity and more access to e-health and digital public services. People will regard this as the correct decision. However, we are right to scrutinise this now. There is no doubt that people scrutinised free education, though now we might ask how we could fail to commit to free education for our people. I have no problem with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform taking a sceptical approach to this. That is its job and it is for Departments like my own to look at the challenges and set out the vision.

The Government has to make that decision. If it were to be made by experts, we would not

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have this Chamber, as decisions would be made by them and they would not be accountable to us. We value democracy. We value a process whereby people like me sit around with 15 colleagues to make such decisions and are accountable to the House. Tomorrow, one of the Members opposite might be in my seat and I will be asking the questions. I assure Members that I spent most of my political life over there asking the questions. The process we have is robust and the project is robust. I look forward to meeting with Deputies in whatever format is chosen to try to win the argument among my peers.

Sitting suspended at 4 p.m. and resumed at 4.05 p.m.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Drugs Crime

Deputy Fergus O’Dowd: The people of Drogheda are very proud of their town and of their record on hospitality and the fact that this year Drogheda will again host Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann and hopefully have more than 600,000 people visit the town. We welcome in particular the additional gardaí provided to Drogheda by the Garda Commissioner. I also welcome the contribution of the Minister for Justice and Equality to the fight against the appalling drug crime war that has broken out in the town. I pay tribute to Superintendent Andy Watters and Chief Superintendent Christy Mangan for their work on this matter.

The problem of drug related crime did not develop overnight. For some years I have been holding meetings locally with local voluntary bodies and Ministers. Of particular note is the fact that more than 40,000 needles were exchanged in County Louth in 2018, the last year for which we have numbers. There is a significant dependence on drugs, but in the middle of this very serious drugs crisis in Drogheda, we do not have a proper outreach service. The Red Door Project, which has an annual budget of €150,000, is at maximum capacity. There is a four-month wait before a person with a drug problem who wants to go into treatment is able to get a place, which is a serious issue.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: I concur with Deputy O’Dowd. Drugs, criminality, antisocial behaviour, fraudulent activity and raids on the elderly and bank machines are all matters regularly dealt with by the Garda Síochána and are not unique to the north east in any respect. What is happening in Drogheda and other parts of County Louth is a microcosm of what is happening throughout the country. However, the situation has been exacerbated in Drogheda. Crime is a scourge on all our communities, but the focus is currently on Drogheda. Crime, particularly gun and knife crime, is becoming expected rather than exceptional. Public order offences are up 9% year on year and there is a growing sense of lawlessness on our streets. All one must do to realise that is to look at the front page headlines of this week’s edition of two local newspapers, one of which states, “Tackle drug crime now”. That is referring to Dundalk. It is not just Drogheda which is experiencing this problem and some rural villages and towns as far away as Dundalk are affected. It needs to be tackled. I wrote to Commissioner Harris on 18 November and have not received a response. I asked him and the Minister to meet the joint policing committees, JPCs, and all Oireachtas Members who represent the area.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. I call Deputy Thomas Byrne.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I attended a protest held in Drogheda last Saturday. There is a sense of fear in Drogheda and east Meath of what might happen next. Although the Garda resources that are being allocated to Drogheda are welcome, new gardaí should receive appropriate mentoring and training to deal with this situation.

I wish also to draw the attention of the Minister to the situation in east Meath and the Ashbourne Garda district, which is adjacent to Drogheda. Unfortunately, counties Louth and Meath are in different Garda regions. I have raised with the JPC in Meath that there should be as much co-operation as possible and that any armed support for Drogheda would also be available to east Meath. On that note, I thank and pay tribute to the Garda for some work it did in the east Meath area today and yesterday which will yield results. This problem is causing significant fear and needs commitments that will be followed through on after the election as well as before it.

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): My understanding is that this Topical Issue matter concerns violence related issues in Drogheda. I ask the Ceann Comhairle to confirm that that is the case.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is, yes.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: The situation in Drogheda is a microcosm of what is happening throughout the country.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I am acutely conscious of the serious concerns of the people of Drogheda. I totally condemn the disgraceful criminal behaviour and reckless violence committed by a small number of violent thugs in that area in recent times. In particular, I condemn the very serious issue of drug related intimidation which impacts greatly on our communities and society as a whole, especially families.

I am advised that An Garda Síochána and the national family support network have concluded separate evaluations of the drug related intimidation reporting programme and jointly agreed a number of actions in regard to the programme going forward. These include actions relating to training existing members and new recruits from An Garda Síochána, organising a conference for designated inspectors to share knowledge and experience relating to drug related intimidation, and holding a joint agency conference to include designated inspectors and agencies working in the drugs area. There will also be an internal programme of communication regarding the programme within An Garda Síochána, as well as external promotion of the programme through the media, external contacts and various forums. The national family support network will continue to run training in the field of drug related intimidation.

The implementation of the joint action plan is crucial to the overall response possible to the issue of drug related intimidation. Although the reporting programme was found to be effective in its current form, the jointly agreed action plan is designed to enhance the effectiveness of the programme through training, knowledge sharing and awareness raising.

As the Deputies may be aware, I visited Drogheda Garda station with Commissioner Harris on the evening of Thursday, 2 May and was briefed on the very important work of Operation Stratus, which was commenced in Drogheda in October 2018 to counteract this ongoing feud. I acknowledge the work of Chief Superintendent Christy Mangan and Superintendent Andy

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Watters. I am briefed daily by my colleague, Deputy O'Dowd, who is on the ground in the area on a 24-7 basis.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: So are we.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: An Garda Síochána put Operation Stratus in place to prevent, detect and mitigate against any further escalation of violence between the groups involved. I am informed that the measures to strengthen this operation, which are being discussed within An Garda Síochána, will be highly effective. On Tuesday, 30 April, Commissioner Harris announced that he will appoint an additional 25 Garda members to Drogheda next month. The allocation of resources, including personnel, is a matter for the Garda Commissioner. I hope this influx of Garda members to the Drogheda area will go some way towards comforting and reassuring the citizens of Drogheda that their safety and that of their communities is a main priority for An Garda Síochána. The assistant commissioner with responsibility for the northern region is putting immediate arrangements in place for additional uniformed patrols to be conducted within the district, thereby providing reassurance to and within the community. These patrols will be supplemented by the emergency response unit from Dublin and supported by the regional armed support unit within the northern region. It is clear that this intelligence-led policing, involving many Garda units throughout the country, is yielding significant results. I commend An Garda Síochána on its tireless efforts in continuing to tackle drug related crime.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the additional supports to which the Minister referred which are to be provided by the Garda Commissioner. A related issue is that of CCTV in the Moneymore area. When the Minister visited the locality, we pointed out to him the issues in that regard. The CCTV is not his responsibility, but this area has been worst affected by much of this crime, and the CCTV there is still not working. The local authority is only now putting together a proposal to reinstate it. I will be meeting the manager tomorrow and I ask that the Minister and his Department do their best to fast-track the reinstatement of the CCTV. There is nothing more important than people knowing that a criminal walking the streets with a petrol bomb or other weapon will be captured on CCTV such that the Garda can act.

Last week, Deputy Breathnach was present when the very positive and hard-working community of Moneymore came forward with a proposal for a community centre. Some 800 young people under the age of 16 live in the area. They have no proper youth or community services. The community is at breaking point in terms of these demands and needs. We want additional childcare, after-school services, community intervention and more community workers. The total expected cost is approximately €2.5 million. I will put the proposal on the Minister's desk and ask that he assist in furthering it in any way he can.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: I commend the most recent activity by the Minister. I wish to echo the words of Deputy O'Dowd, but I will try not to be repetitive in the short time I have. What is happening in Drogheda is a microcosm of the situation throughout the country. Although the problem may not get out of hand elsewhere to the degree it has in Drogheda, the Minister should watch this space regarding criminality. This is not about politics. It is about operating together. That is why I asked that the Minister and Commissioner Harris would meet local politicians and the JPC for us to get to grips with much of what is going on in the area. Innocent people are being intimidated in Dundalk, Dunleer and Clogherhead, as was acknowledged by Chief Superintendent Mangan.

I welcome any move to get more boots on the ground, but it is an interim measure. The

Minister appointed an additional five gardaí to Dundalk. That has not been flagged, but it is great to see. As well as having a short-term plan, there need to be medium and long-term strategies. The task force must be put in place 24-7 to target these criminals. As Deputy O'Dowd said, there should be greater resources to engage young people and ensure that they do not find their way into the criminal activity that is taking place in our region.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I again pay tribute to the Garda. The Minister appeared to take exception about Drogheda, but he should know that a significant part of the town is covered by the Ashbourne Garda district and a significant number of the criminals involved in this feud live in east Meath. It is a matter of serious concern for me, and I appreciate that it is a serious concern for the Minister as well. I am concerned about resources and the fact that the area is in two different regions. I received assurances from the chief superintendent in Meath that there is ongoing co-operation. I accept that and realise the Garda is doing its best, but the resources in Drogheda, which are extremely welcome and necessary, must be matched on the Ashbourne side as well. The Minister and the Garda Commissioner should assure themselves that full resources are available and that maximum co-operation is taking place to get the type of results that were achieved today and yesterday in the area. That will give people confidence that this is being addressed. In addition, as other Members said, there are the underlying issues that must be dealt with.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: The Garda authorities advise that every effort will be made to disrupt the activities of these groups, arrest and prosecute offenders, and deny access to road networks to those involved. Liaison is ongoing with the relevant stakeholders, including Tusla, the HSE and the local authority. I welcome Deputy O'Dowd's meeting tomorrow. Every Member of the House wishes them well in their endeavours. I also acknowledge the support of Deputy Breathnach.

There were a number of successful targeted operations in respect of organised crime in the Drogheda region recently. There was a seizure of drugs worth €110,000 at Moneymore before Christmas. One person was charged in that regard. There was the discovery of three firearms and a consignment of drugs at Boyne Rovers FC in Drogheda last March. On 10 April, four residential properties were searched, one vehicle was seized for examination and a quantity of suspected cannabis and cocaine with an approximate value of €5,000 as well as a quantity of mobile telephones were seized. Three men were arrested in that regard. On 14 April, gardaí arrested four men in connection with the shooting incident that took place at M1 Retail Park in Drogheda in February. A number of premises were also searched in connection with this investigation. The shooting followed a number of incidents earlier this year that the Garda is actively investigating. On 22 April, An Garda Síochána discovered a handgun and nine pipe bomb components during a search of open ground at Moneymore. To date, 319 proactive searches have been carried out in the Drogheda area, along with 870 armed support unit and roads policing checkpoints and 1,253 proactive uniform and plain clothes patrols.

When dealing with complaints of drug related intimidation which may be linked to criminal activity and offering advice on the issue, An Garda Síochána makes every effort to afford the person or family subject to the threat the best level of security, advice, protection and support. The confidentiality and security of persons concerned are paramount for An Garda Síochána when dealing with reports of drug related intimidation and other reporting issues.

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Crime Levels

Deputy Seán Crowe: A taxi driver was attacked and suffered serious head and facial injuries in Dublin last Monday night. He was attacked at 12.30 a.m. at Rutland Grove in Crumlin. The passengers took the driver's mobile telephone, a sum of cash and a dashboard camera. According to reports, as he lay injured, the gang members attempted to steal the taxi but failed to start it. They fled the scene on foot and four people were arrested following the attack. This was not a once-off occurrence but part of a spate of attacks on taxi drivers in recent weeks. More must be done to protect taxi drivers.

The latest attack on a taxi driver in Dublin comes just weeks after a video of a racist and violent attack on a taxi driver was shared online. That incident happened at 10 p.m. on Easter Sunday on the Malahide Road in Donnycarney in north Dublin and a man has handed himself into a north Dublin Garda station with regard to the attack. The Immigrant Council of Ireland has interviewed taxi drivers from various ethnic backgrounds and its report on the racist attacks noted that many of them happened while the taxi was in motion, putting the driver and passengers at risk. The number of physical attacks is also increasing. A 73 year old Dublin taxi driver was beaten up and pulled out of his car in Tallaght recently. He was stabbed and his car was later burnt out. Many other attacks go unreported.

Taxi drivers are increasingly frightened of going out to work. Many of them say they will not drive into certain estates in Dublin. I heard that at first hand from taxi drivers. They are being attacked and held at knifepoint. Their equipment is being stolen and there are attempts to rob them. Some taxi drivers have put a camera in the cab. Perhaps the Minister for Justice and Equality could examine ways of supporting the drivers. It is their place of work. I spoke to a taxi driver who told me that on two occasions he has had a syringe put to his throat. He ended up packing in the job, saying that it was not worth his life. That has an impact on his family.

No person should have to work in such a dangerous environment. The recent spate of attacks and violent robberies has led taxi drivers to avoid certain estates, and the ordinary, decent people who are living in these estates will suffer. There are reports of some gangs targeting taxi drivers through apps and based on their age and physical fitness levels. There must be a strong response from An Garda Síochána and the Government before there is a fatality.

Is the Minister aware of the problem? What response will there be to the attacks? Has the Minister spoken to An Garda Síochána about it? Is there a plan to deal with it? It is not just taxi drivers who are affected. There has also been a spate of attacks on drivers of delivery vans. The attackers target people who are vulnerable. Has the Minister talked to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport about this? Has he looked at how other jurisdictions safeguard taxi or cab drivers? There are different facilities in New York. There is a sign at the back of the taxi cab facing the passenger that states the fare and also that it is an offence not to pay the fare or to attack the driver and that the courts will follow through on it. I am seeking suggestions of what new things we can do in this regard. I realise that the Minister was dealing with another issue under the earlier Topical Issue matter and that it is all about resources. However, we must send a strong message to taxi drivers that we are listening to their concerns and we will respond.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I acknowledge the importance of this issue and thank Deputy Crowe for raising it. First, I acknowledge that taxi drivers can work in an environment that puts them at a higher risk of being attacked during the course of their work. There is no doubt that we should do as much as possible to protect them. Taxi drivers have highlighted the potential

dangers of the job. They work alone, often at night and in isolated areas. They carry cash and, for the most part, they do not know their customers. Obviously, thousands of taxi journeys are taken each day and the vast majority conclude without incident, but occasionally taxi drivers will find themselves in unpleasant or even dangerous situations.

All taxi drivers, as part of their initial training and preparation for examinations, are provided with the Official Manual for Operating within the SPSV Industry. This manual is produced by the National Transport Authority in consultation with the Garda crime prevention unit and contains a chapter entitled Staying Safe. The chapter offers a range of information and suggestions on how to deal with difficult customers or dangerous situations that I encourage taxi drivers to be aware of and, where possible, put into action. This includes suggestions on taking extra care in isolated areas, making eye contact with the customer when the customer gets into the car, and arranging a code word with the dispatch operator or a colleague that can be used in communication with them if danger is perceived. Information regarding ways to reduce the risk of robbery is also provided. An Garda Síochána has recommended that taxi drivers: avoid carrying large sums of cash where possible; do not show or tell customers how much cash they have and be discrete with their cash when giving a customer change; do not display valuables; and lock their vehicles while in isolated areas or waiting for a customer to arrive.

An Garda Síochána also advises that taxi drivers who have been the victims of robbery or fare evasion should not chase the perpetrators because this might put their personal safety at further risk. In addition, it is advised that taxi drivers should not take any action that might be deemed to be illegal or, again, put themselves at risk, such as detaining a passenger by force. The advice from An Garda Síochána to taxi drivers is to make contact immediately on 999 or 112 if they have been the victim of an assault, robbery or fare evasion and, if safe to do so, remain at that location until gardaí.

I am advised that An Garda Síochána is conducting full investigations into each recent case involving assaults on and robberies from taxi drivers. In such circumstances, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further while these investigations are ongoing. I acknowledge what Deputy Crowe stated. He has put forward a number of important suggestions. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, is beside me - he is here to deal with another issue - and I would be very happy to take on board his observations and submissions on this issue. It is important that we unite in this House and work with An Garda Síochána to ensure that taxi drivers and those engaged in that business are fully protected by the law.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The cost of insurance for taxi drivers has trebled in the past year. As well as the insurance issue, the situation is becoming much more dangerous for taxi drivers. Many people who do not have access to transport are reliant on the services of taxi drivers. I include in this those seeking to get to work. Taxis are not just used for social occasions, they are also used for vital purposes such as, for example, if a child is sick and has to go to hospital. It is important that we put in place the necessary supports for taxi drivers and that we stop these attacks.

I would like to hear from both of the Ministers that they will talk to each other to see if there are ways in which we can help the drivers. Will they also meet the drivers and their representatives to discuss the dangers they face and perhaps listen to their suggestions on what can be done? We have heard of apps which increase the safety of drivers and passengers. We have to examine those apps and the information they contain because they might also be a reason that people are targeted. The most important thing is to look at other jurisdictions. We are not

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alone; drivers and cab companies in other countries are also experiencing difficulties. We can learn from their experience. I am not proposing that we learn from jurisdictions where drivers are blocked off from passengers, but perhaps we could look at that as part of an overall safety review. Drivers should have the option to block off passengers, but that cannot be done at the moment. I appeal to both Ministers to sit down with the drivers and talk to them.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: The Minister, Deputy Ross, and I speak on an almost daily basis in respect of this and other issues of importance. I want to make it quite clear that the type of criminal behaviour to which Deputy Crowe refers has no place in society and will not be tolerated. An Garda Síochána is very much alive to this issue, but that does not alter the difficulties it is encountering in trying to effectively tackle this form of crime. Taxi drivers operate in isolated areas or at night. They work alone and often carry cash in their vehicles. In that context, there is a certain amount of personal responsibility on taxi drivers to keep themselves safe. It has been suggested that drivers should consider the purchase of dash cams or CCTV systems to monitor the interior and exterior of their vehicles. A number of drivers already use such equipment. The footage from a CCTV system in the interior of the vehicle can help to identify any attackers. If the quality of footage is sufficiently high, it may be used as evidence in a court of law.

As the Deputy may be aware, the National Transport Authority is launching a new taxi driver respect campaign this month. This is a public awareness drive which advocates respect for taxi drivers. The campaign illustrates that taxi drivers can be anybody, including a friend or a family member. As such, they deserve our full respect. The campaign will include print media and bus shelters, as well as information disseminated via other media outlets. I hope this campaign, aligned with the Government's commitment to increase Garda numbers and visibility, will lead to a reduction in the number of assaults and robberies involving taxi drivers in the near future.

Road Traffic Legislation

Deputy Joan Collins: At lunchtime, Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan and I accepted a petition from 11 carriage drivers who came down from Merrion Road. They gave it to us in order that we might hand it to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. Councillors Cieran Perry and Deirdre Heney accepted a petition from the same carriage drivers to hand to the CEO of Dublin City Council. The letter is entitled "Dublin City Council control of horse-drawn carriages by-laws 2011", and states:

Dear Minister Ross,

We, the undersigned, refer to the above Bye-laws and to Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan's Parliamentary Question to you on 6 November 2018, wherein you were asked "your views as to whether the laws relating to horse-drawn vehicles and-or carriages are in need of review and strengthening".

It also states:

As you are aware, there is a "legal lacuna" with regards to the Bye-laws. It is our understanding that Dublin City Council had no basis to make bye-laws for the regulation of horse-drawn carriages and that primary legislation may need to be repealed or amended.

It further states:

We are professional carriage drivers and owners, operating under licence from Dublin City Council. However, as of September 2018 our Carriage Driver Licences and Carriage Licences have expired ...

In your response to the Dáil to Deputy O'Sullivan on 6 November 2018, you advised that you would "ensure that this matter is given due consideration". **We would be obliged if you could resolve the legal situation as a matter of urgency.**

We are calling on you ... to repeal the Victorian legislation to enable Dublin City Council to draft new, improved and enforceable bye-laws, that ... assess the driver, carriage, horse and harnessing, providing a safe and professional service to customers ...

A representative of the Carriage Owner/Drivers would be happy to meet with you to discuss further.

We look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

The Minister is familiar with this issue. He stated that neither he nor his Department were aware of this issue last November, but that is almost five months ago. He agreed to meet the stakeholders. These people are just asking for the Minister to sit down with them in order to discuss the issue.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. She is absolutely correct to state that this is the second time in six months it has been raised. It is being addressed. She is also correct to state that it should be addressed as a matter of great urgency. I note that she has a petition; I am happy to receive it and respond to it in a manner which shows the need for action on the issue.

As the Deputy may know, some local authorities develop by-laws to licence commercially operating horse-drawn carriages. Local authorities set their own rules and stipulations to govern such operations by means of by-laws. Part 19 of the Local Government Act 2001 provides local authorities with the power to make by-laws. Part 19 also provides a general power to a local authority to make by-laws in respect of its own properties or services or to regulate matters of local concern. Section 199(1) of the 2001 Act provides that "a local authority may make a bye-law for or in relation to the use, operation, protection, regulation or management of any land, services, or any other matter provided by or under the control or management of the local authority, whether within or without its functional area or in relation to any connected matter." It is under this Act that local authorities can choose to regulate horse-drawn carriages that operate for hire or reward.

In most counties there seems to have been little demand and by-laws are not in place. In other areas, the matter is more relevant. For example, in Kerry, where there is a long tradition of jarvey operation, by-laws have been adopted to regulate the operation of these horse-drawn hackney carriages.

In February 2011, the city council took over responsibility for the licensing of horse-drawn carriage operators and drivers from the Garda carriage office. Dublin City Council made by-laws in the same year for the licensing of horse-drawn carriages. They made these by-laws under the Local Government Act 2001. As the Deputy will be aware, my Department has had

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sight of a note prepared by the Dublin City Council law agent giving the view that Dublin City Council has no legal basis to make such by-laws. The note indicates that such powers may instead still rest, under the Dublin Carriage Acts 1853, 1854 and 1855, with the Dublin Metropolitan Police Commissioners, in respect of whom the Garda Síochána is successor. Since this older Dublin-specific legislation was not repealed, powers for licensing horse-drawn carriages in Dublin still exist in statute. This means Dublin City Council is unable to make by-laws under the 2001 Act in this respect. By-laws may not be made under that 2001 Act where powers exist elsewhere in legislation.

While I am currently of the view that these matters should normally be managed at local government level, I have requested that the matter be given due consideration by my Department. I have requested, as I promised to Deputy O'Sullivan in reply to her question last time, that my Department engage with An Garda Síochána and Dublin City Council and seek separate legal advice if that is deemed necessary. Depending on the outcome there may be a requirement to amend or repeal legislation to ensure an appropriate, modern regulatory framework is in place.

Separately, I understand concerns have also been raised relating to animal welfare issues. The Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 provides powers to gardaí and authorised officers to deal with issues of animal welfare. Furthermore, the Control of Horses Act 1996 provides for local authorities to grant horse licences to those wishing to own a horse, thus entitling them to keep the horse in a control area. The Act provides that a horse licence shall not be granted to any person under the age of 16 years. Legislation of this nature comes within the ambit of my colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

As with all vehicles used on a public road, the drivers of horse-drawn carriages are responsible for behaving in a safe manner and for paying due care to other users.

Deputy Joan Collins: The letter and petition have been drawn up by professional carriage drivers and owners who were operating under license from Dublin City Council. They want to be part of a system that is legal. They want to know that they are covered under the by-laws. It has been six months since Deputy O'Sullivan raised this matter. The Minister's reply to Deputy O'Sullivan stated that he would ensure the matter would be given due consideration. This would include further engagement with An Garda Síochána, Dublin City Council and others mentioned by the Deputy, including the carriage drivers and My Lovely Horse Rescue, a group involved with the carriage drivers. They are trying to bring in horse welfare measures that are robust.

If the 1853, 1854 and 1855 Acts are repealed quickly then we can enable the council to bring in the by-laws or else introduce measures under the Road Traffic Act 2016 to allow the NTA to take over this area. The Minister must move on this. These people have been in a lacuna since September of last year. They want to be responsible and encourage other carriage drivers to be responsible and to look after their horses as well. This is not about animal welfare - these drivers look after their horses.

The Minister referred to other Acts including the Animal Health and Welfare Act and the Control of Horses Act. Those Acts are highly questionable because they are not implemented and a great deal of work remains to be done around them. Will the Minister meet representatives of My Lovely Horse Rescue and the carriage drivers to talk to them about what needs to be done and what the Minister will do about this?

Deputy Shane Ross: The Deputy is making a fair point and I think something has to be done about this. It probably should have been done a little sooner. The Deputy will understand that there were other distractions in recent months which probably meant it was not at the top of the priority list. If this is not addressed shortly, I intend to let the Deputy know. It is my intention to consider whether we need a small tranche of legislation to repeal the Victorian legislation that gives the Garda Síochána powers for licensing horse-drawn carriages in Dublin. Once that is done, Dublin City Council can license these carriages under the Local Government Act 2001, as can other local authorities. We intend to use the taxi regulation (amendment)(rickshaw) Bill 2018 to do this. The Department has this week been assigned a drafter for the Bill. We will be engaging with An Garda Síochána and the City Council as part of this process. I intend to move on this as rapidly as the taxi regulation (amendment)(rickshaw) Bill 2018 moves. I intend to move to introduce the taxi regulation (amendment)(rickshaw) Bill 2018 as soon as possible.

Urban Renewal Schemes

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister of State for being here. I live in Newbridge, which is a fine town. I imagine the Minister of State has been there several times. It has a population of close to 29,000 and the figure is growing. There has been significant growth and development in recent years but unfortunately the town has been overlooked in respect of putting in place the necessary infrastructure and services. While the town has many challenges, this particular challenge of a second bridge is one that I wish to highlight.

At peak times the traffic delays and congestion are significant and impact negatively on the lives of people. I put it to the Minister of State that a second bridge is vital not only for the future development of our town but also for what is going on currently. The traffic into and leaving town is ever-increasing. We have only one main bridge, which was built in 1930, over the River Liffey. The bridge causes a major build-up throughout the day.

Newbridge is an excellent destination town for retail with local independent shopping and the Whitewater Shopping Centre and Newbridge Silverware. People come there from all over the country.

The part of Newbridge where this particular bridge is situated is the only way that Newbridge can be accessed. There are almost 6,000 people living there. There are five schools with 3,000 pupils and teachers. There is a church and crèches as well as a doctor's office etc. One can only begin to imagine what it is like with five schools congested in an area and only one bridge. The other 22,000 people do not live on the Dublin side of the bridge and they are trying to get through the town and over the bridge to get to the schools. Equally, we have the 6,000 people trying to come in to the town. We have people trying to leave Newbridge to get onto the M50 motorway or the Dublin dual-carriageway. Others want to get to Naas, where our council offices are located and where many people can access employment.

Lidl has its head office in Newbridge and is currently building its main distribution centre on the outskirts of the town. Pfizer is continuing to grow, with staff numbers growing year after year. All of this is beneficial and the associated employment is welcome and important. However, I fear that the lack of a second bridge will catch up on development and obstruct future growth.

Kildare County Council has prioritised this as the main infrastructure project for south

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Kildare, together with another bridge in Celbridge. These are the two main focuses for Kildare County Council. Funding was applied for under the urban regeneration and development scheme to construct a 1 km long road, including a new bridge over the River Liffey that would link the Great Connell Road and Athgarvan Road. This would be a significant benefit and bonus. Unfortunately, the application was turned down. I hope the Minister of State has good news with regard to a new bridge. It is estimated that building such a bridge would cost approximately €15 million. I accept that the latter is not an insignificant amount, but a new bridge would be very important and would greatly benefit all of those who need to cross into and out of Newbridge daily, often more than once.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I thank Deputy O’Loughlin for raising this issue. I am glad to have the opportunity to discuss the support available under the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, which is one of the funds that might be open to fund a scheme such as that to which she refers. I am conscious that the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport just left but the Deputy might want to raise this issue with him too because it is important that it should be dealt with on a cross-departmental basis. A project such as this is not just for one Department. We have a fund which is suitable for projects of this nature and Kildare has already availed of the opportunity to make an application to that it.

The URDF is a flagship element of Project Ireland 2040, comprising an allocation of €2 billion in the National Development Plan 2018-2027, with €58 million available in 2019 and an overall Exchequer allocation of €550 million earmarked for the fund up to the end of 2022. The URDF was established to support more compact and sustainable development, through the regeneration and rejuvenation of Ireland’s five cities and the many other large towns in line with the objectives of the national planning framework and the national development plan. This is about sustainable development, encouraging sustainable development of town centres and making them more pleasant places to live. Exactly as the Deputy described, Newbridge is probably similar to the town in which I live, Navan, with congestion at crossings and development over a number of years giving rise to pressure on existing crossings, meaning that infrastructure needs to be upgraded.

The work we are trying to fund through the URDF is to enable a greater proportion of residential and mixed use development to be delivered within the existing built-up footprints of our cities and towns and to ensure that more parts of our urban areas can become attractive and vibrant places in which people can choose to live, work, invest in and visit. If somewhere is a nice place to live in, one will be able to create more jobs with investment to service the needs of the people who are already living there. Many people in Kildare and Meath have to leave their homes and travel long distances to work. We are trying to encourage more jobs to be created beside them and to make the towns more attractive too.

Bids were invited from public bodies for further funding under the URDF and 189 applications were received by my Department under the first call for proposals. On 26 November 2018, the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, announced initial URDF support of €100 million for 88 projects around the country. The applications received contained a wide variety of themes and sectoral areas from urban regeneration and public realm works to enabling strategic infrastructure such as bridges to leverage further development, as well as cultural and amenity development. Applications received fall into two categories, namely, projects that are ready to go and funding to support the initial development of projects, including master planning and feasibility, to ensure a pipeline of projects for the future that may be funded by our Department

or the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. As part of this first call, Kildare County Council submitted seven proposals and was awarded initial URDF support for four. Four of the proposals submitted by Kildare County Council related to a link road from Great Connell Road to Athgarvan Road in Newbridge. However, this proposal was not awarded URDF support as part of the first call.

The Deputy mentioned Celbridge. It was awarded funding. The proposal is progressing through part B, which is to develop feasibility and bring different stakeholders and players together. My Department is continuing to engage with successful applicants, in the case of Celbridge and others in Kildare, from the first call on the advancement of their proposals. Once that process is complete, my Department will complete its review of the first call, after which a second call for proposals will be announced later in the year. The Deputy asked if I brought good news with me. I certainly cannot say I brought the chequebook, so I will have to check on the position. There will be a second chance to apply for funding. Every applicant that did not succeed had engagement with our Department. The local authority in Kildare had engagement with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government about its application, where it went wrong and what it needs to do to make a new application. Kildare County Council can consider further projects and applications. That will be open for it in the near future.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I guarantee that Kildare County Council will submit another proposal for funding with the full support of all the councillors. Not having a second bridge is a significant hindrance to the growth and future development of the town. The Minister of State talks about the plans that are there. We have to obtain national funding to build this bridge. Kildare County Council has sought funding for it. The Minister of State must acknowledge the negative impacts that this will have on future plans for Newbridge. There is a proposed traffic management plan from the National Transport Authority in respect of which submissions have been received. I am concerned because I am of the view that far more radical changes than those which have been proposed are needed in order to improve matters regarding the build up of traffic. What is proposed will not work without a second bridge. We could have investment in respect of the traffic flow within Newbridge. The traffic is chaotic at the best of times. We need a strategic, long-term plan to deal with possible increases in housing and attractions to our town. That cannot be done without a second bridge. Another smaller bridge in the area, Sexes Bridge, is a prime example of the need for adjustment. The area has been developed significantly, yet the only changes to this bridge were to add traffic lights and a footpath.

The regional spatial and economic strategy for the eastern and midland regional plan is close to the Minister of State's heart. The report on submissions was released earlier this month and it was felt that Newbridge should not be listed as a key town. Newbridge is the fifth largest town in the mid-eastern strategic planning area and it is the only large town of the ten largest towns in the mid-east area that is excluded as a key town. We are a dynamic town. We are on a main rail line with good connectivity to the wider hinterland. I cannot help but feel that the lack of a second bridge is impacting on decisions such as this. While Newbridge is thriving now, it needs a lot of extra support. Future population and economic growth will not continue without a second bridge.

Deputy Damien English: It is open to the Kildare local authority to make another application in the future. We have had engagement about why it did not succeed in the first instance. Four out of seven projects did. The Deputy stated that it got four out of seven priorities, which is quite good compared to other counties. I am trying to match good quality planning with infrastructure under this fund. The whole-of-Government approach in the context of Project

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Ireland 2040 is that we should invest in infrastructure because this will encourage greater investment and quality of life in many areas. It will also make up for a lack of infrastructure in the past due to bad planning, where we had thousands of houses built in many counties, but no infrastructure provided to service them. As we roll out the next round of development and recognise that there will probably be an additional 500,000 houses built over the next 20 to 25 years, we want to do that in a planned and co-ordinated way. We have asked all the regions that use the national development plan to put in place three regional plans and to bring that down to county level too.

There were concerns about the different population growth targets in the regions which I think have been addressed since the draft. People are very happy in Kildare, Meath and Wicklow that the right population targets are in place. They will encourage more housing construction along with job creation and such. It will not be as it was in the past, with houses with no jobs. That will change and that will mean there will have to be investment in infrastructure in towns in a timely manner. We asked that we would focus on the county town concept in every local authority. Newbridge is not the county town of Kildare. My understanding is that is probably why it was not named the county town. The Deputy makes a good argument that all towns should be considered. As the regional plans are taken down to a county town level, there will naturally be a plan for each town that will set out its strategy for the years ahead. We recognise Kildare as a county that will grow. It will need more houses. That needs to happen in a planned, co-ordinated way.

The Deputy and I have both seen many cases where places have been allowed to grow without the proper infrastructure, whether services, investment in education, hospitals, roads or whatever it takes. Very often, transport infrastructure is a key part of that too. We are determined that, if we work with local authorities properly, the right resources will be allocated to the areas that need it to deal with development for the past and also for the future, which we are trying to do with the long-term thinking in Project Ireland 2040. There will be plenty of opportunity to deal with this in the context of the applications. If everyone does their homework right, I have no doubt that there is every reason there could be a successful application in the future. We do not judge them. It is not me or the Minister, there is an independent body with all the expertise to make the call on whether applications are successful.

5 o'clock

Report entitled 'Climate Change: A Cross-Party Consensus on Climate Action': Motion

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I move:

That Dáil Éireann shall take note of the Report of the Joint Committee on Climate Action entitled Climate Change: A Cross-Party Consensus on Climate Action, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 29th March, 2019.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): This is an important opportunity to acknowledge the work of Deputy Hildegarde Naughton and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action. I think the whole House has recognised that this is a really important subject. It has rightly been described as the greatest challenge facing humanity. I had the benefit of being at the conference in Poland where

people from the youngest student to the oldest environmentalist commented on the scale of the challenge we face and the urgency with which we must address it. This country has seen some extraordinary changes in the past decade. One of the ways we have succeeded in making change is by using the Citizens' Assembly and the all-party Oireachtas committee approach as a way, not of getting full consensus, but of creating a significant degree of common ground on issues that present real difficulty to our community. We need to think outside the traditional ways we have thought. It is absolutely right that in what is probably the greatest challenge we face and the greatest set of changes we have to make as a community we have adopted the same approach. I acknowledge the work of the Citizens' Assembly that preceded the work of the Oireachtas committee because it exposes the Oireachtas to thinking from outside, which is very healthy, and has provoked our political system to sit down with everyone involved, with people from different backgrounds, to hear views that are challenging at times but yet try to find common ground between them so that we can meet obligations that are very important not only to us but to our global environment. That is what has been achieved by this report. I know it does not have full consensus but there is a great deal of common ground there and many very practical proposals.

Anyone who gets close to studying this issue, and I have to admit that it is only since I was appointed to this post that I have given it the level of attention it deserves, will see that we are approaching a tipping point in respect of climate deterioration and things will deteriorate very rapidly unless we move very swiftly. The window of opportunity to do that is fast closing. We come to that from the unenviable situation of being way off target. We will be approaching 2020 with the expectation that far from having reduced our emissions by 20% as was expected we will probably be down by only 1%. That is a massive disappointment. As the economy has started to recover the link between economic prosperity and carbon emissions has not been broken. Substantial increases in emissions, particularly in agriculture and industry, have accompanied the recovery.

A great urgency has entered this debate not only in this House but further afield as we saw in the protests by school students and the increasing urgency of demands for action from us and from other parliaments around the world. It is justified that a level of urgency be injected into this debate. When we speak of an emergency people often think of something unexpected that can be resolved through a sustained effort for a relatively short time. This is not an emergency of that sort. This is a much more challenging emergency in that we must change our behaviour in profound ways and do so on a sustained basis. Our targets for 2030 represent a 2% per annum reduction in emissions that we need to make. From 2030 to 2050 that will accelerate massively to deliver a 7% reduction per annum. This is going to be a sustained challenge for our communities, homes, ways of travel and working, to change those in such a way that we can meet the obligations.

There is a huge responsibility and Government must put together the whole of government system to respond effectively to this report from the Oireachtas committee and put us on a trajectory to hit our targets and achieve the sort of ambitions we want to set for 2050. The one asset of my period in government, which I hope will be of advantage to me in taking on this challenge, is that when we faced the employment crisis we had to enlist support across Government and we used the Office of the Taoiseach and the Department of which I was then Minister to get a level of ambition and co-ordination to meet the challenge. That experience is valuable and I will adopt the same approach of having very rigorous, well-defined targets with clear responsibility, tracking their impact and adapting each year as we go to ensure that we are

achieving them.

The committee's work is really valuable in shaping our direction of travel. It has been very clear in its demand for a new approach to governance and to political accountability which is absolutely appropriate. It has dealt very effectively with renewable power, retrofitting, carbon pricing and many other individual sectors such as transport and agriculture which we cannot go into in the time available. Possibly the most important sections are those which recognise this is something very different from designing policy to be implemented. This involves community engagement and getting the confidence that there will be a just transition as we undertake difficult changes that will affect every home and individual. That will be an important part of it. This is not the sort of emergency where some individual or Minister is given emergency powers which set aside normal parliamentary procedures or accountability to do something for a short time. This is an emergency where we have to orchestrate our whole community to adopt a different way of dealing with issues. That will be really challenging. It will be important that we frame that debate, get action and do not divide communities into rural versus urban or farming versus others. There is a genuine risk of pitting one group against another instead of trying to find a way of bringing everyone together toward a shared goal and a sense of confidence that the burden will be shared fairly.

Our own process is well advanced. I started with a consultation which was very useful and several Deputies participated. I have had 11 interdepartmental teams considering very particular areas where there are opportunities to act effectively. We have designed a marginal abatement cost, MAC, curve, looking from the whole of economy point of view at the interventions we could make that would hit our targets and be cost-effective from the community point of view. That starts to give one an idea of the areas that can make the biggest impact in the short run and at what point different technologies will start to impact. We must be prepared to see them take off and make a significant impact as we go along.

We have made some significant commitments already. We have committed, in response to the committee's request, to a target of 70% renewable power. We have introduced the climate action fund and its first allocation of money is to roll out an electric vehicle charging network so that we begin to see more people having the confidence to purchase electric vehicles. It is very significant that there has been a real surge this year in the number of people buying electric or plug-in hybrid vehicles. We are also changing the rules on green procurement because Government as a purchaser of nearly €12 billion in goods is hugely powerful in terms of its capacity to influence the choices that are made throughout the supply chain.

I thank Deputy Hildegard Naughton and the members of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, many of whom are here this evening, for the work they put into their report. I look forward to co-operating closely with them as we bring forward a Government response which will be renewable each year and will be based on the principle of open debate and feedback.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the Minister for his very positive comments and his emphasis on the need for urgency on this issue. The report of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, responding to the Citizen's Assembly report on climate change, was formally launched on 16 April 2019. This report marks the beginning of a new era for climate policy in Ireland. The report represents all-party consensus on many of the tough and ambitious actions the Government must take to address its international climate commitments and go beyond that to become a leader in tackling climate change globally. We as an Oireachtas have shown leadership, bringing all political groupings together to reach strong cross-party support for the

practical recommendations outlined in our report. There have been calls for this type of good practice on climate policy to be replicated across Europe.

We know the science around climate change is becoming increasingly urgent. The special report by the Intergovernmental Conference on Climate Change, IPCC, on global warming of 1.5° Celsius was the starkest warning yet that we are running out of time to address runaway climate change. In Ireland we are beginning to see some of the initial effects of climate change through extreme weather events, such as flooding, affecting our homes, farms and businesses. Our citizens and, in particular, our young people are mobilising to demand stronger climate action to secure their future. Our Citizen's Assembly was clear in its call for Ireland to do more to address this existential threat. In establishing the joint committee to look at the recommendations of the Citizen's Assembly and in producing our detailed report for action, the Oireachtas has shown that we are listening to Irish citizens, that we take climate change extremely seriously and that we must take strong and immediate action to address it.

I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge the great work of the Joint Committee on Climate Action over the last seven months. I commend my committee colleagues, across all political groupings, for their commitment to this process. I express my thanks to Deputies Butler, Corcoran-Kennedy, Pringle, Eamon Ryan, Sherlock, Bríd Smith, Stanley, Deering, Doolley, Heydon, Lahart, Munster, Jack Chambers, Neville and Nolan and to Senators Paul Daly, Devine, Lombard, Marshall and Grace O'Sullivan. Parties should be proud of reaching a strong consensus position on many of the tough actions the Government must take for Ireland to play its part in fairly addressing climate change globally.

The committee's report provides a clear mandate for actions the Government must take to address Ireland's international climate change obligations. It is large and particularly detailed for an Oireachtas report, containing more than 40 priority recommendations for Government and State agencies. It addresses actions across all relevant sectors and proposes a new governance framework for climate policy that will pave the way for more transformational changes in individual sectors. It also covers cross-cutting themes such as incentivising climate action, just transition, citizen engagement and education and communication. The report further highlights the opportunities for Ireland, recognising that there will be new green industries, new jobs and new export opportunities as we transition to a low-carbon economy.

We have tried to make the report accessible to citizens, highlighting the opportunities and co-benefits of low carbon living such as cleaner air, more comfortable homes and healthier lifestyles. We have tried to work with the different sectors, making recommendations that incentivise participants to drive the transition to a low-carbon economy. It is now up to the Government to use this bold political mandate in developing its all-of-Government action plan to feed into Ireland's national energy and climate plan.

I wish to focus on a few areas of the report that have received a lot of attention. Our report recommends new legislation setting ambitious climate and renewable electricity targets, putting Ireland in line with the latest science from the IPCC which calls for net zero emissions globally by 2050. The proposed legislation would also require five year carbon budgets to be devised by a new climate action council which would supersede the existing Climate Change Advisory Council to set a structured pathway for emissions reductions. The report further recommends that responsibility for climate action be centrally co-ordinated by the Department of the Taoiseach. In order to ensure adequate oversight and accountability, the committee recommends a new permanent Oireachtas committee that will hold Ministers and public officials directly to

account for performance on climate action. This new governance framework would be truly transformational and would provide a robust structure to ensure that Ireland gets back on track and stays on track in tackling climate change. I urge the Government and the Oireachtas to fast track these legislative changes.

There was broad, cross-party support for setting a long-term price for carbon of €80 by 2030, giving certainty to individuals and businesses to drive the transition towards low-carbon choices, investment and innovation. This should be accompanied by supports and incentives for climate action measures including the protection of those vulnerable to fuel poverty. A public consultation was recommended to help to inform Government's decision on whether to return the revenue to citizens equally as a carbon dividend or to spend it in a targeted manner to address fuel poverty and support climate actions. Those who oppose any increase in the carbon price but criticise Ireland for not meeting its climate targets are pursuing a populist line that is not linked to the reality we face. The vast majority of our political parties recognise that increases in the price of carbon are necessary if we are serious about lowering our emissions trajectory. It would put an increasing cost on greenhouse gas emissions that reflects their social and environmental impact, encouraging business and citizens to pursue lower carbon choices. Increases must, of course, be balanced by enhanced incentives to support households and small businesses to decarbonise such as grant schemes and low interest loans.

In addressing agricultural emissions, the committee was mindful of the importance of this sector to the rural economy as well as the large proportion of our emissions generated by the sector. Members proposed that farmers should be encouraged and supported to engage in climate mitigation measures, some of which should be incentivised through the CAP. We also recommended the implementation of the Teagasc report in full and on-farm measures to reduce emissions and improve the sustainability of farming in Ireland, including through agricultural diversification. Measures to reduce soil carbon emissions and better enhance the carbon sequestration potential of land were also proposed through, for example, sustainable forestry practices, maintaining hedgerows and re-wetting peatlands. The committee also recommended a national strategy for anaerobic digestion.

The report acknowledges the urgent need to retrofit the majority of the housing stock in the State in order to reduce emissions from heating. It recommends a needs assessment to ascertain what is required to deliver this to the planned 45,000 homes per annum and to explore increasing that number to 75,000. On energy, the committee was mindful of the huge potential for expanding renewable energy generation in Ireland, especially off shore, to help us to meet our climate targets. The committee recommended actions to further and better exploit Ireland's plentiful renewable energy resources such as by urgently delivering a regulatory framework for offshore energy generation. The report also recommends measures to enable the participation of citizens in large commercial projects, to promote community led projects and support microgeneration. Developing offshore wind generation should become a priority and I urge Government and the Oireachtas to fast track legislation such as the Marine and Foreshore (Amendment) Bill to ensure a regulatory framework can be put in place as soon as possible to enable an offshore industry to develop. Offshore energy projects can contribute to Ireland's energy mix and help us to meet our 2030 targets. It has been a privilege to chair the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action, which is supporting Ireland to meet its international climate obligations with a view to ultimately becoming a global leader in climate action. This report represents significant political consensus that will help to frame climate policy in Ireland for the next 15 years. It is my earnest hope that the recommendations in this report are imple-

mented as quickly as possible, particularly those recommendations around the establishment of a new and comprehensive framework for climate policy in Ireland. The existing committee will continue its work over the coming year, working to address areas into which we were not able to delve in sufficient detail. Let the committee's report be the start of the ambitious and immediate actions Government will take to get Ireland back on track, and to keep us on track, to meet our international climate change obligations. This is just the beginning. The hardest job of reducing our emissions is yet to come but with continued cross-party support and much work across Government and all sections of our economy and society we can change the dial and ensure Ireland becomes a climate leader.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I move amendment No. 3:

(a) To delete the words "shall take note of" and substitute the words "declares a climate and biodiversity emergency and accepts and endorses"; and

(b) To insert the following after "29th March, 2019": "and calls for the Citizens' Assembly to examine how the State can improve its response to the issue of biodiversity loss."

Fianna Fáil recognises that the climate crisis is the defining global challenge of our time. We are committed to ensuring that Ireland does its fair share in response to the emergency and we therefore strongly support this landmark, cross-party report of the Oireachtas joint committee, in which I was privileged to participate. I thank the Chair, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, for the way in which she managed the process in addition to all my colleagues on the committee. I also thank the secretariat for the work it put in during the six months of deliberations.

I will start by briefly discussing why we have this report. The joint committee was established to respond to the 17 recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly. It is important to be clear on why the Citizens' Assembly was called on to address this issue and on why the committee took such time to examine its proposals and put forward detailed recommendations. This House has heard on several occasions that global warming has to be limited to below 2°C. Unless we cut emissions significantly by 2030, the consequences will be dire. Like other parties, Fianna Fáil has tabled an amendment, which I have moved, that calls for the declaration of a climate emergency.

We must recognise, however, that declaring an emergency does not paint the full picture. This report is before us because the Government has knowingly and repeatedly failed to put in place a proper climate strategy and to implement policies that would see Ireland's pollution emissions reduce. As a result, Ireland will not meet its EU 2020 climate and renewables targets. We are on track to miss our 2020 target by an abysmal 95% and our 2030 commitments are already at risk. Compliance costs to try to close the gap are likely to be in the hundreds of millions. Ireland is now heralded as the worst performing country in Europe for action on climate change. It is the Irish public who will suffer most from the significant environmental, economic and health impacts arising from a failure to decarbonise.

Notwithstanding that appalling record, I notice that in one of the Taoiseach's many communications on Twitter he is today heralding the fact that there has been some reductions as a result of the lack of use of the plant at Moneypoint as if this is something to be celebrated. It is anything but. It is a full recognition of our failures so far. To be clear, the recommendations in the joint committee's report are absolutely necessary not only because we have a global climate crisis, but because we have a climate action crisis here in Ireland. The State is very far from be-

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ing a leader; it is on life support. This committee has done its duty, however, and come forward with necessary actions which this Government must adopt in full.

Fianna Fáil does not believe that the State's response to the climate crisis can ever be treated as purely a technical, academic exercise. Social justice must be at the core of climate action. The report has rightly focused on the need for a just transition and for those most exposed and most in need of assistance to be put first. The social consequences of climate action should be tackled first and not treated as an afterthought. It is for this reason that Fianna Fáil was particularly strong on the impacts of a carbon tax increase and demanded that the most vulnerable be protected first, with revenues ring-fenced and used to support those not in a position to transition immediately from fossil fuels.

Fianna Fáil's priority was that we would not have the sort of vague promises and window dressing that has been a hallmark of this Government's response to climate change. We have witnessed unprecedented student protest for concentrated and commensurate action. We need an honest response. Fianna Fáil has therefore sought to ensure that committee recommendations are SMART - specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound. The science demands measurable action, not living documents. It is vital that we are able to track progress across Departments and relevant public bodies. We must see these deadlines in the Minister's forthcoming plan. Having previously put forward legislation on both new targets and expanding the responsibilities of our Climate Change Advisory Council, Fianna Fáil has long been clear on the need for a clear course of action, which is a legally binding objective in line with the Paris agreement. I very much welcome the recommendation that we follow the example of the UK and put a commitment to net zero emissions by 2050 in legislation together with the new renewables target and a disciplined budgeting approach.

Fianna Fáil also focused on practical measures which would see immediate benefits for citizens and business. This means much greater investment in retrofitting and solar for more energy efficient homes, making community energy schemes and benefits mandatory for renewable projects, new incentives including CAP measures to help farmers fight climate change at farm level, the establishment of an independent just transition task force to make sure we decarbonise in a way that is fair to the workers and communities most affected and new supports to encourage the roll-out of electric cars and buses and greater participation in cycling.

At international level, the Government must ensure that Ireland supports rather than hinders greater EU ambition but we are hearing the opposite is the case. It has been widely reported today that Ireland has refused to join with other progressive member states in pushing for greater EU climate ambition at today's summit on the future of Europe in Romania.

I also want to highlight the second part of Fianna Fáil's amendment which calls for both a climate and biodiversity emergency to be declared and for biodiversity loss to be examined by the Citizens' Assembly. It is unfortunate that we do not have the opportunity to discuss fully the extremely grave warnings published this week in a global assessment report on devastation of species and habitats. In short, biodiversity loss is an existential threat that is fundamentally linked to the climate crisis and Ireland's response is similarly lacking. The current national biodiversity action plan goes nowhere near far enough. When it comes to conserving our biodiversity and responding to the global assessment report, the existential approach of the Government on climate action must not be repeated. A co-ordinated strategy which integrates biodiversity objectives into policy decisions is needed across all relevant Departments and public bodies. The Government must ensure that environmental laws are enforced and align policy implemen-

tation and planning with necessary progress on the sustainable development goals. We also need significantly increased investment in habitat restoration and improved public engagement on the climate and biodiversity crises. The Government should urgently progress measures in the committee report which relate to the protection of our forests, peatlands and soils. Now that we have completed the examination of the Citizens' Assembly's conclusions on the climate crisis we should call for the State's response to biodiversity loss to be similarly integrated, as noted in the amendment.

All of the recommendations in this report must be reflected in the Minister's forthcoming plan, particularly those relating to biodiversity. These must feed into the existing national mitigation plan and necessary legislation on governance and accountability must be introduced before the summer break. The report is a welcome initial step which, if implemented, will allow Ireland to get back on track and bring to an end our laggardly response to climate change.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Sinn Féin's amendment No. 4 states:

To insert the following after "29th March, 2019":

“— however, rejects the endorsement of an increase in the existing carbon tax; and
— declares a climate and ecological emergency.”

I welcome the opportunity to address this motion. Sinn Féin is fully committed to climate action. We recognise the reality that we are living in the middle of a climate crisis which will spiral out of control if we do not take immediate and radical action.

The time for talking is over. We are dedicated to taking action that is ambitious and based on a just transition towards a sustainable, green economy. No worker, family or community can be left behind. That is why Sinn Féin is calling on the Government and this House to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency. Climate action should not be viewed as a burden. We should see it as an opportunity to create a stronger, more sustainable economy for everyone. To do that, however, we have no option but to radically transform our society and economy. We have a fantastic opportunity to invest in towns and villages in rural areas which have for a very long time been neglected. We need a genuine transformation to revitalise rural communities. We can achieve that objective. What we do not want is to see a transition that places an unfair burden on working families through regressive taxation. We do not want to see a transition based on private market solutions that push thousands more families into fuel poverty. We cannot allow climate action to turn into some sort of green austerity where taxes increase and workers lose their jobs.

Sinn Féin is committed to climate action and we are willing to work with every group here on a cross-party basis, as we have done. At the Joint Committee on Climate Action we did achieve consensus on the vast majority of substantive issues behind climate change. However, we diverged when it came to agreeing to certain solutions to the problem, particularly in the areas of afforestation, power, waste, a just transition and carbon tax. My party also wants to be more ambitious in producing power from renewables. For that reason, we felt it was necessary to produce our own minority report. We believe the majority report fails to deal fully with the principles of a just transition. In our minority report we call for a just transition in line with the International Labour Organization's framework. This is essential to ensure ordinary people will not be left behind, which we have as a key recommendation. Just last week we saw Bord na Móna announce that a total of 200 workers had been made redundant this year, with 240 more

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to lose their jobs by the end of the year. That is having a significant effect on places in the midlands such as counties Laois and Offaly. While we all agree that we must move away from peat production, it is essential that we transition to an alternative that is environmentally sustainable and that will not drive down the standard of employment for workers. That is why Sinn Féin is proposing that we phase out peat by transitioning towards renewables such as biomass, biogas, solar and wind energy. While it is positive that some peat plants have already started converting to biomass, we have not established a native biomass industry on a scale that can create the supply chains required to support it and supply the raw material. Instead, we are up importing fuel from across the globe to power these plants. That has carbon footprint implications.

With regard to biogas, Germany has over 8,000 such plants, while England has over 600. We have a problem here with agricultural waste. We have a large agriculture sector and need to deal with this to do things more sustainably. We are repeatedly seeking derogations from the European Commission for slurry spreading instead of using biogas as a sustainable way of utilising this material to create sustainable energy. Our large agriculture sector means that we have one of the best biogas resources in the European Union, but we are not taking advantage of it. We are only starting to do so. We have one plant that is supplying gas to the town of Athy. Despite this great potential, the midlands are in danger of becoming a rust belt. We need to do this quickly. Sinn Féin is arguing that we should provide Bord na Móna with the substantial State and EU funding that it is seeking to make the transition from brown to green industries through biomass, biogas and so on. We also have potential in Ireland for wind, wave, hydro and solar energy. A recent report by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, estimates that a €1 billion euro investment by the State would lead to the creation of 11,000 net jobs in solar energy, 4,400 jobs in wind energy and over 18,000 jobs in retrofitting homes. That is a great need. We have an opportunity to enable Ireland to become secure in its energy supply, instead of importing up to €5 billion worth of fossil fuels each year and continuing to create the amount of pollution we currently create. There is great potential to move towards a green economy based on good employment and a sustainable environment. Unfortunately, the report fails in some aspects to deal fully with the ambitious just transition that we need.

Sinn Féin is clear and unambiguous that it is absolutely opposed to an increase in carbon tax. The international evidence does not show that carbon taxes have worked. Since the introduction of a carbon tax in Ireland in 2010, emissions have actually increased. Sinn Féin will not support a policy that would multiply the carbon tax by up to four times its current rate. Householders are already paying €52.67 extra in carbon taxes on a tonne of coal. That figure will increase to €208 under what is planned. There are 400,000 families across the State living in fuel poverty and any increase in carbon tax would force thousands more into fuel poverty. Heating one's home in winter time is not a luxury. We are collecting substantial amounts by way of carbon tax. Sinn Féin wants the existing carbon tax we currently bring in each year to be ring-fenced for retrofitting homes, which would help people to reduce their energy use and bills in a positive way, as well as reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Most of the homes in the greatest need of retrofitting, with the worst energy ratings, are also the lowest income households. We must get our heads around this key point. More often than not, those on the lowest incomes live in the homes with the least insulation and that are least energy efficient. They have very high energy bills. We cannot expect families and their communities to change their behaviour without giving them a viable alternative to which to transition. We cannot tell people in rural villages and towns to use their cars less when they do not have any public transport available. We cannot expect people in the city to use electric cars when we do not have the required networks to charge them. In its minority report Sinn Féin has set an ambitious target

of achieving a figure of 80% for renewable energy by 2030. We believe that is achievable. It is good that the majority report includes a figure of 70%, for which we pushed, but we believe we can go 10% further. That is completely achievable and contingent on the basis that we work together to develop innovative policies. We should be ambitious and see if we can set the figure of 70% as the baseline and push it further.

My office has put forward a Bill on microgeneration, which is mainstream in Germany, Italy and many other European countries. The Bill would allow families, small businesses and communities to generate their own electricity and sell the excess to the grid. It is through these simple, straightforward ideas that we can move away from a high carbon economy. This is an issue of fairness and sustainability. That is what we must get right. We must ensure those who are the least to blame for the climate crisis are not the ones who will end up paying the highest financial cost through a new green austerity programme. The transition to a low carbon economy cannot be left to the whims of the private market; it must be led by a public vision supported by public investment. It must involve all public bodies, including local authorities, the Government and all other State agencies. That is the approach we need to take.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: I congratulate the committee on its work, particularly the Chairman, Deputy Naughton. Deputy Sherlock represented the Labour Party on the committee. Unfortunately, he cannot be here because his wife gave birth to a baby this week, adding to the world population crisis.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Congratulations.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: The climate challenge facing Ireland boils down to one simple thing: greenhouse gas emissions. The economy is based on burning fossil fuels. We burn oil, gas and peat for electricity generation, industrial processes and home heating and power almost all transport. Burning fossil fuels releases large quantities of carbon dioxide which is the main greenhouse gas. Other economic activities such as farming also generate methane, nitrous oxide and F-gases, all of which are greenhouse gases. The bottom line is that our total greenhouse gas emissions are 60 million tonnes per year. The EPA conducts studies to determine where the emissions come from. A third comes from farming, 19% from transport, 19% from electricity generation and 10% from home heating while the remainder come from other sources such as manufacturing, industrial processes and waste. Our international commitment under the Paris Agreement is to get our greenhouse gas emissions down to 33 million tonnes per year by 2030. This is not a political target. It is based on the best science. Greenhouse gases remain in the atmosphere for decades. Our 60 million tonnes of emissions are cumulative so it should be no surprise that with almost 8 billion people on Earth, we have reached and far exceeded the ability of natural processes to absorb these emissions.

There will only be one economy in the future and that will be an economy that operates on a carbon-neutral basis. We are facing an environment and climate emergency and Labour believes the Government should elevate its concern with climate to the status of a national emergency until we have taken serious steps towards reducing our carbon emissions. Carbon emissions and the destruction of natural habitats are the root cause of the loss of plant and animal species, which is as much of a problem in Ireland as it is in other countries. Declarations are not enough. We must have concrete proposals to reduce our emissions in each and every sector of the economy. Fine Gael keeps saying it will reverse the trajectory of Ireland's rising emissions but we have not seen anything like the seriousness of action that is needed. Ireland's emissions per person are amongst the highest of any country. We are behind many other Euro-

pean countries in taking action and we urgently need to catch up.

Labour's core concern throughout the discussion on climate change is that workers and communities could be made worse off. Labour has joined with ICTU and individual trade unions in calling for a just transition approach. This means making sure that workers can move to new quality, sustainable jobs if their industries are going to decline due to reduction in our use of fossil fuels. Bord na Móna workers are one obvious example. Labour called for a just transition task force to be set up, along with a fund, to make sure that we create new good jobs in the midlands to ensure that communities there are not destroyed economically by the loss of hundreds of good jobs in Bord na Móna. The same just transition approach should be taken across the board. Will the Government establish a national just transition task force in 2019 with an independent chair and membership drawn from trade unions, employers and the community sector, as the report recommends?

Labour believes that we can combine serious action on climate with serious action on poverty and inequality. There is no doubt that the transition to a carbon-neutral economy will require dramatic changes but we can use that as an opportunity to change our economy for the better. We can eliminate fuel poverty by putting serious investment into home insulation and retrofitting and by making sure all new housing uses the best possible insulation. That would reduce carbon emissions and reduce poverty. If all homes reduced heating emissions to zero and used electricity from sustainable wind power, this would meet 9% of the total emissions reductions required. This is an example of Labour's approach to real climate action. We want a "Green New Deal" for Ireland with ambitious targets for home energy retrofitting that will create many new jobs. We believe the Climate Change Advisory Council was right to seek for 100,000 homes to be retrofitted annually and Labour shares that level of ambition. We should start by retrofitting all council housing and publicly owned buildings.

There is a significant amount in the report's recommendations. Due to time pressure, I will focus my remarks on just a few areas. The report calls for carbon budgets. Currently, responsibility for emissions rests with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment but all Departments need to be included. I acknowledge the Minister's comments in that regard earlier. Labour has been fighting for science-based carbon budgets that would set out for every year the maximum allowable carbon emissions for each Department and for each sector of the economy. Deputy Howlin recently proposed a new office of Minister for public expenditure and climate action to integrate carbon budgets into the national budget framework to give this the seriousness that it deserves. Will Fine Gael adopt carbon budgets?

Carbon tax is one of the measures needed if we are to collectively deliver the scale of change with the urgency dictated by the science of climate change. Labour has taken the view that we can support carbon tax if all of the proceeds are ring-fenced to address the climate emergency. The economy is not going to magically transform overnight. Investment in home insulation, public transport and better recycling needs major investment. The private sector will address some areas like electricity generation because it is clearly profitable to generate electricity from wind but the State will need to step in across many other areas of the economy. Carbon taxes provide a way of funding that investment while also reducing poverty. Opponents of raising carbon taxes have to specify where else they would raise taxes to come up with the hundreds of millions of euro annually that are needed to transform our economy to a carbon-neutral economy.

It will be hard for our current agricultural sector to become sustainable and carbon neutral.

Greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture are increasing when we need to reduce emissions urgently. There is currently no Government policy in place to address the trajectory of agricultural emissions. We need a just transition in farming as well to lower emissions and protect livelihoods. A free market approach will not deliver sustainable agriculture and decent farm incomes. Labour has called for measures to help farmers diversify their incomes as part of the transition.

Ireland's industrialised peatlands emit approximately 7 million tonnes of carbon dioxide every year. It is astonishing that no one has yet addressed this. There is nothing in the national peatlands strategy to address it. Peatlands need to be re-wetted and rehabilitated to stop carbon emissions from leaking out. Labour proposed ambitious targets for the restoration and rehabilitation of each major type of peatland in Ireland but we could not get agreement from other parties. Re-wetted peatlands could open up a new chapter for the rural economy with Bord na Móna positioned as the custodian of our peatlands and new jobs created in peatland restoration, nature tourism and recreational activities. What does the Government intend to do about peatlands?

We need a similar strategy to change our approach to forestry with a move towards continuous cover of native broadleaf species. That would create more jobs and better jobs in forestry but changes to our model of forestry will require supports in the early years as it will take time for the new model to begin paying dividends to investors.

Detailed work is needed to build on all of the recommendations of the climate report. The committee should meet weekly until the summer recess to make progress on this issue. The climate emergency needs to be taken much more seriously by all of us but by the Government in particular. Is Fine Gael committed to climate action? Will the environmental and climate emergency be made into a legally binding all-of-Government priority? Is Fine Gael committed to reducing our emissions to 33 million tonnes by 2030? Is the party committed to a carbon-neutral economy by 2050? It is essential that this commitment is there and is backed up by the urgent actions that are required to address the emergency that are contained in the report that I welcomed at the outset.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Amendment No. 2 states:

To insert the following after "29th March, 2019":

"and declares a climate emergency."

I thank Deputy Naughton for the great job she did as Chairperson of the committee that produced this report. However, the starting point should be the other reports that are constantly being produced - probably on a daily basis. They include a report entitled, EU Overshoot Day: Living Beyond Nature's Limits, which will be published on 10 May 2019 and a report from Paul Price, a researcher in DCU, which I received this morning. Paul Price looks at what we need to do to rapidly make a transition to a fossil fuel-free society in Ireland. He bases his study on the current national energy and climate plan. I know it is difficult to see but what he is trying to show us with this graph that for our carbon emissions to be where they need to be, we need to be up here but we are down here. What this report plans to give us is in between the two. It falls short of what needs to be done. That is my starting point - not to be a naysayer but to say that we are not doing enough and are not moving rapidly enough at the scale and speed required to deal with the loss of species and biodiversity on the planet and to deal with our emissions.

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These reports are interesting and I hope Members will look at them. They reference repeatedly what we need to do to reduce our emissions and to be optimistic about the scenarios we can have for the future. However, this report does not go far enough in that respect.

To paraphrase Greta Thunberg, these reports should make us panic. That is what she has said. We, as politicians, need to panic, and she is right. The stark realisation is that we are living through a mass species extinction - we are heading towards the loss of 1 million species - and that we may now be committed to trends that place a question mark over the future of ourselves as a species, yet the official policy of the State is to effectively ignore these facts and proceed with plans and policies which, aside from the odd public relations release or spin, ignore these realities. I advise the Minister that we need to panic. One would think in that context that I would welcome a report entitled, *Climate Change: A Cross-Party Consensus for Action*. The first comment I would make on it is that it is not a cross-party consensus. I have written to the Chairman of the committee and to the Minister today asking for that to be corrected. Two parties did not consensually adopt this report and that needs to be put on the record. I have also written asking for the record to be changed regarding an amendment I proposed that was accepted on a just transition for workers. Importantly, that amendment was altered not by us, and it was not what we voted on - to exclude peat workers from the possibility of the State taking care of the pensions and conditions of those workers. I wrote about that in the email I sent and I hope the Minister will strongly consider making those adjustments.

We contributed to and participated in this committee for months. We took it very seriously and in every chapter we suggested recommendations and policies that we believed could have an effect. In fairness, on many occasions, the committee listened to us and tried to adopt some of the positions on those issues, such as fuel poverty, the need to protect workers in industries affected, the kind of role the State should play in delivering renewables and the role of the fossil fuel industry in hampering and hindering the actions we need to take. Other issues it did not take on board included a proposal to work towards delivering free public transport in the future.

This report is too modest and too meek and it lacks the ambition that is needed in many areas. If this report has been produced ten or 20 years ago we might have considered it progress. Given what we now know and what scientists are alerting us to and screaming at us on a daily basis, the report is mild and a little outdated.

The key issue I have, aside from the aspirational nature rather than the concrete nature of the report, is the proposal on carbon tax, or as it is called in the report, "incentivising climate action". First, what is the tax on, who is it on and how do its supporters believe it will reduce our carbon emissions? Effectively the carbon tax, or the increase in it, is on the consumption of fossil fuel energy by ordinary people, that is, on their energy, transport and heating bills. It suggests that if these bills rise, it will incentivise ordinary people to turn away from their high-carbon use and adopt alternative, renewable sources of energy, transport and heating. It is true there are many good ideas and suggestions in the report but there is only one policy I am confident this Government and its successors will enact and that is the trajectory for raising carbon taxes on ordinary people.

We can dress this as we want but the ideology behind this proposal is that ordinary people's personal behaviour and choices are the key to reducing carbon emissions. If they, we and all the people who may be following these proceedings change our behaviour, that will encourage the market and private entrepreneurs to provide the alternatives we need. That will not work and it is a dangerous illusion. The problem is not the personal behaviour of ordinary people;

the problem is systemic, it is connected to the economic system under which we live, to the drive for profit and competition and the way the fossil fuel industry and the giant corporations attached to it are the heart of that system, the system of capitalism that has developed over the past 200 years.

We use fossil fuels because that is where the greatest profits, returns and largest investments are to be had. We have failed to reduce our emissions because of the opposition from the fossil fuel giants who denied the science and the link between fossil fuel use and climate change. These giant corporations have funded climate scepticism and climate deniers and have sought to delay and undermine those scientists who have been trying to raise awareness and they have bought and influenced governments which pursue policies that have meant society remains addicted to and continues to use fossil fuels and continues the extraction of oil, coal and gas.

Last year, almost 30 years after the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, report and decades after “An Inconvenient Truth” and after the scientists had begun screaming at governments, humanity emitted more CO₂ than ever before in human history, not less, not the same but the greatest volume of CO₂ from human industry, human consumption and other sources. That failure places a question mark over the future habitability of our planet. That failure has come after 30 years of failed market mechanisms that were introduced such as carbon trading, carbon offsets and dubious schemes and scams that provided a few windfall profits but failed to reduce or even address the global rate of CO₂ emissions. Carbon taxes on ordinary people are another market mechanism that will fail to reduce CO₂ emissions.

The imposition of carbon tax seeks to suggest that the problem is individual choices and that tweaking market signals can achieve the historic and major task that we face. The market will not provide the solution because to a large extent, the free market is the source of the problem. It is a system based on endless growth, on endless need to accumulate for the sake of profits and to expand and create new markets to accumulate more.

The measures humanity need to take fly in the face of the very reason free market capitalism exists in the first place but it is not true that it means demanding sacrifices from ordinary people or lowering our living standards. Free and plentiful public transport, energy efficient homes, properly planned towns, villages and cities and a switch to State-run renewable energies, especially in offshore wind, are not a sacrifice for ordinary people but could be a major gain for people and the planet. The measures needed to bring the mass of people with us in tackling climate change are those I listed. What do carbon taxes say to those people? They say they are the problem, not Exxon Mobil, Shell or the giant corporations that continue to extract the fossil fuels.

We will increase heating and transport costs by not providing alternatives in public transport or renewable energy. That is a guaranteed way to alienate ordinary people, lose them in the battle and allow climate sceptics tell them it is all a hoax designed to make them pay more, while the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

I have constituents, as have all Members present, who face fuel poverty and cannot access the fuel allowance. Their bills will go up and they will be seriously asked to accept that we mean what we say when we talk about reducing our carbon emissions.

I want to conclude by appealing to the Green Party Deputies to remove the amendment they have placed before the House because what it says to us is that we must accept the report in full,

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when we clearly already have voted against it, in order to accept that we need to declare a climate emergency. Of course, we need to declare a climate emergency. The Bill I have struggled to get to Committee Stage, and hopefully it get there in June, is called the climate emergency measures Bill. We accept there is a climate emergency but we will not be bounced into accepting a carbon tax on ordinary people for all the reasons I have outlined.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the report and its 42 priority recommendations and 39 ancillary recommendations. I thank the Chairman of the committee, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, my constituency colleague in Galway West, and all the members of the committee, including my colleague, Deputy Pringle, who represents the Independents 4 Change group.

It is important to put all that positivity, which is wonderful, in context. If we go back to 1988 where this started with the first intergovernmental conference, 31 years ago, and following on from that, during all that time our emissions have increased. The Kyoto Protocol was introduced in 1997 and it came into operation in 2005. We can jump forward to the Paris Agreement with its binding targets. Then we come to Ireland where we have had a White Paper, I am not sure if we have had a Green Paper, we have introduced legislation, we had a mitigation plan and a framework plan and we have set up the advisory council.

We have to acknowledge the Dáil has been led screaming by the nose to do something about climate change. It has not come from the Dáil, although it certainly has come from the Opposition, with new politics since February 2016. I welcome that the Government has come along with us in that new lead. We have been forced by the children of the world, the children of Ireland and the Citizens' Assembly to take action. That is what is happening here.

This is a good report, although I have some reservations about it, which I will come back to in regard to carbon tax and using it to divide and conquer, thereby losing the point of what we are trying to do in regard to climate change. Deputy Bríd Smith mentioned a number of reports. It would be remiss of me not to mention the recent biodiversity report, or should I say the "lack of biodiversity" report. The summary, or the advance unedited version, of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services for policymakers makes for grim reading. The UN-commissioned report, the summary of which was approved at the 7th session in Paris last week, is the most comprehensive report on the issue ever completed. It was compiled by 145 expert authors from 50 countries over the past three years, with inputs from more than 310 contributing authors. The report finds that approximately 1 million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction, many within decades, which is more than ever before in human history. The average abundance of native species in most major land-based habitats has fallen by at least 20%. More than 40% of amphibian species, almost 33% of reef-forming corals and more than one third of all marine mammals are threatened.

I hasten to add that only a small number of rich developed countries have led us to this disaster, and Ireland, unfortunately, is one of those. The intergovernmental panel's latest report in October 2018 confirmed what we have only 12 years left for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5°C, beyond which even half a degree will significantly worsen the risk of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people, most of whom have done nothing wrong. Rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society are essential to prevent catastrophic climate change. The latest report from the World Wildlife Fund tells us that the European Union consumes almost 20% of the earth's biocapacity, although it comprises only 7% of the world population. Our role in that, as I understand it, is

that Ireland is currently the third highest carbon emitter in the EU. The Climate Change Advisory Council produced its first report in November 2016 and pointed out we are failing to meet our targets. The EPA has spoken out and highlighted that we are failing to meet our targets.

Earlier today, we debated the national broadband plan and we noted for the first time that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform mentioned climate change in this regard. If the Government goes ahead with the plan in the manner in which it plans to do, it will have significant effects on many areas, including our ability to take climate change action.

In regard to the joint committee's report, I welcome the recommendation to set up a committee to monitor the implementation of the priority recommendations and ancillary recommendations, which is essential. Perhaps I am being a bit unfair to the Minister in regard to the way the motion is put because I realise it is the standard language to "note" the report. The report was laid before the Dáil on 29 March. Since then, as we know from each report, and as I have quoted the biodiversity report, circumstances have worsened. I would have thought the Government might have seen sense and moved on from the gentle language of taking "note" to taking action. I welcome the amendments tabled by Fianna Fáil, the Green Party, People Before Profit and Sinn Féin to declare an emergency, which I support. We have to take action but before we take action, as with housing, we have to recognise the problem. That will determine the speed of our action.

There are ten chapters in the report, which is too many to go through in the short time I have left. I will focus on chapter 10, which relates to transport. There are many good suggestions, including that we pick one particular city as a pilot project. Interestingly, this only appears once but it is a very strong recommendation on page 97, where paragraph 6.d states: "develop a pilot scheme for a city and its regional hinterland to develop a best practice model". I welcome that and I would suggest Galway city. The report refers to cities over a certain population size and Galway is a good example of a city that could be picked to implement climate change measures very quickly, particularly in respect of public transport. Our population is 80,000 and destined to increase by another 50%, which is all set out in national development plan and the national planning framework.

The Government talks about sustainability but it also talks about the provision of another road and more traffic, which goes completely against its own recommendations in this report and completely against the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly. As I understand it, the Government has endorsed all of recommendations from the Citizens' Assembly, which asked it to rebalance the money being spent on roads in favour of public transport.

To take Galway again, park and ride facilities could be implemented immediately. It has been in the city development plan since 2005 but, 14 years later, there is not a sign of park and ride in a city of 80,000 people, although it is picked out as one of the five cities to grow. Cycling infrastructure is minimal in Galway and could be immediately improved, with little effort. We have no biodiversity officer in Galway. These are practical measures and if the Minister was seriously interested, this could be done in a short time. The retrofitting of houses has been suggested and this should start immediately with the houses owned by the local authority.

I will give another example. On the one hand, there are good ideas coming from the Government, albeit with sustained pressure from the Opposition, but, on the other, it is doing the opposite. In Galway city, a successful "cash for cans" scheme has been operating for a number of years. People bring back aluminium cans and get a small amount in return. The scheme has

been suspended and one of the reasons is that the council believes the polluter should pay. Can the Minister believe this inverted logic? We have people willingly going forward to the council after picking up the aluminium cans but it has suspended the scheme. While that is small and parochial on one level, it illustrates the doublethink of the Government.

I will conclude in regard to carbon tax, which is divisive. The Government is going to divide people, which is unnecessary because the people are united in their demand that we do something about climate change at national level and then work down. We have to show the way in this Dáil and through the Government. By zoning in on a carbon tax for those who can least afford to pay, the Government is in danger of repeating the debacle of the water charges. I ask the Government to learn from that. We have no time left. We need to take serious, urgent action on so many aspects together. Let us agree on what we can agree on and take action, and not divide and conquer.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I would like to move the Green Party amendment.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We will deal with that later.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There are other amendments and we would like to support their provisions. The idea of identifying a climate crisis is correct, but we should also recognise the biodiversity breakdown. The two are inextricably connected. We support the suggestion of using the Citizens' Assembly as a mechanism to address the biodiversity crisis. We look forward to discussing the amendments with parties in advance of any vote.

Our own amendment is not intended to divide. I know there are different views on carbon tax. We did not bring it into this process; it came from the environmental community, environmental NGOs and the Climate Change Advisory Council, with which we engaged in our committee work. We know it is a divisive issue. We have sought to look at ways to introduce it which are socially progressive, demonstrably benefit those on lower incomes and protect people from fuel poverty. Our work in that regard is not finished. The report outlines that all parties are engaged in a further process. Before deciding on anything we are going to look at how it could be done in a way that signals the real cost of carbon while protecting those on lower incomes. That is not finished.

There are other aspects of the report which I think should be different. There is a glaring contrast between what we say about taking climate change seriously and a transport policy that is heading in the other direction. With our amendment we wanted to reflect what is happening in the UK Parliament, Wicklow County Council and other councils across the world, heed the words of Ms Greta Thunberg and recognise that we are in a climate crisis and an ecological breakdown crisis. We are not facing climate change but rather climate breakdown. We want to recognise that and our amendment sets that out.

In declaring such a crisis, we know that for the Oireachtas merely to "note" our report is political speak for not doing anything about it. We want to go further by accepting and endorsing the report. The work is not complete. The key project will be the Government's national energy and climate action plan. Our report will hopefully be a very useful pointer for that. Accepting and endorsing the report allows this House to tell the Government to be far more ambitious and to recognise that this is a crisis and everything has to change. I hope that other parties will see it in that light, not as a divisive mechanism but a reality which we must recognise and which requires a range of actions now.

This Oireachtas, the Seanad and the Dáil, has done some useful work in this report. It is important that we acknowledge, accept and endorse it. The process has been a proper one. Setting up the Citizens' Assembly to look at the climate issue was a Green Party initiative. That has served our country well by convening a representative sample of citizens, presenting the evidence and receiving their collective wisdom on what we need to do. Interestingly, that is one of the first asks of the Extinction Rebellion movement. That movement calls for a similar citizens' assembly. We should say to them that they must go further than that, as we have done. A citizens' assembly should be connected to the political system and the democratic institutions of the State in order to turn its recommendations into reality. That is what we have done in this report.

There are various aspects of the report which demonstrate why I think we should accept and endorse it. The first reason, which is not easy to explain and does not necessarily hold the front page, is that we must get our own institutional systems ready to make the change we need. We need a change in everything: in our land use system, our transport system, our energy system and our industrial system within two or three decades. We have learned from previous moments of change in this country that we do that best when there is common agreement on our goals and the scale and speed of the change we want to make. We do best when all the agencies of the State and other non-State agencies work together towards a common goal. We do best when the effort is outside the short-term switching on and off of the political cycle. We need the next three, four or five Governments to be determined that this is central to everything they do. When we work together on that common aim, we as a country can be really effective at making strategic changes.

I refer to the governance systems we put in place, such as the Oireachtas committee charged with overseeing what happens. A rule requiring a five-year budgeting process and real checks in the system to make sure that the Government is playing its part in the transition are really significant and important steps. The provisions for a just transition will be central. We are completely agreed that this green new deal has to deliver a just transition. Our own Just Transition (Worker and Community Environmental Rights) Bill 2018 would set up a specialist mediation service to work with Bord na Móna, workers at Moneypoint power station, the agricultural industry and local communities in places like Leitrim and Roscommon, where issues like new afforestation are causing real anger. That mediation service and the just transition system we recommend in this report are critical. These are institutional measures, but sometimes how the institutions of the State work is important. This report broadly gets it right.

The second really significant initiative in this report goes against the advice of Teagasc. It goes against what the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Michael Creed, and his Department say they want to do. We must insist on a new national land use plan. This land use plan is critical to protecting our biodiversity and restoring nature. We must start by looking at how we can reverse the tide and bring back pristine water conditions to help us develop soil health, which will bring back insect and bird life. We must completely, fundamentally and radically change our entire agricultural system, which is not serving Irish farmers at the present time. We must create a whole new model of forestry so that we create forests that store water and carbon and create a local environment that is a joy to walk through. It will take 50 or 100 years but that is what we must set out in a national land use plan. We must restore our peatlands, rather than scraping out the last bit of them and exporting it to the UK or burning it in a power station, which is the last thing we should do.

In a climate emergency we should be adopting the Petroleum and Other Minerals Develop-

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ment (Amendment) (Climate Emergency Measures) Bill 2018, which Deputy Bríd Smith has brought before us. We cannot declare a climate emergency and then say in the next breath that we are going to allow offshore oil and gas exploration. We cannot declare a climate emergency and say in the next breath that we are going to bring in liquid natural gas, LNG, or fracked gas from the USA. We have to make fundamental and radical changes and we can do that as a country. We can power this country with renewable wind, solar, biomass and other local power sources. They will strengthen our country and bring wealth and prosperity to it in the future. This change will not come if we try to hold out against the divestment from fossil fuels that we need to make.

More than anything else we need change in the transport sector. We cannot continue with the current national development plan. It is not fit for purpose. It only delivers a third of the emission reductions we know we need to make in the next decade alone. We cannot continue with a situation in which 51 national road and motorway projects are being built or are about to be built while not a single public transport project is ready to go. We should accept and endorse this report because it puts the move towards active travel first and foremost as a way as improving health and air quality as well as tackling climate change. We need to tackle the core underlying problems with our current economic model and move to a circular economy. That should involve immediately adopting the Waste Reduction Bill 2017, which we have been fighting to pass for the last three years, against the intentions of this Government. That all needs to change.

We can bring about change in a political environment in which we work together. This report, the work we have done and the work we are going to do by the end of this year is of critical importance. In my mind it is the most important thing this Oireachtas is doing. Ultimately I believe the Irish people are ready to make the leap. The Irish people are going to be good at showing leadership on this transition. We will play our part. We need the Government to help but it must also start from the bottom up. Local communities must be asked for their help rather than being told what to do. There must be genuine open dialogue as to what the options are in every local area. We in the political system all know that the Irish people are ready to do this. There has been a sea change in the last six months. Let us give the people a signal and a sense of hope. Yes, there is a climate emergency, but by accepting and endorsing this report we are ready to make a leap. This country will be a leader if we start the work together today.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: As a member of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, I am very pleased to contribute to the debate. In particular, I thank my colleague Deputy Hildegard Naughton, my Fine Gael colleagues and all members of the committee for the fantastic work they did. We worked incredibly diligently since last July. Although we did not see eye to eye on many things, in general we did. For many who came to the committee with a particular viewpoint, its deliberations were an eye-opener. It was a fantastic exercise in democracy. I praise the establishment of the committee by the Taoiseach and the previous Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, for asking the Citizens' Assembly to examine how Ireland could become a leader in climate action. That was tremendously important and timely. I commend them on their actions. I had advocated for the establishment of the Citizens' Assembly and the work it did, as well as the establishment of the committee and its work. I was delighted that happened.

It has become clear to us all that political leadership is required for long-term climate action planning. I look forward to the report on the publication of the climate plan by the Minister, Deputy Bruton, who is working incredibly hard on it. It is not just a question of leadership from the Minister or Government politicians, leadership is required across the political spectrum. The work we must do as a Dáil and society means that the actions we must take should not

become a political football. That is most important. I have always advocated for a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach and that we should be united in our efforts because we are the transition generation. The next 12 years will be critical, but they will not be easy. The changes in the way we live our lives will be significant. There will be social, economic and cultural impacts. Therefore, we must encourage people in local communities and economies to ensure we can achieve that but also to ensure rural regeneration will be at the heart of everything that we do. As an island nation, it is in our national interest to demand that higher emitting nations take action. If sea levels rise, as predicted, around the coast, this single island of ours will be a collection of islands within a couple of generations. The extensive diaspora should be tapped into to carry the message of mitigation and adaptation in order that they can also adjust their lifestyles and influence their communities.

We talked a lot at the committee about a just transition being a significant part of how decarbonisation would be achieved. In my county of Offaly Bord na Mona was for many decades a significant employer, with the ESB. Bord na Mona made significant decisions on restructuring as a result of the lack of demand for the peat it produced as the ESB no longer required it. In County Offaly, in particular, it is a very difficult time for workers, communities and the company as we are impacted on the most. We had employment for generations when in other counties people had to leave these shores and emigrate. Offaly County Council has led the way in the establishment of a transition team. It has pulled stakeholders together. Next week a job matching fair will be held in Mount Lucas in Daingean. It will be a great opportunity for workers and potential employers to connect. There is potential in other areas to follow the lead of the Offaly County Council. There is also potential in upskilling the Bord na Mona workers. It has been made clear to us that it will be very difficult to do what we need to do if people do not have the necessary skills.

Communication is an enormous requirement in getting the message out about the changes we have to make. Last week I was delighted to attend the Public Participation Network's launch of Green Offaly in Lough Boora Discovery Park. The plan is to work with communities to help them to take ownerships of the actions they will take. I am pleased to note that RTÉ and Met Éireann appear to have taken the opportunity to provide accurate information and help to communicate the message of climate change to the people. That is something for which I have long advocated. Since the establishment of the committee, there seems to be much greater and more detailed coverage, on which I commend them.

I wish to refer to agriculture. We are an agricultural nation. I am very pleased that as a result of the committee's report, the demonisation of farmers has been somewhat reduced. Mrs. Justice Laffoy was very clear at the first meeting that she would have liked to have had more time to look at the impact of agriculture in terms of emissions. She recommended that we do something in the area, which we did. In my community farmers are not averse to change. They are quite willing to change, but fairness must be part of it. The new CAP will have an impact in that regard.

We must not forget the impact climate change is having on people in the developing world and how they are already feeling the impact in desertification and lands being under water, which have resulted in migration. Today we had a debate in the Seanad Chamber involving young researchers who are passionate about climate change. We have all of the evidence. We know what is happening and cannot deny it. We have heard enough words; it is the time for action.

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Deputy Catherine Martin: I welcome the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action which is before us. My colleague Deputy Eamon Ryan played a vital role in pressing for the committee to be set up, just as we pushed for climate issues to be included in the work of the Citizens' Assembly. I commend all those who worked on the report - Deputies, Senators, committee staff, researchers, academics, activists and everyone who contributed and presented to create a very important document. It is the beginning of a real roadmap towards a greener, safer and secure future for all of us. The cross-party report is not perfect, but it is an important first step. It is vital that we in this House go further than just noting its contents, as usually happens with committee reports brought before the House. As we all know, noting their contents means condemning them to gather dust on a shelf in the ministerial corridor. That cannot happen with this report. This Dáil has noted too many committee reports without the Government taking step to put their recommendations into force. We cannot afford for this report to be treated in the same way. That is why we have submitted an amendment to have it endorsed by the Dáil.

The committee was created as a process for parties and Independents to come together, tease out the issues, have the important discussions and come to a collective conclusion. Compromises were made, as they have to be, when we all commit to working together. Not everything the Green Party sought to have included in the report made it into the final draft. We all have to make compromises because if we did not, nothing would ever be done. In a cross-party process such as this no one gets everything he or she wants. It is vital that we do not fixate on individual issues but instead come together, unite on the issue of our time, namely, saving the planet and creating a sustainable future, to which we say "Yes".

We have an opportunity to commit to doing something real and tangible because this issue is too important for us to do anything less. The report is a roadmap for action. Let us endorse it. The financial, social and ecological cost of climate inaction presents too great a risk. We need action now. The scale of the change we must make cannot happen without the political will to make radical, systemic changes in how we structure our world. Individual citizens have a crucial role to play, but it must be a Government-led approach, with the biggest polluters being made to change their ways.

Hope is coming from those who will suffer the most from climate change. Young people have been taking to the streets and calling for climate action. Every Friday students have gathered outside Leinster House to protest at the Government's climate inaction. Young people realise they will be the ones most affected by the short-sightedness of the Government today. However, they do not yet have an electoral voice. I have three children, aged 12, ten and eight, who are already looking forward to being able to go to the ballot box because their future, like that of all other children, is at risk. As they watch this debate tonight they, like many other young leaders of this country, will be disappointed that nine of 158 Members saw fit to find time to debate this issue. Where are the Members who profess to care about climate change? I hope that the children and others participating in the climate strike on 24 May will loudly and clearly ask where those Members were when this report, one of the most important to come out of the 32nd Dáil, was debated.

We cannot tackle climate change and continue to explore and drill for oil and gas or continue with a national development plan that prioritises road expenditure over public transport, walking and cycling. As my Green Party colleague in the UK, Caroline Lucas, stated, "we cannot tackle climate change with an economy built on the assumption that precious minerals, fresh air, clean water and rare species can magically regenerate themselves in an instant".

In the past 18 months there has been a blizzard, a hurricane and a prolonged summer drought in Ireland. News items in February showed people wearing shorts and queues for 99s. That is not right. It is climate chaos and meltdown. It is a climate emergency. Temperatures are rising, our global and local ecosystems and habitats are being pushed to the limit and our seasons are being knocked utterly out of kilter. This has terrifying implications for our natural heritage, insects and future food security. That is why it is vitally important that this House declares a climate emergency. We call on all Members to support the Green Party's amendment to the motion which proposes to do just that.

It is also essential that in declaring a climate emergency we commit to concrete, real and identifiable action rather than just uniting around vague concepts. There is little value in all declaring a climate emergency without committing to doing anything about it, which is why we must endorse the report of the committee. There is no room for complacency, populism or green washing in the greatest challenge facing humanity.

Greta Thunberg, the inspiring young climate activist, stated that "Our house is on fire." When one's house is on fire, one does not extinguish part of the fire, one extinguishes all of it and ensures that one is safe. That is why we need to endorse all the recommendations of the report and ensure they are implemented and then go further.

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I thank all Members who spoke on the motion. This is a very important debate. There is a great deal of consensus, notwithstanding very sharp differences on some issues. I am reminded of the late Brian Lenihan, who memorably stated that the only fair tax was the one that he did not have to pay. In introducing the concept of carbon pricing, there is a danger that people will want something for which someone else will pay or should be shouldering the burden, rather than the group for which they speak. The sad reality is that no one can afford to say that these changes should be borne by someone else and not by them. Everyone must make these changes. That is a difficulty in dealing with this issue.

Each household will have to change how it manages energy in the home in order to move away from fossil fuels. For many homes, that process will be neither quick nor easy. Each of us will have to think about how we manage our resources and our approach to disposables which have become commonplace in terms of plastic, food and many other items. We must change our approach on such matters and that will not come easily to people. We must change the way we manage our travel: the amount of travelling we do, the mode of transport we use and the types of fuels we use. That will be a profound change involving an increase in the cost of travel and for some people it will come very hard. We will have to change how we run our farms. Many farmers have been farming in the same way for decades and it will be difficult for them to make the necessary changes. We will have to change how we run our businesses. We must accept that there will be more wind farms and more associated interconnectors and infrastructure being built in or close to people's backyards. None of those things will come easy.

I am very conscious that as well as declaring that this is crucially important and urgent, we are asking people to make profound and difficult changes to the way they live. That is not easy and it cannot be solved in Kildare Street. Rather, it will be solved in every home, village, community, business and farm in the country. We must find a way to bring those people into that engagement and help them to make the necessary changes.

It will not be possible for the taxpayer to pay for everything. It is not a question of the Gov-

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ernment opening the purse and everything suddenly being possible. We will have to continue to fund our health and education services and all of the very heavy priorities that fall to the Government and the House to find the resources to fund. That is why our advisers such as the members of the Climate Change Advisory Council, who know this issue intimately, have put forward carbon pricing as one of the measures we must consider. As some Members may be aware, I trained as an economist. One of the first lessons an economist learns is that much of what we do has an adverse impact on people, but for which we do not pay. Carbon emissions are the worst case of that - we simply have not been paying for the damage we have done. There are many other examples, as Members have pointed out, such as the headlong rush to flatten our hedgerows and create big open tracts to plough and so on, which has done significant damage about which no one thought at the time and for which no one has paid.

We are asking people to make big changes. The easy part is for the Members who are present to say we endorse these things and that this is an emergency. It is correct to do so, but the hard part will be for all sides of the political community to find a way to bring people to make those changes in order to protect the globe for which we all have a shared responsibility. We will have to find a way to work through our ideological differences. We do so every day in the House - we reach compromises, vote and debate. We accept some things and are disappointed that other things are not accepted. That is what we will have to do on this issue.

This is the start of a very important process. I hope to be able to inject additional momentum to that generated by Deputy Naughton, the committee, the Citizens' Assembly and all involved, and that, year by year, we will be able to show that we are winning this battle. The early wins we get will encourage people to come further down the road, take the issue more seriously and get engaged on it. What very much inspires me is that at the end of this process we will have a better country in which to live and a healthier relationship with one another, our environment and those who share the globe with us. That is a prize that is well worth the effort we will undertake. We will continue to have our differences in this Chamber. There is no doubt that I will be criticised for whatever I do or fail to do, and that is as it should be. Hopefully, we can conduct the political debate in which we must engage through the common ground that has been created by the committee and our willingness to sit in the same forum, discuss this and try to reach compromise solutions in respect of the difficult challenges ahead, and continue to move in that spirit.

I thank everybody who has been involved in this. They come from different backgrounds but they still stuck with it. Some felt the need to write minority reports, but they persevered and fully engaged. Deputy Hildegard Naughton had the challenge of keeping that together and getting something valuable at the end. I am grateful for the opportunity to conclude the debate and I look forward to returning to the House in the not-too-distant future with solid proposals that will advance the cause set out here.

Amendment agreed to.

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

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is unfortunate that some of the Members who tabled amendments are not present. This is an unfortunate way to agree the motion given that it has been amended without any of the amendment's proposers being present. I understand that the motion, as amended, has been agreed and that further debate on the other amendments is not required.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): It is a little different from the usual Private Members' motions we discuss. I am simply following the instructions before me. I did not invent them.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Has amendment No. 4 been moved?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): It is amendment No. 3, which was tabled by Fianna Fáil. Amendment No. 4 was tabled by Sinn Féin and it falls. We do not put it to the House.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Therefore, the House does not accept the Green Party amendment or my amendment.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): They cannot be moved because amendment No. 3 was agreed.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Amendment No. 3 does not contradict the other two amendments.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): It is an alternative. The matter will be explained after the House rises. Those are the rules.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 are gone.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): It would have been better if it could have been done in another way but that was not possible. I accept the points raised but what has happened does not take away from the strength of the debate, the motion or the sentiments expressed by the Members. There is general recognition of that from the Minister and the Members on the Government side.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.45 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 14 May 2019.